

# Aussie TV Films Election Feature

By **Marianne Leitch**, *Associate Producer*  
"Foreign Correspondent" ABC TV

When I think Florida, I think golf courses, beaches, palm trees and Jerry Seinfeld's parents Morty and Helen living in a condo somewhere near Palm Beach. However, my executive producer thinks alligators, which is why I found myself zipping along on an airboat at dawn on a lake somewhere near Tampa recently.

Having never heard of an airboat until getting on one, it was an interesting experience. And – it goes without saying – very enjoyable ... I figure that since this story is being written for *Airboating Magazine*, there's a fair chance most readers who've gotten this far will already know that.

The airboat belongs to Joyce Rondos, who publishes this magazine. Joyce was helping us film Phil Walters, the Tampa-based gator guide/hunter we were profiling for our television program, "Foreign Correspondent," which shows on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. The ABC is Australia's version of the BBC – just much smaller and poorer.

I was in Florida with a small team to make a one-hour TV story about the swing state of Florida. It was airing in Australia on the eve of the U.S. election, just as Americans were going to the polls. We chose Florida because it's a big swing state, supposedly quite evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats, and more to the point, we thought it would be an interesting place to film.

We weren't wrong.

From the moment we stepped off the plane from Sydney into the soaring temperatures and energy-sapping humidity of the hurricane season, Florida delivered everything we'd expected, and more. Much



**L to R: Gator hunter, Jason Holeman; gator guide, Capt. Phil Walters; cameraman David Martin, and correspondent Annabel Crabb, video a gator hunt for Australian TV.**

more. That's the thing about the U.S. – you guys don't do anything by halves.

There's the food, for starters. Where to begin? Perhaps in our Tampa hotel, one of those efficient and friendly good value chains that provides a decent breakfast, and as many large helpings as you choose, but no proper crockery or cutlery with which to eat it, just polystyrene plates, plastic eating utensils and paper coffee cups.

I'm sorry, but I find it profoundly depressing to start my day eating like this. Every time I finished breakfast by throwing my rubbish in the bin, I wondered how big the landfill hole must be to accommodate all the crap from all the hotels over Tampa filled with guests doing the same thing. And I wondered about the people who weren't being employed to wash up. Part of our story was looking at the impact of the high



**Jason Holeman bagged this 11'4" alligator the morning after the video shoot.**

unemployment rate in the U.S.; couldn't some of them wash dishes?

Still on the food front, our reporter, political commentator and sketch writer Annabel Crabb was particularly entranced by the spectacular Bloody Marys in the bar next to our Tallahassee hotel. They featured an entire pork chop. Seriously! Unfortunately for Annabel she couldn't imbibe, being six months pregnant, but she was certainly impressed by their size and sheer chutzpah.

But back to the gators.

We all were amazed that so close to the freeways and high-rises, the shopping malls

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and bridges of Tampa, were beautiful natural-looking lakes filled with wildlife, including the reptiles and flocks of gorgeous birds.

We didn't end up snaring a gator but we saw plenty of evidence of their existence, and had a fun morning out on the lake with Joyce, Phil, and Phil's client Jason, who had an 11 a.m. meeting to make in Orlando. Nothing like a spot of quick gator hunting first to get the blood pumping.

Phil was also good enough to share his political views with us, and for that we thank him.

I always feel a bit uncomfortable bowling up to ordinary folk, sticking a camera in their faces and asking them a bunch of personal questions, even when they've agreed in advance to be interrogated. Luckily for us, everyone we met on our road trip around Florida, including Phil, was incredibly generous both with their time and their thoughts, and for that we thank them. Americans are a gregarious and outgoing bunch, and make it easy for people like us to do our jobs.

We started our journey in Tampa and ended in Miami, via Orlando, Apalachicola, Tallahassee and Delray Beach. We spoke to a fabulously diverse bunch of folk, from writers, immigrants, United Daughters of the Confederates and Tea Party members, to lobbyists and prominent politicians like Jeb Bush and Bob Graham, to football fans, retirees and oyster farmers. Their political opinions ranged from very liberal to deeply conservative, but they were all polite, helpful and extremely welcoming. It was my first dose of your famous Southern hospitality, and I was not disappointed.

Politically speaking, we were interested in talking to people about the issues that our research told us were going to be the important ones in the election – healthcare, taxes, immigration, women's concerns and the economy. In practice, all most people



The crew of the Australian TV show, "Foreign Correspondent," wrap up filming the alligator hunting segment. L to R: Marianne Leitch, Associate Producer; Annabel Crabb, Correspondent; David Marvin, Camera; Richard McDermott, Sound Engineer Producer.

wanted to talk about was the economy, and that's understandable.

The two aspects that perplexed us most, as outsiders, were both to do with process. The first was the staggering amount of money spent by both sides in the campaign, including the primaries. It feels profligate. America has never owed so much money – and yet at the same time, Americans have never spent so much on a political campaign. There's a disconnect.

And the second was the totally bizarre voting process – at least to us. The idea that every county in every state would have its own rules and regulations on who should be allowed to vote, and how, and that it should all be overseen by partisan, party-affiliated officials, seems to us to be completely bonkers. It sets you up for an argument ... as if there aren't already enough real things to disagree about.

One person we interviewed compared the U.S. election process to a bare knuckles brawl – whoever controls the process controls the vote – and it seems a valid point.

In Australia, voting is compulsory. The notion of individual rights doesn't come into

it – the right to vote is seen instead as a duty that every citizen needs to fulfill, period. It also happens on a Saturday, when most people aren't working, and have time to do it – not in the middle of the week on a working day.

And the whole process is overseen by a totally neutral body of public servants working to strict regulations promulgated by our national parliament, and applied uniformly across the nation. People are manually marked off the electoral roll, and then use a pencil to mark ballot papers, which are then counted by hand, overseen by scrutineers from the various parties. It seems old fashioned, and there are sometimes disagreements and recounts, but overall it seems to work remarkably smoothly.

The butterfly ballot/pregnant/hanging/dimpled chad controversy simply couldn't happen here. It's actually pretty boring.

And that's one thing Florida could never be. Thanks, guys. Without people like you, people like me would be out of a job.

The ABC Foreign Correspondent election special "Goin' Up Around the Bend" can be seen here: <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2012/s3626790.htm>

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