

# going the distance

Guess who's coming to dinner... and lunch... and breakfast. Sally Feldman knows only too well that moving away from home means it's not just the flight that's a long haul

**I**t starts with a phone call (often at 4am because they can't work out the time difference): "Can't believe we've not been in touch for so long..." (I'm scrabbling for my diary.) "What are you up to?" (Checking my bank account and thumbing feverishly through the restaurant listings.)

"We're coming over for a month and want to spend as much time as we can with you." (I'm trying to remember where we went wrong last time.) "We can head off somewhere for a couple of days to give you a break or, better still, let's go away together!" (I'm working out my annual leave and logging on to lastminute.com.)

For that large group of wayfarers who've made Australia their home or who've broken rank further than the next suburb, this scenario may have a certain, er, ring to it. For whatever reason we've chosen to be here, our heritage is sure to pack its summer clothes and pursue us, bearing inappropriate gifts and confusing the dog.

You have to expect it, of course, when you've heartlessly abandoned family and friends, be it across the Nullabor or on the other side of the world. I'm sure I had a reason for leaving, but I can't for the life of me remember what it was (until I spend a couple of weeks back there). As for repercussions – who knew? Would I have left if I'd given them serious thought? There are many times I doubt it – usually when I'm upending furniture trying to find the crystal avocado dishes the in-laws brought over last time.

A friend once sagely advised me that her only visiting rule was three sleepover nights; any longer and the

Our trips together back to the old country are irregular, but when we do manage the double shift, our Kodak moments are a terrifying blur of speed-freak EU truck drivers and powerful German auto-engineering as we try to divide our time fairly and end up with nought but turbo-jet-lag and terminal petrol bills. The upside is that I like to think we don't settle anywhere long enough to outstay our welcome. Hell, we barely make a dent in the sofa beds, let alone our friendships.

Back here, we stock the fridge, book the restaurants and brush up our best recipes and sightseeing itineraries.

We see our adopted home through our guests' eyes and fall in love with it all over again. Then, after we've waved a tearful goodbye at the airport, we book the dog in to a therapist, eat cheese sandwiches in front of the TV and pack away the avocado dishes safely until next time. **VE+T**

## Our heritage is sure to pack its summer clothes and pursue us, bearing inappropriate gifts

relationship was under serious threat. But if your loved ones don't just live in the next state, those wretched long-haul flights (which always seem so much longer, even if you are Bolli-ed and blinkered up the front) mean that whenever they come – or whenever you go back – it's never going to be a carefree flying visit.

So, although we assure those foolhardy enough to make the journey that they're welcome to stay for as long as they please (who are we to place time constraints on anyone prepared to travel so far just to see us?), we've learned from (occasionally bitter) experience that three weeks is the acceptable limit, with time off for good behaviour – or at least a gift that doesn't involve moulded ceramic fruit or novelty butter knives.

I knew I should have hitched up with an Australian, then we could have had semi-normal visiting rights – Sunday lunches, birthday dinners – punctuated by those cosy rituals such as arguing over who'd be doing Christmas or why we wouldn't take holidays "as a family".

But no, out of all the gin joints in all the world, I had to hitch up with another expat who grew up a mere 50 kilometres down the road from me. Of course, that's in Euro-kilometres, which converts to about 250 kays in Australian driving hours.

