

The Air Nauru plane at Brisbane International Terminal smelled like the Pacific. Not the resort redolence of frangipani, coconut and citrus, but a mix of burnt diesel, timber smoke, cheap detergent and a sweet pungent sweat, prevalent throughout much of Pacific nations. The Nauruan cabin crew were efficient but morose, their ethnicity a confusion of Polynesian, Melanesian and Micronesian ancestry.

The plane's descent, heralded by the hydraulics of the landing gear, snapped me from a dreamy reverie, the cast of which included Paul Gauguin, Thor Heyerdahl, Somerset Maugham, James A Michener and the Reverend Missionary John Williams. Hot equatorial winds gusted exposed coral dust and sand across the tarmac while officials listlessly processed new arrivals. A roughly punched stamp, its rubber sheeting cracked and dry at the edges, left an illegible smudge in my diplomatic passport and I was ceremoniously ushered into the quintessential, foreign-aid funded, white 4WD and driven to the coastal Menen Hotel to drop off my luggage and advised to 'freshen up'.

An hour later my familiarisation of the 21 square kilometre former Pleasant Island, now the Republic of Nauru, began with a vehicular circumnavigation. First stop: the old jailhouse. Weathered besser block, corrugated sheet roof, iron bar windows, a single forged metal door, and twenty or so glistening male torsos trying to catch the warm breeze and foam blowing off the coral reef ridge, teasingly just metres away.

Next, the port. A rusted dilapidation. Seemingly operative, a medium sized cargo vessel bobbing like a cork in a turbulent tub while fluoro-vested peons affixed cargo netting, drove forklifts, and loaded flat top trucks boasting worn wooden slat trays. A tall crane stood erect but impotent, its future utility apparently at the mercy of a submission to 'Australian Immigration'. I logged it mentally as a formal request, or rather a prompt.

The 4WD meandered its way bumpily inland, up towards the island's high ground, avoiding recklessly errant motorcyclists on the rough dirt roads. I wondered what the road fatality rate was remembering an asylum-seeker who had been gravely injured falling off as a pillion passenger while on day leave from the processing centre. We passed its entrance with the ominously baritone promise, '*we've got full day there tomorrow.*'

Up on the unprotected ridge of the island the full extent of the 1960s and 1970s pillaging of its only natural resource was in glorious view. The surface phosphate of the island, deposited over millennia by seabirds, had been comprehensively strip-mined to meet the voracious demand of foreign powers in Britain, Germany, Australia and New Zealand for prime agricultural fertiliser. I looked at the desolate remains, a surreal landscape of jagged limestone pinnacles. A barren landscape of spires bearing testament to the callous greed of colonialism. In the dead centre of this almost extra-terrestrial expanse was the nearly-constructed new prison, courtesy of a foreign aid deal with Australia.

The descent back to the coastal ring-road felt strangely like a returning Apollo lunar mission. As we re-entered the atmosphere I broke the silence and asked about the squandering of Nauru's phosphate wealth. I only half-listened to the response from my guide as I had heard this audio-book play before. The usual words punctuated the rehearsed answer. Corruption, profligacy, elitism, political, fraudulent, poor investments, bankruptcy. My ears pricked up at the occasional synaesthetic colouring in the otherwise monochrome soliloquy - suitcases bulging with cash, sprawling casino suites, debauchery (prostitutes always make a cameo), luxury cars driven to the rims and abandoned, and the funnelling of cash to global tax havens.

I tried to calculate how long just the thinnest sliver of purloined cash in just one private account in the Bahamas or Liechtenstein would fund the periodic maintenance of an offensively unkempt primary

school patch where a troop of children played Aussie Rules football, their Geelong and Essendon loyalties fiercely on display in an array of apparel which looked stiflingly out of place in the sweltering heat and humidity.

