Going Down Under

It's a long, long trip from the Netherlands to Brisbane, Australia, but when I can afford it, I think it's worth going there for the annual Linux.conf.au conference. I've been there in 2009 and was exited about the quality of the conference, good in-depth sessions, with a strong community and that's why year after year, the conference attracts many people from all over the planet. Not the least of these was Linus Torvalds, whom I met there in 2009.

This year the idea was to get there from Monday until Friday, and come back home on Sunday. However, another customer urgently requires my presence next week in Sweden, so I shortened the trip: leaving on Saturday afternoon and back the Friday morning after that. That leaves no less than three and a half day in Australia. But, three and a half day with an ambitious agenda, doing two talks and meeting several people. In fact, I'm going to squeeze all that in two days, which leaves arrival day Monday and departure day Thursday for additional fun stuff, such as visiting the beaches of the Gold Coast and Sun Coast.

Friday Jan. 21st

When booking this trip, Emirates had an excellent promotional offer for their business class fares, so I booked Emirates. With a ten and a half hour stopover in Dubay. Normal people hate long stopovers, I don't. I just go out and get a bit of an impression of what the stopover country is about. For my first LCA, I visited Hong Kong this way and I wasn't disappointed with that, so this time I decided to do Dubai.

Now you do need to know that it's not always easy doing trips like these, but with the help of sleeping pills and Red Bull, I manage. The problem is that the body is programmed to do its eating and sleeping at regular intervals, and if you go to Australia for three days, you have to turn it all up-side-down. That is: sleep when normally you are awake, and eat at moments that you normally sleep. There are two ways to deal with that problem: one way is to try to continue the normal daily schedule. That works if you fly to the USA east coast with only 6 hours of time difference; just go sleep at 8 PM and wake up at 4 AM and it's not that hard getting back. This doesn't work however for a trip to Australia. Fortunately, there's Red Bull and sleeping pills, which can always be used to force the body into the new schedule.

As I like to be well prepared, I decided to check the Emirates website on Friday, which brought me to the topic of restricted items in Dubai. They were warning about Codeine, it's considered a drug in Dubai at the same level as Heroine and Cocaine, (fortunately I checked, because I always have some in my emergency medical travel kit), but apart from the Codeine there's a complete list of other restricted items. And regulation is rather harsh in Dubai, horror stories have been published about people that were thrown into jail because of the "possession" of 0.003 grams of hash. And to make it worse, sleeping pills are included as well on that list. That freaked me out, and I had a hard time deciding what to do with it.

Finally I ended up by leaving my entire emergency medical travel kit at home, with the exception of one box of Paracetamol. After all, if I can force my body to prepare for a marathon, I can tell it as well to sleep without sleeping pills right? Who's stronger, the jet-lag or me? (Your about to find out)

Saturday

Departure day, it all started with traditional crappy Schiphol airport total absence of service, followed by the delight of finding my business class seat in the Emirates 777. Beautiful 19 inch televisions, with a Nintendo-like device to serve as a remote control, and excellent service all the way long. Amazing to see that for half the price of the same journey with KLM, they can offer double the service. Just one inconvenience: Dubai airport is growing too fast, and therefore, the normal terminal was full and they have to park the airplanes, even the big ones, at a remote place, a twenty minute bus ride from the terminal.

For some reason, they're also having all arriving flights coming in about midnight. So instead of a well organized system, I witnessed total chaos of people waiting to get through customs. I wasn't too satisfied with that, because after the bus ride and the immigration chaos (worse than JFK), just 8h30 remained of my stopover. Of these, I had decided to spend four hours in a real bed, in the Hilton, which is in the old part of Dubai, and with the highlight of my stopover a run through Dubai in the early morning. There's no better way to see a city than by running in it.

For some reason (remember the story about the sleeping pills?), sleeping didn't go too well, I was in bed at 2 AM, aware of much that happened around me until 3 AM and awake by 5.30 AM. So, time to make a cup of coffee, drink some water and go out for my morning run.

