

England with kangaroos

Once the home of convicts and the 'Hell on Earth' penal settlement, Tasmania is the forgotten state of Australia. But now, as **Philip Watson** discovers, wilderness has become a tourist attraction and the island is suddenly fashionable





The oldest bridge in Australia, in the village of Richmond, Tasmania

ROBERT TWARDING

It looked like it had been beamed in from outer space. Driving along a country lane in northern Tasmania, surrounded by rolling hills, thick hedgerows and West Country place names (I was heading out of Launceston along the Tamar river valley), I was beginning to think this could not be a more archetypal English scene. Sheep and newborn lambs frolicked (maybe even gambolled) in the fields. A tractor ploughed away in the distance. Even the spring sky had a familiar cloudy countenance; there was the threat of rain in the air.

And then it appeared, and I had to double-take. Standing by the side of the road was the classic symbol of Australia: the diamond-shaped, black on yellow kangaroo warning sign. It was as incongruous as a sheep shearer in a cocktail bar.

At times, Tasmania can seem, as Trollope said when he visited the island in the mid-19th century, 'more English than England'. One American writer described Tasmania as 'Surrey gone bush'. It is a place of Fifties milk bars, Devonshire cream teas and 'Victorian accommodation'. Locals drive old Morris 1100s (on the left, mind) and spend their evenings watching TV programmes such as *Dad's Army* and *Two Fat Ladies*. There are Fred Basset cartoons in the local newspapers; many shops observe half-day closing on Saturday. It takes kangaroo jolts to remind you that time spent in Tasmania is actually time spent in Australia.

In many ways, Tasmania, which lies 185 miles south of the mainland across the Bass Strait, is the definitively un-Australian holiday destination. Think of that vast country, more than 2,500 miles across, and you picture such grand geographical gestures as Ayers Rock and the Great Barrier Reef. You do not envisage untropical vistas such as glacial mountains, alpine moorlands, jagged coastlines, thick forests and Georgian sandstone buildings. If you want those, many think, you may as well stay in Europe.

Because of this, Tasmania has seemed to lag behind other Australian holiday states, to be moving in reverse compared to the screaming, fifth-gear Americanisation of Sydney and rapid resort development in Queensland. It is often overlooked and under-appreciated – especially by Australians. Speak to Sydneysiders and you're more likely to encounter the widespread prejudice that Tasmania is a small, backward island of excessive isolation and inbreeding. 'Watch out for people with six fingers and five limbs,' said one Sydney resident, almost in seriousness, as I left the Big City for the Small Island.

These attitudes are changing. Not only are more Australians visiting the

island, but the number of overseas holidaymakers, especially from Europe, has increased dramatically over recent years. In the eco-aware Nineties, Tasmania has suddenly become fashionable.

And it is only small, of course, by Australian standards. With fewer than half a million people living in an area twice the size of Switzerland, Tasmania can justifiably promote itself on its sense of space. More than 30 per cent of the island comprises world heritage areas, national parks and reserves, and the state claims to have the cleanest air in the inhabited world – the westerlies carry air up from Antarctica which has had to cross nothing but thousands of miles of ocean. 'People don't come here for sand and surf,' says Mike Fry, part owner of the Ormiston guest house in the charming west coast village of Strahan. 'Wilderness is our number one tourist attraction.'

The wilderness seems more pristine and Edenic than most parts of the world. From Strahan you can take flights into the high ranges and deep gorges of the untamed Franklin-Gordon rivers. Saved from hydro-electricity development by conservationists in 1983, this is an area of unparalleled beauty. Most flights land on the fast-flowing river; imposing temperate rainforest trees such as myrtles, sassafras and the rare Huon pines tower above you. Wilderness flights also leave the sleepy state capital Hobart for the even more remote and virginal swamps and sedgelands of the South-West National Park.

Tasmania is an island with great and surprising natural advantages. Just as you have become accustomed to the green pastures of the east and north, the landscape plunges you into flat parched grasslands that recall the South African veldt, or through grand and eerie eucalyptus forests that could not be more Australian. The parched stripped white bark of the trees lies on the woodland floor like cattle skulls; when it rains the trunks are transformed into streaky palettes of rich greens, browns and reds.