My guide switched from torpor to a state of semi-animation. This sudden catharsis coincided with our trek arriving into what seemed to be a more populated part of the island. On either side of the roadway there were now buildings, some domicile, some business, some non-descript. I saw two men holding hands, not in the style of fraternal and Platonic bond as is often sighted in the islands, but as lovers do.

I asked whether homosexuality was culturally accepted on Nauru. I was told it wasn't and that these two refugee men were the only openly gay men in the 10 000 strong population. They had consciously chosen to live overtly as a gay couple and for their perceived sin they had been harassed often and assaulted occasionally. They walked into the Capelle & Partner supermarket with empty woven bags, I presumed to buy ingredients for dinner.

We continued on at a leisurely 30km/h as a Nauru Police Force ute drove in the opposite direction at a less leisurely pace. Four youths squatting among prone motor scooters and a myriad of dirty spare parts on the footpath smiled and waved at the police car as it hurtled past. The boys had good teeth. They looked Indian or Sri Lankan. A quick-fire question drew an enthused response. *'Yes, refugees. U-A-Ms (unaccompanied minors). In business, repairing bikes. The boys are trying to get scholarships at South Pacific Uni in Fiji'*

The Prado pulled left off the crumbling bitumen road and stopped on a strip of buffalo grass growing sparsely over the granulated coral laying between the peasantry of the roadway and the majesty of the ocean. I hurriedly tried to dissolve a cognitive knot in my head before my attention would indubitably be drawn to whatever it was that had warranted an interruption to our journey. I had just spotted a sign on a building we had passed - the Budapest Hotel. I was certain the Ottoman Empire had not extended much further than the northern coastline of Africa, but why then would an ugly box-shaped hotel in the middle of the Pacific Ocean carry the name of a Central European capital?

I managed to form the word *'Why...'* before I was beaten to speech by my guide who jabbered excitedly and jabbed a gnarled index finger at a formation of masonry sticking rectangularly into the sea, walled on three sides, with the open end of the rectangle facing the road to form a swimming enclave. A dozen or so bodies were ungainly splashing about in the water, and twice that number were gathered in small clumps of diverse nationalities in and around the approaches to the pool, talking, laughing, cooking and drinking.

While they swam, on the other side of the road in one of the Anibare Bay unit blocks a refugee woman had just tried to immolate herself with cooking kerosene. The local ambulance was in attendance and a crowd had collected at the front of the complex. A local in an olive coloured security uniform was officiously, but unnecessarily, reshaping the crowd from a long-stretched line along the footpath to a tight swarm spilling dangerously onto the roadway. The ambulance lumbered off lazily in the direction of the Nauru Hospital, which coincidentally was our next stop.

My low expectations needed a further revision downwards when we parked in the emergency parking bay next to the ambulance, its humans already disgorged from its sparse innards. The hospital was in veritable ruin. It looked ramshackle and rickety, with neglected grounds. The roof had partially collapsed and sheets of what looked like asbestos were conspicuous in their angularity. The interior was tidy and had a sense of bustle, but the absence of that familiarly disconcerting, but simultaneously comforting, sterility of a hospital was palpable.

I tried to nod and grunt in the right harmonies as I was briefed on the operations and the plans for a new hospital construction, but I was in autodidactic mode and thirstily drinking in the backdrop scenes. In a curtained-off cubicle to my left sat a young Nauruan woman, immodestly clothed, with a rubber-gloved nurse giving her a handful of prophylactics; to my right, in an open hospital bed lay a man, half-supine, half-intoxicated, taking stitches to a deep laceration which had bisected the webbing between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand.

Further along, three older women lay in beds in a type of makeshift respiratory ward, dressed in loose fitting gowns, variously attached to breathing apparatuses, the central core of which were small cylinders with clumps of attached hoses. Their wheezing was largely drowned out by the primal screams emanating from the surgical ward where medical staff were treating the burns victim just brought in.

