

TRAVEL+ LEISURE



Tasmania Is the World's Next Great Under-the-Radar, Unspoiled Travel Destination

Move over, Iceland! Despite its remote location, the island off the southern coast of Australia is increasingly being recognized as a modern-day Eden, a place of epic landscapes, idiosyncratic local cuisine, great wine (and whiskey), and supremely cool culture. It's come a long way since its penal-colony past under British rule, and the friendly, laid-back locals want you to know it. Only question is, could Tasmania's newfound popularity change what's so wonderful about it?

My first day back in Hobart, Tasmania, I knew where I had to begin. After checking in to my hotel, I walked to Battery Point, the old seamen's neighborhood. Even if you're visiting for the first time, the aura of maritime despondency will hit you like a Proustian drug. For me, returning 10 years later, the effect was doubled. It was early June, and the neighborhood was quiet, washed in the pale light of Australian winter. The fishermen's cottages and merchants' houses along the snaking 19th-century lanes felt widowed. At the bakery Jackman & McRoss, a prim yet sumptuous Hobart staple I remembered fondly, a small circle of elderly women gossiped quietly in the corner. They called to mind the old adage that citizens of the commonwealth outside the U.K. are "more British than the British," reminding me that, in Battery Point, you shouldn't raise your voice for fear of waking the dead.

Tasmania — an island off Australia's southeastern coast, a little more than an hour's flight from Melbourne — dangles off the edge of the earth. And Battery Point feels as though it dangles off the edge of Tasmania. The clean, bracing winds that buffet you as you walk along its wharves blow in all the way from Antarctica, some 1,700 miles to the south. If you listen, you can catch the mournful undersong of Tasmania's history. The same windswept severity and utter remoteness I found so picturesque inspired the British Empire, in the early 19th century, to establish a penal colony here. More than 75,000 convicts were sent to what was then known as Van Diemen's Land, where most were conscripted into hard labor. Upon arriving, William Smith O'Brien, an Irish political prisoner, wrote to his wife: "To find a jail in one of the loveliest spots formed by the hand of Nature in one of her loneliest solitudes creates a revulsion of feeling which I cannot describe."



Today Hobart is scrubbed and neat, a beautifully appointed port city spread below Mount Wellington along foothills that descend to the Derwent River. On the main waterfront, overlooking Sullivans Cove just north of Battery Point, there are signs of development — and redevelopment — everywhere. The wharves and causeways are being consolidated into a water-locked public square, crowded with restaurants and flanked by two high-end hotels. The area's cafés prepare flat whites with the same sacramental reverence as in Melbourne, the most coffee-obsessed city in the Anglosphere. Well-to-do tourists arrive in droves from China, and a Singaporean mogul recently bought up commercial real estate along the waterfront, possibly to build a tower dozens of stories high.

With the pace of development accelerating, "Tassie," as locals call it, may soon catch up with more-sophisticated tourist rivals like Queensland. This is a bittersweet prospect for those who see Tasmania's charms as fragile and bound up in the island's forlorn history, its perennial status as an Australian backwater. To mainlanders, the name *Tasmania* has traditionally been an excuse for a cruel put-down; as a destination, it conjured up camper-van getaways or backpacking hippies. But Tasmanians always knew they had something precious and were confident the world would find out eventually. When I visited a decade ago, Tasmania's wines, particularly the cool-climate varieties like Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, were gaining international recognition. Serious chefs and fine diners had become aware of the island's uncanny ability, thanks to its diverse microclimates, to grow anything and grow it well, from stone fruits and berries to avocados and walnuts.

It's important to understand how unlikely even a modest facsimile of an Alice Waters-style food revolution once seemed here. "When I first arrived thirty years ago, the attitude was so negative," recalled Tony Scherer, an American-born farmer who owns property in the Coal River Valley, just north of Hobart. I was having a drink with Scherer and his wife, Joyce Johnston, a social worker, at the Glass House, a mod structure on a floating pier with views of Sullivans Cove and the mountains beyond. It has a copper bar with backlit shelving and offers a variety of tapas-style shared plates and designer cocktails. The Tasmanian booze, especially the whiskey, was dark and savory, and the water vistas, shifting in the light, were mesmerizing.

On my first visit, Scherer had remarked that Tasmania might become the planet's most sensitive barometer of change in the 21st century. "The only question," he said, "is which will transform us first — global warming or global capital." These days, Johnston told me, Tasmania is becoming "the new Iceland" — the next hot destination for global trendsetters. Their tourist dollars are welcome, as historically, Tasmania has had

Australia's highest percentage of government aid recipients. "And yet, the *sweetness* of Tasmania," Scherer said, "comes from it not yet being ripe."

