

## Cricket 68

### Chapter 68

The night after the monumental victory in the U19 World Cup, the team gathered for a final celebratory dinner in the hotel. Laughter and chatter filled the air as we reminisced about the matches, the nail-biting moments, and the sheer joy of lifting the trophy. It was a bittersweet moment, knowing that soon we would part ways and return to our routines back in India.

Early the next morning, the team began packing their belongings. The hotel lobby buzzed with activity as players hugged each other, shared light-hearted banter, and clicked pictures to preserve the memories of this unforgettable journey.

"Take care, Aarav! And don't forget to text us once in a while," Jaiswal said, grinning.

"I'll miss you, captain," Ravi Bishnoi added, giving me a firm handshake.

I returned the gesture. "You all better stay in form. Next time we meet, we'll be even stronger."

The team boarded the bus to the airport, and as the vehicle pulled away, I waved at them, feeling a mix of pride and sadness. This team was more than just a group of players; it was a family that had supported and grown together.

As the bus disappeared down the road, I found myself alone in the now-quiet hotel. I stood there for a moment, taking it all in, before dialing my parents back in India.

"Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad. Everyone's heading home, but I was thinking of staying back for a couple of weeks."

"Staying back?" Mom's voice carried a note of surprise.

"Yeah, I've been in Australia for cricket, but I haven't seen much of the country. I'd love to explore a bit—visit some iconic places, enjoy the beaches, maybe even try something adventurous. It's been a hectic few months, and I think this could be a nice break before things get busy again."

There was a brief silence before Dad spoke up. "You've earned it, Aarav. Take your time. Just keep us updated on your plans."

"Absolutely. Thanks for understanding!"

(Well rich parents could give permissions, but if you could not get permission, then you are poor so don't complain about it 😞😞)

With their approval, I started planning my tour. Cricket might have been my first love, but traveling was a close second. The idea of exploring Australia on my own excited me. It was the perfect way to unwind, reflect on the World Cup journey, and recharge for the challenges ahead.

The next day, I left the hotel and moved to a cozy guesthouse in Sydney. As I gazed out of the window at the iconic Sydney Opera House and the sparkling harbor, I felt a sense of freedom and anticipation. My Australian adventure was just beginning.

The journey began with a train ride early in the morning from Sydney Central Station. The soft hum of the train accompanied the rolling views of the Australian countryside. The further I traveled from the bustling city, the more the scenery changed. Rolling hills, golden fields, and the occasional herd of sheep grazing in the distance painted a serene picture. I arrived at a small station in New South Wales, where a local bus waited to take passengers to nearby villages.

The bus ride was an experience in itself. The vehicle was filled with locals, some chatting in a dialect that was almost musical, others silent but smiling at me—a curious visitor. The driver, a cheerful older man, shared tips about the best spots to explore. After an hour's journey, the bus dropped me off at a quaint village surrounded by eucalyptus trees.

The village was a world away from the fast-paced life I was used to. The houses were modest, their roofs gleaming in the sunlight. Children played barefoot on the dirt roads, and the air smelled of freshly baked bread and woodsmoke. My accommodation was a homestay, a charming wooden house with a veranda adorned with potted plants. The hosts welcomed me like family, serving me a hearty meal of roast lamb and vegetables.

During my days there, I immersed myself in the rhythms of village life. I helped milk cows in the morning, attended a small community gathering at the local hall, and even learned to shear sheep—a skill that required more dexterity than I anticipated. Evenings were spent around a fire pit, listening to the villagers share stories about the land and their ancestors.

After a week in the villages, it was time for a change of scenery. I returned to the train station on a public bus, my backpack heavier with small souvenirs and gifts from the villagers. My next destination: the Whitsunday Islands in Queensland.

To reach the islands, I took a flight to Airlie Beach, the gateway to this paradise. The town was buzzing with tourists, all eager to explore the turquoise waters and white sandy beaches. But I had something unique in mind—I'd booked an entire yacht for my time there.

The yacht, named Sea Breeze, was a sleek beauty equipped with all the luxuries one could ask for. I hired a local captain who not only steered the vessel but also acted as my guide, sharing fascinating tidbits about the islands. The Whitsundays were breathtaking. Seventy-four islands scattered like emeralds across the sea, each with its own charm.

I spent my days sailing from one island to another. The uninhabited ones offered a sense of solitude that was rare and precious. On one such island, I set up a picnic under the shade of palm trees and watched as waves lapped gently against the shore. Another day, I anchored near the famous Whitehaven Beach. Its powdery white sand felt like silk beneath my feet.

Scuba diving was a highlight of the trip. I rented an electric bike from Airlie Beach, which didn't require a license to operate, and used it to explore the mainland as well as ferry it to the islands on the yacht. This lightweight yet sturdy bike became my trusted companion for the rest of the journey. It was exhilarating to ride along coastal roads, the salty breeze whipping against my face.