Up in the mountainous north-west there are remote pine lodges and forest inns, such as Cradle Mountain and Lemonthyme, where you are exposed to nature at its most raw. At night you can watch the feeding of wallabies, possums and wombats. You awake in the morning to the cackles and screeches of such exotic birds as the currawong and yellow wattle-bird; the tannins in the surrounding buttongrass turn your bathwater golden brown.

This area is a Mecca for hikers and bushwalkers; many leave from Cradle Mountain lodge to make the five-day trip over the high mountains to Lake St Clair. At the start of the Overland

Track, they pass the chalet of Gustav Weindorfer, an Austrian ecologist who founded the surrounding national park in 1922. A sign outside reads, 'This is the Waldheim Chalet – where there is no time and nothing matters.' Quite.

Even the weather is favourable. Contrary to popular belief, Tasmania has a mild climate (it has half as much rain as Sydney). It should be said, however, that the weather can change quickly – I was reminded of the old Scottish saying: 'If you don't like the weather, wait five minutes.' On a two-hour walk around the glacial lake at Cradle Mountain we experienced rain, hail, sleet, sunshine, showers, brief calms before stormy winds, and black clouds that raced across the mountain tops as if powered by Grand Prix engines. The night I spent at Eaglehawk Neck on the south-eastern Tasman Peninsula turned a still and sunny afternoon into a storm. 'Strong enough to blow the milk out of your tea,' said my B&B host, Nick Tanner.

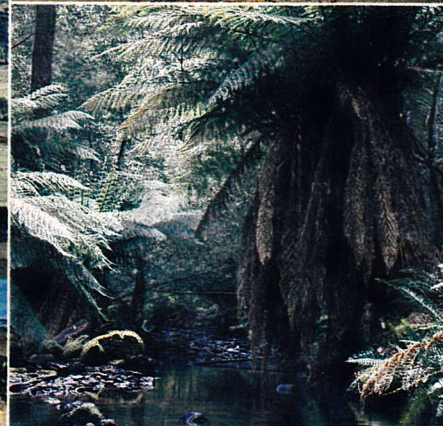
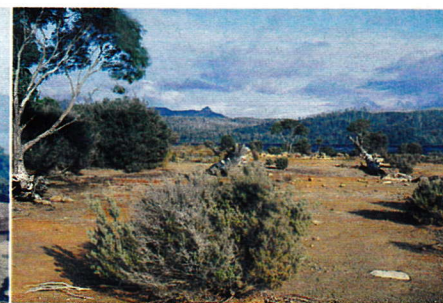
Then there is the food. Once known as 'the garden of Australia', not only do fruit and vegetables grow in fecund abundance in Tasmania, but the seafood is some of the finest (and best value) in the world. On the Tasman Peninsula I passed a sign for a seafood bar (then turned rapidly back) which read, 'Oysters: \$6.50 a dozen'. That's 20p each. Add the wonderful cheese and dairy products fresh from King Island off the north coast, the nascent yet highly regarded Tasmanian wine industry, and two breweries – Cascade and James Boag's – that are known as the best in Australia, and you have a place that should satisfy even the most demanding gourmand.

AS MUCH as Tasmania can remind you of the ruggedness and verdancy of highland Scotland or coastal Ireland, it is a place apart. In truth, it is not quite Little England or mini-Australia. And that is how the Tasmanians (or Taswegians, as hardcore islanders refer to themselves) seem to like it. Sure they made their displeasure strongly felt when the map of Australia drawn up for the 1982 Commonwealth Games failed to include their island, but you half suspect that the locals quite liked falling off the map. Tasmania is an island on the edge of an island at the end of the world. It is the last stop – and Antarctica is the end of the line.

Because of this it has always been a place of exile and banishment, of pioneers and refugees. If there is one thing that differentiates Tasmania from the rest of Australia, it is that it seems to have more history – much of it bloody and brutal – more visibly, in a more concentrated area.

European settlers first arrived on the island, named Van Diemen's Land by

WORLD PICTURES, TROPIC SMITH



Clockwise from left, the Forth River valley; Lake St Clair; the rainforest in Mount Field National Park

17th-century Dutch navigator Abel Tasman, in 1803, and there was immediate conflict with the Aborigines who had inhabited the island for at least 35,000 years. Violent battles broke out over land; many Aborigines were killed and their children abducted for use as forced labour.

