

**D**EVENPORT, Tasmania--If you go to Tasmania, the island state of the island nation of Australia, expect the unexpected. Despite being part of Australia, it's different. I've been to Sydney, Perth, Mooloolaba, Cairns and Port Douglas, and Tasmania strikes me as being "old Australia," which doesn't make it any less an attractive place to visit. Just different.

How different? Well, opium poppies are grown legally in Tasmania for medicinal purposes, primarily to make pain killers. Tasmania is the only place in the southern hemisphere where this is legal. Government-regulated poppy farming began in 1970 and you can see poppy farms in just about any section of the state. But you can also encounter poppies growing alongside the highway and in people's yards, although they are the non-opium type.

My wife and I took a round-trip cruise from Sydney to Devenport within the past year and in addition to the poppy farming were surprised by some other things.

For example, when I checked out Devenport hotels on the web, I found one close enough to where our ship docked that I was ready to book a room for three nights. Then I read that the hotel provided only "shared facilities" and that the bar was a good place to meet locals at night. The locals I didn't mind, but I wasn't sharing facilities with anyone. So there was a bit of casualness that said old Australia and which I hadn't encountered in other states in the country.

I had been warned that Tasmanians were rather insular but wasn't prepared for the 60-something resident of Devenport I met on a walking trail who told me he had never been any farther than Launceston, a town of 100,000 only an hour away from Devenport, which is a quarter the size. A shopkeeper who provided me with Internet access revealed that he had once planned a trip to Minnesota but it didn't pan out. We met a Tasmanian native on the cruise, and keeping in mind that most Tasmanians have a British background (as do I on my mother's side), I asked him what his ethnic background was. He looked at me and replied somewhat awkwardly: "Australian. What else?" I've been approached in Cairns while wearing a T-shirt from Wales and had people wanting to talk about the "motherland." Tasmanians seem to see Tasmania as the motherland.

Besides interesting attitudes of some residents, the geography of the island took us a bit by surprise in places. For example, along the shoreline we expected sandy beaches that extended inland the way many beaches do in North America. Instead, we found rocky beaches around Devenport and shallow sandy beaches at Table Cape and Stanley. The transition between beach and green was abrupt and surprising. A strip of trees nearly stripped on one side by the sea grew next to abundantly green trees of the same variety. Cows could graze within feet of beachcombers.

The sharp contrast in the geography extends to the mountains. One can drive from seaside Devenport to Dove Lake below Cradle



Mountain (1545 meters) and pass through verdant rolling hills occupied by grazing cows, horses and sheep into volcanic and almost barren landscape that supported Alpine coral-ferns and moss, among other mountain plant life. The roads are winding and two lane and reminded us of northern Wales and our native Pennsylvania. Temperature

changes, even at seaside, can vary enough that the advice to dress in layers would well be heeded. We walked around New South Wales in shorts, but wore sweaters and windbreakers off and on in Tassie.

Cradle Mountain, a jagged volcanic formation that in winter is a ski area, even in mid-spring still had snow on the mountain. An alpine lodge provides more than the comforts of home, including a spa and a masseuse. Fly-fishing (catch and release, no spinners, barbless hooks) is just one outdoor attraction. Depending on your endurance, the related park offers a variety of walking paths, including the beginning of one that will take the hardest on a five-day venture to Lake Saint Clair. We chose to amble about Dove Lake on a designated path that allowed visitors to observe the landscape without ruining it by tramping on it. There's an A\$20 entry fee

Another volcanic formation worth visiting is the Nut, which is an hour-and-a-half trip west of Devenport on the Bass Highway, with unbroken views of Bass Strait. Although not quite the farthest point west, a trip to the Nut and the fishing town of Stanley is known as the journey to the edge of the world. Atop the 152-meter Nut, which can be reached via a 10-minute chairlift (A\$3.50) or a 20-minute walk (free), one



can see almost all the way back to Devenport. Just below, the fishing village of Stanley, first settled in 1825, nestles against the volcanic formation. We ate in a small restaurant that did not take credit cards, posted its menu on a chalkboard, and kept the chill off with a wood fire.