The underwater world of the Whitsundays was a kaleidoscope of colors. Corals in shades of purple, orange, and green danced with the current. Schools of fish shimmered like silver ribbons, and a curious sea turtle even swam alongside me for a while. It was humbling to witness such raw, untouched beauty.

Nights on the yacht were equally magical. I lay on the deck, staring at a sky filled with stars. The gentle rocking of the boat and the distant sound of waves created a lullaby like no other. The captain often joined me, and we talked about everything from cricket to the mysteries of the ocean.

The electric bike proved invaluable as I ventured further inland to explore waterfalls and hidden trails. Riding through dense forests, I discovered secluded swimming holes where the water was so clear it mirrored the sky. Locals I met along the way were warm and welcoming, often inviting me for tea and sharing stories of their connection to the land.

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The next leg of my Australian adventure was as thrilling as it was heartwarming, filled with breathtaking encounters, quiet moments of introspection, and new bonds with nature and wildlife. After exploring the picturesque Whitsunday Islands and enjoying the joys of island-hopping, I turned my attention to the wonders that lay beneath the surface of Australia's pristine waters.

I had always dreamed of swimming with marine life, and Australia promised experiences straight out of a nature documentary. My day began with an early ride on my trusty electric bike to the diving center. The bike, a silent companion, zipped effortlessly along the coastal road, offering stunning views of the endless blue sea. At the center, I was introduced to a group of enthusiastic divers and our guide, a seasoned local with an infectious passion for marine conservation.

Our first dive was in the Coral Sea, where we slipped beneath the surface and entered a different world. The water was so clear it felt as though I was flying through the ocean. A humpback whale and her calf swam gracefully in the distance, their massive bodies moving with surprising gentleness. It was humbling to witness their sheer size and serenity up close.

Moments later, I found myself face-to-face with a whale shark, the largest fish in the ocean. Despite its size, the creature exuded a calm and curious demeanor, allowing me to swim alongside it. The guide emphasized the importance of maintaining a respectful distance, a rule I was more than happy to follow as I marveled at the intricate patterns on its back.

Playful sea lions soon joined the scene, darting through the water with an agility that made them seem like underwater acrobats. They swam circles around me, their curious eyes peering through my mask. The guide informed me that this particular pod was known for their friendly demeanor, and it was easy to see why.

As if the day couldn't get any better, we ended our diving expedition with a swim alongside a pod of dolphins. They moved in perfect synchrony, their sleek bodies slicing through the water with effortless grace. One even leapt out of the water, splashing down in a playful display that left our group laughing and clapping underwater.

The next adventure on my itinerary was camping on Australia's pristine beaches. Armed with a lightweight tent and basic camping gear I'd rented from a nearby store, I set up camp on a secluded stretch of beach near the Great Ocean Road. The soft golden sand was the perfect bed, and the sound of waves crashing against the shore provided a soothing soundtrack to the nights.

Camping under the Australian sky was a magical experience. Each night, the stars shone brighter than I'd ever seen, their light reflecting on the calm waters. I spent hours staring at constellations I'd only read about before, marveling at the vastness of the universe. On one such night, I was joined by a group of fellow travelers who were camping nearby. We shared stories, roasted marshmallows, and watched as bioluminescent plankton lit up the shoreline like tiny underwater stars.

During the day, I explored the nearby trails and rocky outcrops, often encountering kangaroos grazing peacefully in the wild. These iconic animals were a joy to observe, their powerful hind legs and curious faces embodying the spirit of Australia.

Speaking of kangaroos, my visit wouldn't have been complete without a trip to one of Australia's renowned wildlife sanctuaries. Taking my electric bike once again, I rode to a nearby zoo famous for its conservation efforts. Here, I had the chance to feed kangaroos and even hold a koala. The kangaroos were surprisingly gentle, their soft noses brushing against my hand as they took the food.

The zoo also housed an array of other fascinating creatures, from emus strutting proudly across open enclosures to wombats snoozing in shaded burrows. A zookeeper gave a lively talk about Australia's unique fauna, explaining how many of these species had adapted to thrive in the country's diverse environments.

One of the highlights was observing a platypus in its specially designed habitat. Watching the little creature paddle through the water, its duck-like bill and beaver tail in perfect harmony, felt like witnessing a real-life miracle of evolution.

Back at the beach, I rounded off my days with long walks along the shoreline, collecting shells and watching the sun dip below the horizon. The colors of the sunset—fiery oranges, deep purples, and soft pinks—reflected on the water, creating a canvas of natural beauty.

My journey through Australia wasn't just about exploring its landscapes and wildlife; it was about connecting with the spirit of the land and its people. Whether it was diving alongside majestic marine creatures, camping under a starlit sky, or sharing a moment with a kangaroo, every experience deepened my appreciation for the world around me.