I calculated that it had been at least 15 minutes from the time I had seen her carted away in the ambulance and I wondered why morphine or similar had not yet been administered to relieve her pain. I learned later that her burns were primarily on her legs and not life-threatening and I wondered if that was the reason she hadn't received painkilling injections.

It was a relief to leave the hospital. I've spent too much time in good and bad hospitals, as a patient, as a visitor and as an investigator, to have any desire to stay longer than necessary in any hospice. On the way out, my attention was drawn to a young man with Afghani Hazara features sitting alone on a toppled besser block retaining wall just outside the hospital grounds. His demeanour was what made me look at him longer – belligerent, pugnacious, defiant, a scowl as much evident in his coal-dark eyes as it was on his snarled lips. Around his neck was a dirty string looped through half a medallion. I had just seen the other half of that medallion around the neck of the Nauruan girl in the hospital cubicle. I thought of the devastating venereal diseases introduced to the Hawaiian islands by missionaries and sailors.

We completed the loop of the island and I was taken back to the Menen Hotel. On my way in to the hotel reception I was introduced to Nauru's President, Baron Waqa, who was standing nonchalantly and unaccompanied next to a new 4WD parked at the front entrance.

My interaction with him was perfunctory, he going through the automaton motions of extending sovereign courtesy to a senior representative of a patron country, and I extending feigned deference to a Head of State whose country had a lesser population than the number of officers in my Department.

I laced my Nike Flyknit trainers in my room, ensuring I set the air-conditioning to the highest fan setting and the lowest possible temperature before I headed off on a 7km run back through the Anibare Bay Area. Experience had taught me that if I didn't cool off quickly after running in high heat and humidity that I'd still be sweating profusely when getting ready for the early evening BBQ dinner.

Running alone is often the best way to see things unfiltered by hosts or subordinates. I've collected the memories of innumerable solo runs around places in the world, squeezed into the most tightly packed agendas, sometimes in the dead of night and often in extreme weather, but they are among the most precious and enriching of my memory archives.

The Island Ring Road run was easy. Flat, even surface. No need to concentrate too much on my footfall, just the occasional laterally attacking foray by typical Pacific Island dogs: semi-domesticated, mangy, dingo-esque, yapping and biting at the lower legs, conjuring up unrelished thoughts of rabies and treatment at the Nauru hospital.

As I showered, first in cold water and then in warm water to keep my skin pores open and breathing, I was searching for a word, a phrase, that could adequately describe the overall impression of my observations of Nauru so far. It was making me uneasy that I couldn't quite grasp that word until I realised that was the word itself: uneasy.

The BBQ dinner was ocean side under a specially erected marquee. Buffet salads and breads, tropical fruits, marinated BBQ meats, and a modest selection of Australian beer, wine and soft drinks. I noted with interest the advice from my hosts that the banquet had been 'put together' from the same base ingredients used in the industrial kitchens at the processing centres. To avoid offence, I only smiled internally and didn't utter out loud the obvious.

I stayed as long as I needed to observe civility, tolerating the usual ABF staff interactions in these types of quasi-work occasions: the irreverent, opinionated and slightly intoxicated older employee; the reticent, but highly respectful and professional employee; the sycophantic and ambitious younger employee; the flirtatious employee, irrespective of gender; the nervously grouped team employees; and the disenfranchised, usually ex-immigration, forced-to-be-here employee. I walked back to my room enjoying the warm breeze evaporating the film of perspiration from my exposed limbs and face.

I woke up still feeling uneasy. Breakfast was continental, which reverted my thoughts to the Budapest Hotel. I was still thinking about the history of colonisation of Nauru when we arrived at the processing centre and I took the obligatory safety briefing from an expatriate Scotsman from Wilson Security. I'd received these briefings a hundred times before and I only tuned in at the key words and phrases which I needed to memorise: exit points, call-signs, emergency words, do and don'ts.

I checked out the security contingent closely. All of the leaders were Australians or 'expats' as they're known in the industry. An eclectic mix of ex-military, ex-police and security 'professionals'. I thought about the French Foreign Legion. All of the peons were locals, their appearance slovenly in both physicality and dress.

