

Saturday 13th of February 2010

Up in the Air

I woke up throwing a punch. It was one o'clock in the morning and I thought I was being attacked, but in fact a painting had fallen on my head. In response, I had jumped out of bed and tried to belt it. (This is what boxing commentators mean by "hitting the canvas".) Not only did I end up with a faint bruise on my head, but I drew blood bashing

my shin against the side of the bed. So the final score was Painting 2, Idiot 0.

I woke up again four hours later, sneered at the picture lying impotent on the floor - "Not so tough now, are you?" - and finished packing my embarrassingly distinctive bright-red wheelie bag for the plane to Queensland. (I need a flight bag that looks different from everybody else's because when I was researching the Fiji guide book for Lonely Planet - whose publications used to proudly claim they were aimed at people who knew how to pick up their luggage from the carousel - I picked up the wrong luggage from the carousel, and arrived at my Suva hotel with an Indian traveller's laundry.)

My bag and I caught a taxi to the airport and I realised I bloody love going to the airport first thing in the morning, driving down empty roads, past builders waiting at street corners for their lifts to work.

I love being a frequent flyer, always between destinations, somebody you pass on a moving walkway who never meets your eye. I love the excitement and romance of catching a plane to a place I've never been before, where I've got no idea what might happen.

As it was, I was going to Bundaberg and nothing much happened - or ever has, as far as I could see. (If it had, I'm sure somebody would've told me about it, because it's very easy to get into a conversation in regional Queensland, although not necessarily an especially memorable one.) But to add an element of surprise to the trip, I booked myself into a "mystery hotel" on a discount accommodation website.

You choose a mystery hotel based on a brief description on the website, and don't learn its identity until after you've paid. I picked a \$99 room in a central motel with a pool, and imagined swimming leisurely laps at dawn.

The motel was described as "four star", but instead of stars the website showed blobs. This meant it was "self-rated", a practice that would vastly improve everything from matriculation scores to world boxing rankings if it were more widely adopted.

According to the accommodation website, hotels list themselves as "mystery" because they are luxury establishments that would damage their brands if it was known that they offloaded rooms at such cheap prices.

According to the receptionist at the motel, they opted for the "mystery" description because the previous management was useless and people were reluctant to stay there. The regular rate was \$109 a night. The swimming pool was only slightly larger than a backyard spa.

I had a choice of two beds in my room. One of them was under a small picture of two horses. It didn't look as if it would hurt much if it landed on my head, but it's not the size of the painting in the fight that counts, it's the size of the fight in the painting, so I selected the other bunk.

The next day, I flew to Brisbane, where my mystery hotel turned out to be the Novotel

Mark Dapin



offered at a \$40 discount. I quite like Novotels, even though they look as if they've been built by a toddler out of plastic building blocks.

The Novotel had a 12.5 metre outdoor pool, where the blank faces of the surrounding concrete-and-steel towers were reflected on the surface of the water. It was like swimming through the skyline of the CBD and, as I cleared my head with short, slow laps, I thought, I love this. I really do.