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The allure of the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) was something I couldn't resist. Known as the home of Australian cricket and a temple of the sport globally, it holds a unique aura, second perhaps only to the Lord's Cricket Ground in England. Having played a match here during the U19 World Cup, I had experienced its grandeur firsthand. Yet, I yearned to delve deeper, to understand the history and essence of this iconic venue that had witnessed so many legendary moments in cricket's history.

To make this happen, I booked a private tour of the MCG. I wanted to immerse myself in its legacy, away from the crowd and with someone who could narrate its stories in vivid detail. The morning of my tour arrived, and I made my way to the gates of the stadium. The enormity of the structure hit me once again, its towering stands seeming to embrace the memories of every cricketer who had ever set foot there.

After my ticket was checked at the entrance, I was greeted by a cheerful man named Sam Sweeny. A seasoned tour guide with years of experience, Sam had an infectious enthusiasm for the sport and the stadium. "Welcome to the MCG," he said, extending his hand with a smile. "You're about to walk through history."

We began our tour in the main stand, where Sam started narrating tales of the stadium's inception. Built in 1853, the MCG had grown from a humble playing field into a colossal arena capable of hosting over 100,000 fans. It was here that the first-ever Test match was played between Australia and England in 1877, and where cricketing legends like Don Bradman, Dennis Lillee, and Shane Warne had etched their names into history.

As we walked through the stands, I could almost hear the echoes of past cheers, the collective roars of fans celebrating centuries, and the suspenseful silence during nail-biting finishes. The energy of the place was palpable, even without a live game in progress.

Sam led me to the dressing rooms, and as I stepped inside, I felt a rush of excitement. "This is where the players prepare, where strategies are discussed, and where dreams begin," Sam explained. I took a moment to imagine what it would be like to sit there as a player, donning my gear and getting ready to walk onto the field.

We then moved to the prestigious Members' Pavilion, an area steeped in tradition. The walls were adorned with photographs of past matches, championship teams, and iconic moments that defined the sport. Sam pointed to a picture of the famous 2001 Test match where VVS Laxman and Rahul Dravid's partnership turned the tide against Australia. "Moments like these make the MCG more than just a stadium. It's a storyteller," he said.



As we approached the century board, Sam excused himself to fetch some water. Left alone, I found myself drawn to the board, a testament to the brilliance of cricketers who had scored centuries on this hallowed ground. The names of Sachin Tendulkar and Virat Kohli stood out among others, each etched with pride and glory.

I was so engrossed that I didn't notice someone approaching until I heard a soft laugh. Turning around, I saw a woman, probably in her late 20s or early 30s, with a friendly smile. "What are you staring at so intently, young man?" she asked, her tone curious but light-hearted.

Without a second thought, I blurted, "My name will be there soon, just like Virat Kohli and Sachin Tendulkar—my idols."

She chuckled, clearly amused by my confidence. "Oh, really? And why do you think so?"

I met her gaze, unwavering. "Because I have confidence in my game. I believe in myself, and I will work hard to make it happen," I replied, my voice steady and assured.

The woman's laughter softened into something more approving. "You know," she said, "a few years ago, I heard the same thing from a young man. He was just as confident as you are."

I smiled and said, "Maybe he was, but I will be the next big thing."

She nodded, her amusement giving way to a hint of respect. "Well, young man, I'll look forward to seeing your name on this board someday."

With that, she walked away, leaving me with a renewed sense of determination. When Sam returned, I shared a brief smile with him, and we continued the tour.

Our next stop was the commentary box, a place where words had immortalized cricketing feats. From Richie Benaud's iconic calls to modern-day commentators, this room had witnessed the sport from a unique perspective. Standing there, I imagined the view during a packed match, with every run and wicket being broadcasted to millions around the world.

Finally, Sam led me to the ground itself. Standing on the edge of the pitch, I felt a deep connection to the field. It was more than just a patch of grass; it was a stage for heroes. Sam later said, "Every inch of this ground has a story".

The tour concluded with a visit to the MCG museum, where cricket's rich history was preserved in artifacts, from Sir Don Bradman's bat to jerseys worn by modern legends. It was a fitting end to a journey through time, a reminder of the legacy every cricketer aspires to be part of.

As I left the MCG, I felt a mix of gratitude and inspiration. This was more than just a tour; it was a reminder of the responsibility I carried as a player.

As my trip came to an end, I packed my belongings, including the electric bike that had been my trusty companion throughout this adventure. It was time to head back home, but the memories of these two weeks would stay with me forever, a reminder of the beauty and wonder that exists when we take the time to explore and connect with the world around us.

My journey back to India was filled with thoughts of the stories I had learned and the dreams I had reaffirmed. The MCG had shown me what it meant to be part of something greater than oneself, and I was determined to make my mark, not just for myself, but for every aspiring cricketer who dared to dream.