As always in these cohorts, those least professional were trying to impress and convey competence through the usual feathers: bellicosity, tightly tailored shirts, muscularity on display, 'special forces' watches, cargo-pant trouser legs tucked into steel-toed Magnum boots, webbed utility belts cluttered with accoutrements, and lanyards tucked pre-emptively into their epaulettes in the event of a physical confrontation.

And, as always in these cohorts, the most professional were trying their hardest not to impress, wearing their uniforms with sparse adornments, and speaking softly in succinct sentences.

As we toured 'RPC1', the highly secured compound housing the administrative offices, medical clinic, staff accommodation, plant and other functions, I was impatient to get to the other compounds. I'd seen these 'head' compounds before. In fact I had been involved integrally in these types of operations and I had lived in them for long periods of time so I wasn't learning anything new. I did learn that the processing centre was currently in transition from a detention facility to an 'open camp' where detainees could come and go as they pleased as long as they observed a nightly curfew.

Finally with the preliminaries despatched our gaggle made entry into the residential compounds. The single adult male compound was first. I instinctively switched into a state of hyper-alert as the first perceptions hit my senses, my sixth sense screaming. The atmosphere was dangerously reminiscent of the prisons I had been in.

Everywhere around me I recorded disarming signs of the drudgery of an incarcerated population: men walking in pairs to ablution blocks, their thinning towels homogenous, their individualised cosmetics and preening tools courtesy of permitted mail parcels; men engaged in solo or group recreational activities – individual and team sports, chess and checkers, reading, painting and sketching, making music, and tea smattering of pedagogy; an over-subscribed gym with conventional cable machines and home-made free weights like a bench-press bar with large filled water-cooler containers roped to both ends.

Someone half-whispered behind me, *'we don't allow free weights because they may horrific bludgeons'*. Despite its lack of walls, the gym stank like the familiar stench of a prison which no amount of bleach or deodorant ever eliminates.

And despite this drudgery, everywhere I recorded unsettling signs of the volatility of an incarcerated population: the furtive, super-alertness of eyes, simultaneously opportunistic and fearful; the subtle movement of groups of men strategically re-positioning to a better offensive or defensive posture; the tensing of our assigned guards at the slightest approach to our gaggle, even if the approach was by a lone, painfully thin and physically incapable waif; the menacing murmurings in languages and dialects, their meaning unintelligible to me but their intent crystal clear; and the omnipresent, but indefinable, sense of dread and foreboding.

As I mused whether I would remain one minute longer than I was forced to inside the fences of these compounds if I was able to access the 'open camp' rule, we passed almost osmotically into the single women's compound which jolted me out my musings and made me wonder whether long-burning romances or desires, hitherto thwarted by fences and systems inside the facility, were being consummated out in the Nauruan community under the open camp arrangement and were, no doubt, the cause of many a curfew breach and pregnancy.

The skin-pimpling sensation which had been with me in the men's compound subsided and, as it always happened to me in female prisons, was replaced by a strange, blended sensation of sorrow, ruination, lechery, fragmentation and alienation. I wondered again as I had many times before what socialisation and influences cause me to feel this strange cocktail of sensations.

I self-admonishingly parked the psycho-babble for later and switched to a more practical mode. The single women's amenities were rawer than the single men's dormitories. I was surprised because from even a short distance the hard walls of the structures had given me an impression of neatness and order. The interior was rudimentary. Bare particle board floors, variegated, dirty and lightly littered. A Tetris-like collection of different sized and shaped rooms, dorms, and common areas, demarcated by a brace of partitioning, retrofitted in ply-board, makeshift blanket curtains, foam panels, and cardboard sheets.