Devenport is a sleepy and friendly town. A mainlander on the return cruise described it as "20 years behind the times," which he meant as a compliment. Not counting the lighthouse and the cinema, no

building was higher than 2.5 stories. One resident drove about town in a 1950s U.S.-made coupe. Shops open reasonably early but the town is shuttered and vacant after 6 p.m.—except for the restaurants, of which there are many. Not counting our hotel, we ate in four of them and were happy with all of our meals. With one exception, we drank Tasmanian wines only and were not disappointed. We also sampled Tasmanian beers and found them the equal of the boutique beers we drink in New Mexico.

Despite Tasmania's emphasis on tourism, we found Devenport quaint, but not quite ready for 21<sup>st</sup>-century tourists even though it is the homeport for the Spirit of Tasmania I, II and III, three ocean-going ferries that travel from Melbourne or Sydney. I had been told, for example, to check with the visitor center to get information on where to connect to the Internet, an important thing for me to do because I teach an online course. The visitor center closes at 5 p.m. and while it provides an interactive kiosk, it says nothing about the Internet. Acting on other advice, I went to the convention center bright and early the next morning, but it didn't open until 10 a.m. and a passer-by who tried to help me muttered: "That's Devenport for you." Surprisingly, the ferry pilot who carried us back and forth across the Mersey River, which divides Devenport, knew where I could get Internet access and actually turned back to the dock so I could continue my business.

Tasmania bills itself as "Your Natural State," but some of the



natural sites in Tasmania were created by humans. One particularly memorable and unexpected site was the rhododendron gardens in the Emu Valley outside Burnie. Staffed by volunteers, this 13-hectare garden, which has an A\$5 entry fee, shows off 20,000 rhododendrons from around the world. You can see species of many hues

from Yunnan province in China and the Kingdom of Bhutan. Japan is represented not only by flowers but also a Japanese-style garden, which was surprising to see in a country in which just about every house had an English garden.

Another surprise was Sheffield. We were welcomed to the town of murals by Zorro, a pet alpaca, and his owner, who come downtown daily to greet visitors. Faced with economic decline, residents of the small town south of Devonport reinvented themselves and turned the town into an art colony. Doing what the residents of the Canadian town of Chemainus had done, people started painting murals on their buildings depicting

Sheffield's history and eventually the number grew to more than 30. Artists moved in and the town came back.

Back in Devenport, one museum I was eager to see for exposure to very old Australia was the Tiagarra Aboriginal Cultural Centre, which had an admission fee of A\$3.30. It claims to present aboriginal history, which is a tricky claim to make given that white settlers in Tasmania all but eradicated the native population. The Lonely Planet guidebook said the center had more than 250 rock engravings, which I wanted to see to compare with what we have under federal and state protection in New Mexico, but very few were available. They were exposed to the weather and humans and struck me as endangered. Anyone can walk on the exposed outdoor rocks in which the engravings appear.

To enjoy all that this state has to offer, it helps to get into a Tasmanian rhythm—don't be in a hurry. Even though you can drive from one end of Tasmania to the other in a little over four hours, you really do need to plan for a leisurely trip if you want to take the full measure of this southernmost Australian state. The official travel guide lists 16 national parks, but that does not include a variety of forest reserves, flower gardens, gorges and rivers, and wildlife, from whales and dolphins offshore to platypuses, wallabies and wombats—and, yes, Tasmanian devils—onshore. You can walk, backpack, golf, drive, fish, fly, cruise, camp, raft, horse ride, dive, snorkel, kayak, go caving, climbing, abseiling, cycling and mountain biking—or just put your feet up and sample local beer, wine and cheese. But you need at least three weeks--more if you're hiking--not the three days we scheduled.

Even though Tasmania is a state in Australia, it is a different state. You need to leave your impressions of mainland Australia behind when you visit.

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