

Far from ungrateful Europe; I'm off

That Australia has become the destination of choice of young Europeans is nothing new. Thanks to the mining boom, Perth, the capital of Western Australia, is now attracting growing numbers of foreigners, particularly Italians.

by Stefano Vergine

The view from King's Park is enchanting. The Swan River, a blue snake that winds its way to the Indian Ocean, runs down the middle of this immense city park. The centre of Perth is bristling with skyscrapers, a tangled forest of glass and concrete. Further away, amid palm trees and eucalypti, one's gaze stretches over infinite rows of low, orderly houses. We could easily be in California. The climate is mild, nature is blooming, the white beaches are crowded with young surfers and the wide roads intersect in a maze of overlapping flyovers. But to really appreciate the difference, one has to climb up the King's Park hill. A sign hanging over the entrance reads "Rio Tinto". Another sits abreast the highest skyscraper: "BHP Billiton".

These are among the most powerful multinationals in the world and both are particularly active here in Western Australia, a state with just over two million inhabitants and a surface area eight times Italy's. Gold, uranium, iron, zinc, bauxite and nickel are Perth's major assets. Every year, tons of minerals are extracted from the mines dotted around this vast land – inhabited only by Australian aborigines until 150 years ago – before being hauled to the ports and shipped to the vast Asian market.

All this wealth is concentrated in Perth, the most isolated metropolis in the world. The result

is a city that has seen unprecedented expansion and is now attracting people from all over the world. Adriano Tedde, the Italian consul in Perth, explains: "Two thousand more people arrive every week. It's an unbelievable influx that is massively increasing the cost of living".

Over the next 20 years, the city's population should almost double, from the current 1.6 million to around 2.7 million. Unemployment is 4%, lower than the national average and a great deal less than the disastrous labour market figures in Europe. True, the cost of living is rising steadily, so much so that the city is now ranked as one of the most expensive in the world (beating London and New York) according to a report by the Economist Intelligence Unit. But wages are following suit and there's no trace of the austerity policies that are crushing millions of Europeans.

Over the last decade, the GDP of Western Australia has grown by 33% and the trend should continue in the coming years. And more and more young people are choosing Perth over the better-known Sydney and Melbourne.

The only figures available on Italian immigration refer to the whole of Australia and indicate that between 2010 and 2011 as many as 110,000 Italians immigrated to the land of kangaroos. In Fremantle, Perth's port, we met Vittorio Petriconi, head of the INCA-CGIL trade union. "The difference with respect to a few years ago", he told us, "is that we're not just getting university graduates and academics anymore. The brain drain population has expanded to include numerous factory workers, clerks and craftspeople who choose to start a new life in Perth, or at least take a few years off from the Italian situation".

Alessandro (26) previously worked as an optician in Milan and has been in Perth for a month – he found a job in the construction industry a few weeks ago. "I don't think I would've taken a job as a bricklayer in Italy", he admits,



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“but here they pay me 200 dollars [€153] a day and it’s a whole different ballgame”.

Building is booming at unprecedented levels. Thanks to the serious money being made by the mining industry, the Western Australian government has announced a \$4bn [€3bn] infrastructure expansion plan. Railways, roads and shopping centres – the government believes – will be needed to satisfy the needs of a constantly growing population.

But construction is not the only business attracting so many Europeans to this neck of the woods. Most youngsters from the Old Continent find jobs in bars and restaurants. Lucille, a 24-year-old design student from France, found work as a waitress in a restaurant just two weeks after she arrived. “I earn \$21-22 [€16] an hour during the week and \$24 [€18] on weekends”, she said. Plans for the future? “Earn a bit of money, tour Australia, then see what happens”.

Like Lucille, many of the young people from the EU over here have not yet decided whether they intend to stay on indefinitely. Most of the European migrants arrive with a working holi-

day visa, a special visa for people under 31 that allows them to work in Australia for 12 months. The visa can also be renewed for a second year, provided the migrant has worked at least 88 days in certain specific sectors. The greatest demand for labour comes from farms.

After working seven months in a restaurant, Claudio, a 28-year-old from Umbria, headed south to a little village with 400 inhabitants called Mount Barker. “I worked the land in a vineyard in exchange for board and lodging. Of course, I’d have preferred to have been paid, but it was the only way I found to stay on in Australia another year, and I really don’t want to leave”.

Among the many Europeans one meets in Australia, stories like Claudio’s are ten a penny. Tales of young people who have lost their jobs in Italy, Greece or Spain due to the crisis. Who now, like many before them, have chosen to start again in Perth, fifteen thousand kilometres away from home, where one can take in not only the sea air but also the irresistible scent of an economic boom. **E**

The Perth skyline seen from King’s Park. The city is expanding more than ever before and is attracting people from all over the world.