

National Geographic World Championship

The Australian team came fourth at the 2011 National Geographic World Championship held in San Francisco – the best result since 1995



*Representing Australia at the National Geographic World Championship
(L to R) Jesse Tong, Michael Gu and Riley Kernaghan*

Australia's team is selected from the intermediate and junior levels of the National Geographic Channel Australian Geography Competition via the Final for under 16s.

Representing Australia were:

Michael Gu, Melbourne Grammar School

Riley Kernaghan, MacGregor State High School, Brisbane

Jesse Tong, Brisbane Grammar School

Competing in the National Geographic World Championship were teams of students 16 years old and younger from: Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, Russia, Singapore, Slovakia, Taiwan, UK and USA. The interaction with students from diverse countries is as important as the tests or exploring the host city.

All teams completed a written test and then a second test held at San Francisco Zoo which included map reading and geographical questions on places and environments related to the animals the students could see. On the basis of these two tests, Russia, Taiwan and Canada made it through to the final. Australia came fourth, tying with the United States.

The final was held at Google headquarters in nearby Mountain View. Russia took out first place, with Canada second and Taiwan third. All the teams then had lunch in a Google staff cafeteria (an experience in itself) followed by a tour and presentations on aspects of Google Earth and Google Maps. It was interesting to hear about their work on disaster response and the diplomatic challenges of some geopolitical boundaries, and fun for some students to take a ride in a Street View car.

However, perhaps the most interesting part was seeing how Google's corporate culture worked in practice: multiple free cafeterias which specified every ingredient of the food and the cooking method, with recyclable, compostable or reusable containers; staff playing pool or volleyball because it was good to have a break and come back refreshed to work; bicycles (in Google colours) everywhere for staff to use to go between the many buildings on the extensive grounds.

The students also visited Point Reyes. The visitors' centre is located in the San Andreas Fault Zone, and the students walked a trail with a park ranger to see evidence of the 1906 earthquake. The land to the east is on the North American Plate, and Point Reyes itself is on the Pacific Plate. The weather can be quite different as well with the ridge immediately to the west of the San Andreas Fault Zone blocking the fogs that affect Point Reyes – and San Francisco as well during our stay – from spreading farther inland. On the way back to San Francisco, we visited Muir Woods to see the impressive coastal redwoods.

There was some free time during the programme and during these periods, the Australian team visited the California Academy of Sciences Museum and the Cable Car Museum, rode the cable cars (though the queues were so long that was a struggle), strolled along Fishermans Wharf, caught a bus over the Golden Gate Bridge, and much more, including attending a baseball match. We went to the game with the Taiwanese and UK teams. The local team, the San Francisco Giants, is a top US team and their ballpark is said to be one of the best in the country. The Taiwanese are right into baseball, but the rest of us were bewildered at times by the rules and all the abbreviations on the scoreboard. That's probably how other people feel when they watch cricket! It was interesting to experience this part of US culture.

The food was also part of the San Francisco experience, starting with American breakfasts with not only what Australians would eat for breakfast but adding in waffles, pancakes and sweet pastries. Lunches ranged from hotdogs at the baseball to organic wholefood meals purchased by weight. Dinners reflected the diverse elements that make up San Francisco, e.g. Empress of China Restaurant in Chinatown, Bubba Gump Shrimp Restaurant at Fishermans Wharf, Chevy's Fresh Mex Restaurant.

One of our team, Riley Kernaghan, describes the experience:

For me attending the National Geographic World Championship has been an exciting and great experience as I was able to meet people from all over the world and visit lots of famous places I had only every read about.

Australia's team to the 2013 National Geographic World Championship will be chosen from the 2012 and 2013 Australian competitions.

Older students are in the running for the 2013 International Geography Olympiad in Kyoto, Japan. The 2012 Olympiad is being held in Cologne, Germany, with Australia's team selected from our 2011 Competition via Geography's Big Week Out.

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