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## Postcard from Australia: Pasalubong Billabong

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G'day. I come from the land down under... bearing gifts for everyone from 1 to 92. True to form, I am not Filipino for nothing. Forgive me if this is not so much about Oz.

Gift-giving is a custom rooted in the Filipino's tendency to be effusively hospitable, thoughtful, and generous. It is a time-honored tradition extended not only to family, the household, close friends, and guests and visitors, but also to friends of friends (even dogs of friends!), to acquaintances and colleagues... why not, teachers and students!

Only one thing gives a Filipino more pleasure than getting gifts for people, and that is getting gifts for people while traveling. The word in Filipino is *pasalubong*. A Filipina will hardly buy souvenirs for herself; she only thinks of her *pasalubongs*.

Tell people you are off to Australia and some will say "Bring me a kangaroo." Do, especially if you really do have organic roo experiences while there. I did. I fed an ugly joey in a wildlife park, saw a male roo try to stimulate a female roo by fondling her tail, and ate kangaroo meat barbecued on one of the non-fire, electricity-run, totally pay-free grills that line the beaches of Hervey Bay. Marinated in honey, it was dark, tender, juicy, and delicious; reason enough to buy a kangaroo bookmark for my son's tennis teacher, who had actually asked for a Crocodile Dundee.

Others will say "Get me a koala." Again, do, especially if you really do have a koala experience. Otherwise your gift is "un-organic." My koala experience was a lesson in zoology. That's organic! Because people say "koala bear" the way they say "teddy bear," I always thought koalas were eucalyptus-eating Australian bears the way pandas are bamboo-eating Chinese bears. Ignorant me, koalas are not bears! They're marsupials, like kangaroos, with pockets to keep their babies in. I held a koala in my arms; reason enough to get the office some chocolate-coated macadamia nuts in a box decorated with a koala picture.

The chocolate was awful, so it's a good thing I brought Tim Tams too. Tim Tam, a brand of chocolate biscuits, lies close to the heart of the Aussie household and is a staple in the Aussie diet. And my Tim Tam gift is authentic and "organic" because I munched on Tim Tams while being tossed about in an SUV as we struggled up and down dunes, in and out of rain forests, and among the bush of Fraser Island.

South on the Gold Coast, in surfing havens like Surfers Paradise, the logical or "organic" thing to buy the folks back home is a Billabong item. Though either is Made in China, a Billabong bought out there in Coolangatta is not the same as a Billabong bought at the mall near your home. You can bring thongs for the guys who like flip flops, the statement being simply that thongs in Australia are footwear, not underwear.

Or go aboriginal. A didgeridoo! My workmate Paul Batkins can imitate the obscene sound of this wonderful instrument, so an organic gift for him would have been a didge. But they are large, so I brought him Australian tea instead. He is an Englishman who takes tea. How organic.

But the best present from Oz is a boomerang because it goes back to you.