In 1830, in an attempt to round up the Aborigines, a chain of 2,200 men (known as the Black Line) was formed and moved for three weeks through the settled areas of the state. Most escaped (in fact, only two, a man and a boy, were captured), but by 1842 all the remaining indigenous people had either given themselves up or been captured. Most perished shortly afterwards; in 1876, Truganini, the last full-blood Aborigine, died. Four thousand Aborigines had been wiped out.

The experience of the convicts and free settlers was not much happier. A penal colony was first established in 1821 on tiny Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour in the west of Tasmania; a remote, barren and inhospitable outcrop designed to imprison and punish convicts who had committed further crimes after arrival in Australia. Others followed, including, in 1832, the infamous 'Hell on Earth' settlement at Port Arthur on the Tasman Peninsula. Some were sent for such minor violations as being 'a man in possession of a frock and a pair of stockings', but most had committed more serious

crimes of violence and murder. They were treated with tyrannical cruelty. A few fled, but were easily rounded up – or found dead in the bush. There are tales of cannibalism among groups that escaped. The more enterprising seized prison ships and sailed to China or Chile. One prisoner, a former actor named William Hunt, threw a kangaroo skin over his back and tried, unsuccessfully, to hop past the guards.

Seventy-four thousand convicts were transported to Tasmania in the three decades or so from 1821; by the mid-19th century Van Diemen's Land was the most feared place in the English-speaking world. By 1856 transportation ceased, and that year the government renamed the state Tasmania. Port Arthur was closed in 1877.

The legacy of this unique history – island as dystopia; a prison without walls – can still be felt today, often in subtle and unexpected ways. For one, the offspring of Tasmania's criminal classes have created one of most law-abiding societies in the world; crime rates are much lower here than in other Australian states. Sense of community is also very strong. The island has turned its Victorian population of paupers, lunatics, invalids, drunkards and orphaned children into a skilled and enterprising workforce. This is largely the result of the state's history of charitable institutions, community groups and the best-funded education and welfare system in Australia.

There is still a palpable feeling of self-reliance and independence of thought. Many artists, craftsmen and entrepreneurs have moved to the state, almost as exiles from Australian city life; you sense idiosyncrasy and quirkiness are not only tolerated here but encouraged. Tasmanian politics

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have never followed Australia's trend, and minority parties have always flourished; in the Eighties the Greens held the balance of power in the state. In the 1998 general election, which returned Liberal John Howard as Prime Minister, the Australian Labour Party swept the board on the island. Perhaps it's an indication that working life has always been hard on Tasmania; for all its progress, the state has the highest unemployment rate in Australia.

The power wielded for many years by Tasmania's free settlers has also had an effect. Fearful of ex-convicts gaining any political influence, they formed organisations that were strictly conservative. Snobbish notions of God-fearing, middle-class respectability prevailed. Many ex-convicts, having learnt their lesson, only aided this process by forming a largely conformist and submissive working class. Strict police control quashed any potential disorder. Fear of moral corruption, supposedly another convict stain, is also in evidence to this day. Tasmania only decriminalised homosexuality earlier this year, after a long and bitter battle that was eventually taken to the UN Human Rights Committee.

And there is no getting away from the fact that this is a parochial place, the island that time forgot. Turn on the radio and you'll hear countless hours of Seventies pop, and fantastically politically incorrect adverts encouraging you to 'talk to people in wheelchairs – they're just like you and me'.

It's also true that the same family names crop up again and again on the island. 'Forget about six degrees of separation,' said one woman, who had recently left Queensland to settle in Hobart (a 'blow-in', locals would call her). 'In Tasmania there's barely one.'

Much of the island's early history has been repackaged as 'Heritage Tasmania' and 'The Australian Convict Experience', complete with Georgian townships, colonial homesteads and prison settlements. Just north of Hobart is the quaint village of Richmond, which has some of the oldest colonial architecture in Australia. Many of the buildings were built by convicts, including the sandstone bridge, jail and Roman Catholic church. Bothwell, a little further north, also has fine early 19th-century buildings, and the oldest golf course in Australia. Hobart's Salamanca Place – a graceful row of waterfront warehouses converted into art and crafts galleries and shops – and its Tasmanian Museum are also well worth visiting.

