TASMANIA

Tasmania is generally an afterthought for visitors to Australia, but it should be near the top of their list.

(The Sunday Telegraph, 2001)

There is a school of science fiction in which the hero finds himself in a world with a superficial resemblance to his own. The countryside looks the same, the buildings look the same, the people look the same – until he notices a small, entirely alien detail which reveals that he is actually in a different galaxy.

Tasmania is like that. You can be driving past Constable-country meadows, or a small town with a perfect Georgian church and an inn called the Foxhunter's Return, and then, just when you half-believe you are back in Britain, something unexpected – a blaze of bougainvillaea, a corrugated iron roof on an immaculate cottage, a wallaby hopping along beside the road – reminds you that you are half a world away.

Anthony Trollope, writing in the 1870s, remarked that the inhabitants were 'almost English-mad' and that Tasmania was 'a land more fitted for English emigrants than…any other on the face of the earth'. The affinities run deep: like us, the Tasmanians are obsessed with the weather, understand the importance of a proper breakfast, and hate the French.

The differences, though, are as alluring as the similarities. If Tasmania has rich pastureland with the most contented cows you have ever seen, it also has Wineglass Bay, which is probably as perfect as a beach can get, and Cradle Mountain, whose rough grandeur makes you feel as significant as a Subbuteo figurine. All in all, it is as if a piece of the British Isles had been dragged across the globe and become stretched along the way, making the plains wider, the hills higher, and the skies more immense.

Tasmania's separation from the mainland (it is an hour's journey by plane from Melbourne, and 13 hours by boat) means that although it was one of the first parts of Australia to be colonised, it remains relatively unpopulated and unspoilt. Similar in size to the Republic of Ireland, it has under half a million inhabitants, and more than a third of the landmass is given over to national parks. It is also a haven for creatures which have become rare or extinct in the rest of Australia, including the Tasmanian devil and the spotted-tail quoll (though a distressing number of animals end up dead on the roads: there is a local joke that the best way to see the wildlife is to travel by glass-bottomed bus).

Hobart, the capital, is the second oldest city in Australia, and must have a claim to being the most charming. Situated at the mouth of the River Derwent, with Mount Wellington rising steeply behind it, it flourished as a whaling centre in the nineteenth century, and is now such a happy mixture of past and present that you half expect to find Cap'n Ahab enjoying a cappuccino on the quayside. The waterfront buildings, cleverly converted, range from an incredibly chic apartment hotel, the Elizabeth on Oakford Pier, to the bohemian rough-and-tumble of the galleries, cafes and shops in the Georgian sandstone warehouses of Salamanca Place. It is like Covent Garden with the crassness taken out.

Having once tried to jettison their early history – the island was rechristened in 1856 because its original name, Van Diemen's Land, had such fearful convict associations – Tasmanians cherish what they have left. My Victorian B&B in Launceston, Werona, had been restored to its original state with such fanatical attention to detail that even the fire extinguishers might have come from an old Army & Navy Stores catalogue; and to drive between here and Hobart is to run the gauntlet of picturesque heritage towns. The quaintest of them, Richmond, boasts an

antique jail where – with sublime irony – the front door is plastered with security stickers warning modern criminals against trying to break in.

Still, there is old and there is old, and visiting Europeans cannot help but smile when they discover that Richmond's 'historic' bridge was built in 1823. Tasmania's history would not in itself be a reason to travel 10,000 miles; its natural beauty would.

'Cradle Mountain via Mole Creek': who could resist such a road sign? I turned off Highway 1, Tasmania's underemployed main artery, and in the space of 40 miles passed through four dramatically different types of landscape. First there was the dream valley, with soft green meadows and a self-absorbed river watched over by rocky mountains – the sort of place where an honest frontiersman in a Western would lean contentedly on his axe and whistle at his good fortune, shortly before a hired gun in a dust coat arrived to rough him up.

