

Roosters in the Ruins

Light Airs David Miller



THE LOCUM AGENCY'S listing for a GP on Norfolk Island stood out amongst the rest, so I took it. All I knew was something about a cruel convict past, and the great Norfolk Pines, so many of which were planted by our forefathers to line the promenade of Australian beaches. In today's Australia, Norfolk Island is a curious backwater. In early colonial days it was considered vital and strategic.

The ship *Sirius*, famous from the First Fleet, had become a commuter around the colony, but bad luck wrecked her on the Norfolk outer reef. It was a great tragedy carrying a threat of starvation, saved only by the native flightless burrowing 'Providence' birds at Mount Pitt being hunted to extinction.

As locums go, it was an unusual job, with plenty of time off to see the amazing relics of the convict settlement and learn the tale of 'The Experiment,' a strange colonisation after the convicts had left.

The island medical practice has an uncomfortable edge in anticipation of disaster. Difficult cases and emergencies carry extra responsibility for the GP because no specialists work here. Obstacles exist in evacuating patients from the island and not even the most urgent can get out immediately. Add to that a surprising discovery (a leftover of the experiment) that Aussie Medicare benefits don't extend to Norfolk Island. It's user pays and no Flying Doctor support either. I heard rumour of a man living on the island with an untreated fractured foot due to hospital costs. According to my source Whiskey was cheaper.

The time warp of Norfolk seems to attract older doctors. One of the regulars, Doc Martin, is over 70. He can confidently give an anaesthetic and set a bone.

On-call duty is one in three, which sounds a lot, but nights mostly are undisturbed from frivolous costly consultations. The practice is incorporated in the hospital, a very old-fashioned building set in spacious

grounds. My consulting room has a 1940s era window opening into the garden. The nursing staff are independent and steeped in local knowhow.

From the summit of Mount Pitt, the whole island is an eyeful and takes in great stands of the native Norfolk Island pines. About 200km of narrow roads and hedges wind around the hills and dales and many beautiful old houses survive.

Norfolk.

Cook was a busy explorer, considering he found it a mere four years after the Botany Bay landing. When Cook saw the pines, he was of the opinion these tall straight trees would be good for masts and spars, so Norfolk became a busy convict settlement, only months after the first fleet settled in port Jackson in 1778.

This was the first of many



Gallows Gate on Norfolk: 'Last view of paradise from the gate to hell.'

There are no foxes and flocks of wild chooks peck away in paddocks and ruins. Beautiful and free range, they are just too tough to eat, but every day starts with many roosters.

Located 1600 km due east of Cape Byron and closer to New Zealand, it is a wonder how Cook discovered this tiny speck in the ocean, only 8 by 5 kilometres. He arrived during his second voyage in the *Resolution* in 1774 and named it after his Matron, the Duchess of

failed enterprises on Norfolk. The wood was too splintery for masts, but okay for planks. A small ship, the *Norfolk* was built in this material and used by Bass and Flinders to circumnavigate Tasmania.

In contrast to Lord Howe Island, a suburb of Sydney, Norfolk is an Australian self-governing external territory. It does have a NSW postcode but a passport is required for entry. Quarantine is very strict, so you won't see any apples and grapes

“Not even the most urgent case can get out immediately”

in the shop. In this subtropical zone there are bananas and whatever is in season.

Norfolk Island maintains a strange emotional bond with an even smaller one, far away. The story goes that after Fletcher Christian marooned Bligh and his loyalists from the *Bounty* into the Jolly Boat, these mutineers sailed *Bounty* to Tahiti and collected wives, then off again until they chanced upon the very remote hideaway of Pitcairn Island.

The *Bounty* was burned on the beach to escape the vengeful reach of the royal navy, which eventually turned up to find it overcrowded with religious fanatics, the descendants. These were invited by a forgiving Queen Victoria to settle Norfolk in 'The Experiment'. Bounty-related surnames such as 'Christian' and 'Quintal' are common at the practice.

Prior to this, Norfolk Island had played a harsh role in the convict system, with a reputation for untrammelled floggings and hangings. It is impossible to be unaffected by a ghostly despair evoked by the stone ruins and old cemetery at Kingston Town. This prison complex is now a world heritage site and rivals Port Arthur in great buildings constructed under the lash, with one difference, hardly any tourists.