YET TASMANIA'S premier tourist attraction is Port Arthur. In a bleak bay at the end of the peninsula, the melancholic prison museum gives you a vivid picture of the hardship suffered

ROBERT HARDING TRIPP/DENNIS



by the 12,600 inmates who passed through it. There are the ruins of a penitentiary, a guard tower, an asylum, a church, a hospital, an experimental model prison based on London's Pentonville, and a restored house that belonged to the prison commandant. You can also take boat trips around the harbour to visit the burial places on the Isle of the Dead, and Point Puer, the site of a boys' prison.

It was at Port Arthur in 1996 that a lone gunman went on a murderous rampage, killing 35 people. When asked why he had chosen Port Arthur, 28-year-old Martin Bryant replied, 'A lot of violence happened there... it seemed the right place.'

Back in Hobart for my last night in Tasmania, I decided that I needed some light relief. Strolling down to the local cinema I scanned the list of films on offer. There was *Lethal Weapon 4*, *The Truman Show* and *Small Soldiers*,

The ruins of the penitentiary at Port Arthur, on the 'escape-proof' Tasman Peninsula

but none was a patch on the movie I eventually bought a ticket for. It was a perennially popular choice in Hobart. I was later told. It was a film, because I am of a certain generation, that I had never before had the opportunity to see. It was a movie that, in its depiction of violence, justice and the reformation of the criminal mind, seemed bizarrely, inescapably, appropriate. Its title? *A Clockwork Orange*. **1**

Philip Watson travelled to Tasmania with Air New Zealand. Return fares to Sydney start at around £1,004 including tax (peak season), although special offers may be available; the best time to travel, price-wise, is low season (mid April-mid June) when prices drop to around £700. The airline can also organise onward flights with Ansett Australia (Sydney to Hobart costs £220 return) and car hire (starting at £20 a day). Call Air New Zealand for all reservations on 0181-741 2299. The Spirit of Tasmania ferry sails overnight from Melbourne to Devonport three times a week.

Accommodation: Waratah on York, Launceston (00613-6331 2081); Lemonthyme Lodge, Devonport (6492 1112); Cradle Mountain Lodge, Cradle Valley (6492 1303); Ormiston House, Strahan (6471 7077); Wunnamurra Waterfront, Eaglehawk Neck, Tasman Peninsula (6250 3145); Osprey Lodge, Eaglehawk Neck (6250 3629); Macquarie Manor, Hobart (6224 4999). You can also book holidays online with MSN Expedia UK at expedia.msn.co.uk

Five alternative Australian islands

■ **Double Island** Retreat in northern Queensland is about 15 minutes from Cairns by car or helicopter and then an even swifter boat ride from Palm Cove Jetty. Formerly the hideaway of tycoon Robert Holmes a Court, it has deluxe safari eco-lodges overlooking the Coral Sea and South Sea-style roundhouses amid tropical foliage. New to the retreat are rooms set in bushland and luxury villas with private plunge pools. Prices start from A\$270 (£106) per night. ■ **Lord Howe Island**, which has world heritage status, lies



in the South Pacific Ocean between New Zealand and New Caledonia. Only 280 people live permanently on this island, one-and-a-half hours by plane from Sydney. Transport on the island is of the two-wheeled variety and fishing ranges from rock fishing to marlin and yellowfin tuna. Visitors can either stay at family-run

guest lodges or self-catering apartments. ■ **Cockatoo Island** forms part of the Buccaneer Archipelago off Western Australia's Kimberley region. The all-inclusive island resort takes 70 minutes by light aircraft from Broome. The pale-pink bungalows with louvred shutters are tucked into the hillside facing Yampi

Sound. Light fishing and oyster hunting expeditions can be organised.

Prices from A\$395 for a double deluxe bungalow.

■ **Kangaroo Island** is Australia's third biggest island. It is only 16km off Port Jervis in Adelaide, South Australia, and can be reached by ferry or plane. The island is teeming with wildlife: large colonies of fairy penguins and koala, kangaroo, possum, anteater, platypus, birds and Ligurian bees. Lodging options are the Lightkeeper's Cottage, a homestead, huts or camping.

■ **The twin islands of Bathurst and Melville**, known as the Tiwi Islands, are home to the Tiwi Aborigines, renowned for their distinctive paintings, carvings and batik. Melville (pictured left) is Australia's second largest island after Tasmania and boat trips leave from Bathurst to see the waterfalls and lush greenery. The islands are half-an-hour by plane from Darwin, Northern Territory, and a visitor's permit is required.

■ For information, call the Aussie Helpline on 0990-022 000. **VM**