Next, the road twisted up into Mole Creek Karst National Park, with a profusion of yellow gorse giving way to giant ferns and top-heavy, sky-scraping King Billy pines. Tasmania claims to have the purest air on earth, and the higher you climb, the more you seem able to taste it. When the road levelled out, I found myself surrounded by pale scrub and awesome walls of weather-cracked, wind-wrapped stone.

The final leg of my journey took me across moorland which might have been borrowed from *King Lear*, with silver swathes of rain, and cattle grazing beside the uprooted wrecks of trees; only the pylons, striking Blair Witch attitudes as they stalked across the heather, struck a false note. As I approached the cosy wood cabins of Cradle Mountain Lodge, a sign warned of wombats crossing – and there, within 100 yards, was a stout, furry shape ambling past in front of me, looking more like a soft toy than any self-respecting marsupial has a right to do.

The cradle in question is more literally a crater, spectacularly fenced with rocky peaks (the highest rising to 5,000 feet). The 50-mile Overland Track from here to Lake St Clair is apparently irresistible to serious hikers, but I made do with a two-hour walk around Dove Lake, which nestles idyllically against the mountain. The path took me past eucalyptus groves, quartzite beaches, and the Ballroom Rainforest, where the soaring trees evoke debutantes enchanted in mid-gavotte; and here I witnessed the strange sight of snow falling on palm trees.

I wasn't entirely surprised to find myself in a blizzard. The weather in Tasmania is famously changeable, and the tourist office had warned me to pack warm clothes – though I had balked at their suggestion of polypropylene thermal underwear. By lunchtime, the snow had melted. The following afternoon, four hours' drive away, I was playing beach cricket in blazing sunshine.

The Bay of Fires, where this cliff-hanger match was contested, takes its name from the aboriginal campfires which early explorers saw twinkling along the shore, and is one of those places which is so endued with magic that it inspires evangelism and secretiveness in equal measure. To reach its only lodge, we walked for three hours (most visitors do a four-day hike), carrying our packs across glorious, duned expanses of white sand – deserted except for us and scurrying bands of tiny hooded plovers – and over great boulders dusted with rust-red lichen. At times we found ourselves walking on nothing but shells – thousands upon thousands of them, piled on top of each other like poker chips in a Dreamtime casino.

The lodge itself sits unobtrusively but magnificently on a hillside above the sea. Built of wood and glass, and bisected by a roofless corridor which runs its considerable length, it thrillingly explores the possibilities of modern architecture in a way that British buildings, given

our colder climate, cannot. Here, as in most of Tasmania, eco-tourism is the watchword, and the place is a temple of solar energy and sustainability, with composting loos and rainwater showers as its shrines. (The reason that the Tasmanians hate the French, incidentally, is that they are eco-unfriendly and go around nuking small South Pacific islands.)

Kayaking the next day on a nearby lagoon, we watched five black swans take to the air, pedalling over the surface with the first flaps of their wings, necks outstretched like Concorde, before soaring into the sky. A hermit crab, borrowed from the shallows, nipped our fingers and squirted water at us in indignation. Half-way up the neighbouring *Lawrence of Arabia* dunes, we found a lexicon of possum and wallaby tracks.

By the time I reached Freycinet National Park the following afternoon, I was beginning to grow suspicious. The view from my room at Freycinet Lodge, of a jetty tiptoeing into the serene blue of Coles Bay, was almost too perfect; and when I climbed to the saddle of Mount Amos and Mount Mayson, past red granite rocks and eucalyptus trees, with lizards scurrying *staccato* underfoot, and looked down on the seductive curve of Wineglass Bay, there was no possible doubt. I had indeed stumbled into a parallel universe, where the beaches were always pristine, the water was always clear, and the inhabitants were programmed to charm you, and serve you large plates of delicious seafood twice a day.

Driving back to Hobart Airport, along a rugged coastline with small, fretful waves, I had a sense of coming back to earth. Perhaps the names of the hills I crossed – Break-Me-Neck and Bust-Me-Gall – had something to do with it. I had another month in Australia to look forward to, with red deserts and coral reefs to explore; but as I boarded the plane, I could not remember ever leaving a place with greater reluctance.