

# Murderous thoughts down under

**THE WIND HAD** picked up dramatically over night. It was howling through the low trees. The birds were wheeling overhead because if they tried to land their feathers were blown inside out.

It was to have been a few days in paradise. We were in Australia visiting my step daughter Becky who is now learning neurosurgery - which could come in useful when considering the dark art of murder - and she had decided to treat us to a trip to the Great Barrier Reef.

I first started thinking of murder when we were having a tour of the Law Library at the Supreme Court in Melbourne. For those who think that Australia consists of tin shacks and cattle ranches this building will come as a revelation. The library is a superb piece of Victorian architecture dominating the courts which nestle around its edges. The building is round with rooms radiating from the centre and capped by a magnificent dome nestling inside a larger dome, like a Russian doll.

Between the two are corridors, little rooms and even small doors giving onto winding spiral staircases that lead up to the roof.

On the walls hang portraits of judges resplendent in their wigs and red robes. Among the many records housed here is the trial - for murder - of Ned Kelly.

It would be an ideal setting for a gentle murder story in the style of Agatha Christie, perhaps with all the suspects being judges and the motive being the relentless ambition of one of them to become the Chief Justice.

## To paradise we flew

Lady Elliot Island, the location for our paradise holiday, immediately provoked further sinister thoughts, for it is 70 miles from land - and the nearest police. It is surrounded by a lagoon of coral full of colourful and sometimes poisonous fish. We had been packed off with snorkels, flippers and airline tickets. On arrival on the Queensland coast we were ushered into a terrifyingly small single-engine plane. The pilot gave a cursory run through of the safety procedures and told us not to put on our lifejackets unless we saw him putting on his. He then donned his leather helmet, shouted "chocks away" and gave the thumbs up to a man on the ground who swung the propeller a few times and we were away. After a noisy and anxious 45 minutes, the

tinest speck appeared on the horizon.

Even as we came down low, it still did not seem big enough to land an aircraft - a feeling that was confirmed as we touched down and covered the entire width of the island before we stopped.

We were greeted by a bronzed Australian girl and a million birds. Birds were everywhere, wheeling in the sky, perched on trees, nesting on the ground, all swearing and shrieking. Nobody would hear the screams of a murder victim above that din. Alfred Hitchcock would have been in his element.

The island could be a staging post for an international peanut smuggling operation or the haven of a crazed billionaire who, not content with bringing the banking system to its knees, now threatens to murder innocent tourists for sport.

Not (outside the imagination) expecting anything worse than being muted on by the birds and looking forward to a few days of gentle snorkelling we settled into our basic accommodation (no lock on the door and instructions to use water and electricity sparingly) and turned in for the night.

The following day the world had changed. Cyclone Hamish was racing down the Queensland coast straight for Lady Elliot Island. By breakfast time a decision had been made to evacuate the island.

We were the last plane load of guests to leave and I sat next to the pilot as he struggled to get us into the air as we were buffeted by a violent side wind. We cleared the end of the runway by only a few feet.

## Then we drove some more

Our return flight to Melbourne was days away. We chose to move inland to avoid the cyclone. We headed for a town called Kingaroy (mainly because it was two letters away from "Kangaroo"). It seemed to be close by - just a couple of inches on the map. So we drove and drove, then drove some more and nearly a day later reached our destination. It was a quiet town where the greatest excitement, according to the local free newspaper, was that the police had been called to investigate a bottle being broken on the street. But the great claim to fame of Kingaroy is the



World Famous Peanut Van, from which 40 tons of peanuts are sold each year.

So by now you can see where I am heading. Quiet town, everything peaceful on the surface, but does this bland exterior conceal tensions and conspiracies that dwarf the shenanigans of the sleepy West Country village created in *Hot Fuzz*? And is the cause of this the friction between the various peanut barons as they vie for supremacy - and to supply the World Famous Peanut Van?

Alas we shall never know because we had to take another day to drive the two inches back to catch our flight.

However, sitting across the aisle from me was someone who had all the appearance of an innocent little granny who was terrified of flying. But is that grey hair not just a wig, and are her wrinkles not just careful make up? Any moment I expected her to leap up, Lara Croft style, and do several somersaults in the direction of the flight deck before smashing her way in with a carefully judged karate chop.

But if she was, she didn't. In fact nobody was murdered at all on the entire holiday (except nearly me - by my wife - when I wouldn't stop snoring).

Back at my desk, my first client telephoned to ask if I had had a good holiday. "Yes" I said, "and I could kill for the chance to go back".

I cannot think why my client sounded nervous and hung up so quickly.

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