The same languidness that lay like a pall over the men's compound was also the clouding the women's existence. Pairs and small groups, clustered by nationality, dotted the interior and the shaded exterior precincts, mostly prone and engaged in melodic conversation, interspersed by a giggle or a raucous attention-seeking laugh, nothing in between. Recreational activities were less kinetic, more creative or cerebral. I left the compound with an overwhelming sense of interminable waiting.

The family compound was memorable. Not because of its condition, which in relative terms appeared the least like a detention setting than all of the other compounds, but because of its most vulnerable residents. Children of all ages roamed the compound, most but not all under the watchful, sometimes indolent, gaze of a parent in close proximity or from underneath tarpaulin sails offering shelter from the searing heat.

They tom-fooled, they shrieked and laughed, they were rambunctious, and they were insatiably curious.

And the tom-foolery was watched unwaveringly by uniformed male guards standing sentinel. I watched them watching and thought of mothers and children showering under surveillance.

And the shrieking and the laughing was temporarily unburdened by past trauma and the crippling stress of an uncertain future.

And their rambunctiousness was rewarded with jagged knee scrapes on the unforgiving compound sand, coral and flint stone; and rewarded with stern admonitions from the sentinels whose humour and countenance had worn wafer thin

And their insatiable curiosity was already being blunted by the numbing finiteness and the paltry stock of new things within their trapped existence.

We fast-forwarded through the dispensary as we were running over schedule. A Nauruan who worked at this shop-cum-pharmacy, and who had obviously been prepped to brief me, launched into his speech referring occasionally to talking points which he had surreptitiously taped to the counter with bright red electrical tape.

He rattled off his speech in staccato free-style, the syllabic emphases in the wrong places, but he was intelligible and impressive. I deducted one point off him in my final score because he insensitively ploughed through his *'sanitary napkins and condoms are the only items which are given for free instead of paid for in points'* while an older female detainee squirmed uncomfortably at the counter.

As we left the detention facility for a scheduled meeting with Australia's High Commissioner in his lofty colonial residence on the heights, I asked if we could make a brief detour into Fly Camp, an encampment set up outside of the detention facility as one of a number of village-style locations to accommodate those that had been granted refugee status. I noted a hesitancy in my guide's response but at my insistence he agreed to take me to there.

I was later to see the modern, self-contained refugee villages around Nauru housing multi-ethnic, and harmoniously existing micro-communities, but Fly Camp was jolting in its squalidness. It was a single men's camp, consisting of demountable housing units clustered around a communal hall and kitchen infrastructure. The buildings were kempt enough and its thoroughfares were devoid of the detritus normally littered around homeless cohorts, but my overall impression was reminiscent of the world's slums which I have seen.

I learned that the encampment's residents were provided with all basic necessities by the OPC operation on the island and they in turn were responsible for their own maintenance of buildings, grounds, cooking, laundry and community order. Everywhere I walked I was approached by residents complaining about the quantity and quality of the food, the lack of air conditioning, the absence of employment opportunities, and fear about the minimal security against attacks on the camp, and its residents, by local gangs.

I dutifully logged all of the complaints mentally intending to raise them with the right subordinates and as I was saying my third attempted goodbyes to a group of Iranian men who had held me captive in the laundry, I spotted an athletic Nauruan lad in a green khaki uniform and long blonde dreadlocks leaning against a perimeter fence. I pushed my way through the Persian throng and engaged in a conversation with him.

He was employed by the Australian OPC contractor to deliver material and food to Fly Camp and was its dedicated liaison officer. I asked him about the attacks on the camp by locals and he smiled wryly as he told me of the provocations. I asked him about drugs in the camp and he asked me what I wanted and how much.

I asked him about the availability of alcohol in the camp and he told me it depended on the reliability of contraband shipments, but he showed me an area off a slope at the edge of the camp where thousands of bottles and cans lay discarded. I asked him about prostitution and he pointed at three teenage Nauruan girls seated waiting on the other side of the road for me to leave.

My guide beckoned me away – the High Commissioner was waiting.