The Hilton Dubai Creek as its name suggests is not too far from Dubai Creek. In case you think that Dubai is all about tall expensive buildings and a jet-set life style, there's not much of all that at Dubai Creek, especially not at 6AM in the morning. When I got out of the hotel, it was like entering in an Arabian night. The smell of the fuel of the boats on the river, and from mosques that appeared to be everywhere, the call for prayer was heard.

The creek is still an important part of Dubai, as the Dhows (traditional wooden built freight boats, take your image of the Arch of Noah and you see what it's like) come in from other countries in the Gulf area. The paradox is that what they bring in, is the most modern of materials, like computers, airconditioners, fridges and more. These don't arrive in nice containers, but in boxes and bags that are unloaded by the Indian and Pakistani work force in the Creek area. Not in a high secured area, but just aside Banyas Road, a major road where many cars drive by. And for some reason, no one gets the idea of stealing these goods. I guess their policy on sleeping pills applies to thieves as well, and while running I just imagined the poor guy whose hand gets chopped off.

Running in Dubai gave me another challenge as well. How to dress? Well, apparently, Dubai is a conservative country where most man walk in traditional Arab dress, but there are many people in western dress also. So I decided to go for the "American" running outfit, no tights - which are normal in Europe but unseen in the USA, but a normal short and t-shirt. Anything else seemed unbearable, because the morning temperature was already about 19 degrees centigrade. Later that day I learned that in the mild form of Sharia that they have in Dubai, you might get in trouble anyway for running around in shorts. Fortunately, I've had my 8 kilometers at the shores of Dubai Creek already.

All the restrictions in Dubai did give me inspiration for another session though. For the storage miniconf, I wanted to talk about the High Availability of the iSCSI target, but instead I developed an alternative session: how to hide your p... on your laptop. I remembered a couple of talks that I've had with someone who lives in Saudi Arabia, and that seems to be a major issue there. Not sure though if the Aussies are interested as well :-)

Monday

After the Dubai creek run, there was the 14 hour flight from Dubai to Brisbane. What a delight to arrive in Brisbane and get off the aircraft. It was 7.30 in the morning, a nice

23 degrees centigrade and it smelled like a tropical country, with the sound of birds everywhere. Quiet day today, to be ready for tomorrow because that's when most of the action will occur with two talks. So I picked up my red minicooper convertible and drove to a beach, some 120 kilometers away from the airport. In the first town I found, I drove to the pharmacy (which they appear to call a chemist here), to buy some real sleeping pills. In the airplane I've slept about four hours, so it's time for a real night now, and they have real sleeping pills, with a warning sticker for sale here. Next stop was the energy drink, I took one and felt ready for the day.

The beach was a typical ocean beach, high waves and not much people. So I decided to go for a walk, and while walking, I decided to go for a run. I though why bother wearing a shirt, I'm in Aussieland, and that's a free country, so I wore nothing but my factor 15 sunscreen. I also didn't wear shoes, why bother wearing shoes on the soft sand? The run was awesome, over the beach which was soft and sandy all along. Especially the waves were fun, some came all the way up to the vegetation, where they hit a kind of sandy wall, and that's fun, because if twenty centimeters of water hits a wall, it wants to go back and that doubles the size of the wave to almost half a meter. So sometimes I was running over sand, sometimes up to my ankles in the water, and at other times the water came above my knees, which adds an interesting challenge to the run.

I decided to check in to the hotel early, and was there at 2 PM, where a lovely Alice helped me at the front desk. I just love the way Australian women speak English, and especially appreciated the fact that she upgraded me to a suite, even if I looked like if I came straight out of the bush (sand from the beach still stuck everywhere). The shower was the best shower I've ever had, but hey, why did the water feel so weird on my skin? I looked in the mirror and WOW! Red as a lobster! Completely burnt by the sun. For some reason my sunscreen that was good enough in Death Valley had failed on me completely! So the first walk into the city was to get some real Australian sun screen: Niveau Ultra Beach Protect 30+ Very High 4 H Water resistant. And a good lotion to treat my sunburn.

The rest of the afternoon was work, write this, get an adapter, and organize a few runs with locals in town this week. Australian Linux people are friendly Linux people, and on the chatlist I already found myself a few friends to run with, the first will be in front of the hotel at 6.30 tomorrow morning.