Tasmania's history is tied up in civilization's clumsy attempts to push itself on the natural landscape, from the original penal colony to logging concerns, extractive industries, and mammoth fish farms that now risk polluting the famously pristine waters. Ten years ago, everyone I met in the hospitality business was worried that what they'd built might be endangered by a giant pulp mill then being proposed. The plant was never constructed, but now Tasmanians are confronting an unexpected new threat: popularity. Could what Tasmanians love about Tasmania be compromised by retailing it to outsiders? Could the island's soul be destroyed by gas fireplaces, forced smiles, velveteen couches, tour buses?

In Hobart, I stayed on the outskirts of town at the Islington, a boutique hotel in a Regency-style mansion, long the city's only five-star digs. Though it is fancier than I am, nothing said or done by the kindly staff reminded me of this fact. I spent one of the more blissful hours of my life in front of a wood-burning fireplace in the glass atrium, reading an Anne Enright novel and eating comically plump oysters from a tray. It was as if I were at home and away at once.

The Islington's younger competition is down on the waterfront. The Henry Jones, housed in an old jam factory, is a delightfully chic hotel that wouldn't look out of place in Sydney or London. Farther out on the same pier you can find its just-completed sister, the Macq 01, a sleek cypress-and-glass shed. When I toured the premises, I was told that the hotel had hired a team of "storytellers," all of whom are on call to recount, on demand, some aspect of Tasmania's dark history. Each of the 114 rooms is named after a colorful hero (or rogue) from Tasmania's past. The lounge isn't just a lounge, it's a "storytelling nucleus," and the bar isn't just a bar, it's the Story Bar, decorated with reprints of old newspapers.

Despite all this kitsch filigree, the Macq 01 is a gorgeous facility. Its waterfront rooms hover like crow's nests over Sullivan's Cove, with terraces commanding views out to Mount Wellington. Its owner also operates the seven-year-old Saffire, a superdeluxe lodge northeast of Hobart on the Freycinet Peninsula. I went there a few days later and found that, in its own subtle way, Saffire is every bit as much about storytelling as its younger sibling in Hobart.



Built on the outskirts of Freycinet National Park, Saffire is a swooping, soaring structure designed to look, from a distance, like a giant stingray. Muted timbers and low-reflectivity glass allow the building to blend in with the surrounding eucalyptus forest. In the main lodge, towering windows frame the Hazards, a mountain range whose four main peaks continuously change complexion in the shifting light. Everything about Saffire is to the hilt, but what I liked most was its attentive staff, and how quickly they discovered that all I wanted to do was to stare at the mountains and disappear into a Tasmanian whiskey and a paperback. In between, they fed me like a beloved monarch.

Everyone at Saffire, from the ponytailed trail guide to the buttoned-up corporate spokesman, seemed guided by the same principle as that gossip circle I'd observed at the bakery in Hobart: *Respect the dead*. They'd tell me stories that might at first seem scripted, but if I pushed a little I'd find the sentiment was genuine, most likely because the person expressing it was a native Tasmanian.

One afternoon, Paul Jack, the trail guide, took me up a path nestled between Mount Amos and Mount Mayson, past peppermint gums and white kunzea bushes that gave off the aroma of caramelized honey. We reached an overlook above Wineglass Bay, where we could gaze down on the scalloped white sand of the shoreline and out over the eroded Devonian rock face of Mount Freycinet. Wineglass Bay gets its name not only from its goblet-like shape but also because it was once filled with the blood of slaughtered whales. It is the most iconic landscape in Tasmania. "Whale oil kick-started the Tasmanian economy," Jack said. "We are at last owning who we were, instead of apologizing for it."

He began discoursing with an easy learnedness about Aboriginal middens, shell heaps left behind by hunter-gatherers at the dawn of the Holocene epoch. "They called the mountains sleeping gods," he said. "There is no getting around it, Tasmania has a spiritual background. Ours is a volatile landscape that needs fire to regenerate."

The biggest driver behind the growth of Tasmanian tourism, according to everyone I spoke with, is MONA, the Museum of Old & New Art, which opened in 2011 in Hobart. "What is unique about MONA is what is unique about Tasmania," Mark Wilsdon, the museum's co-CEO, told me. It was founded by David Walsh, a Tasmanian billionaire who made his fortune as a professional gambler, to house his private collection. Though Walsh has spent an estimated \$200 million on MONA, he has kept it free for Tasmanians. It is now said to pump \$100 million a year into the Tasmanian economy.



The museum is dark, both literally and figuratively: its main gallery, carved out of a sandstone cliff next to a historic vineyard, showcases a comically macabre curatorial vision fixated on sex, death, and excrement. To get there, you travel inland, from the same pier that supports the Glass House, about 20 minutes up the Derwent River on a catamaran whose exterior is painted a camouflage pattern and whose interiors, like those of a New York City subway car a generation ago, are covered in graffiti. The bombs and tags pair oddly well with a dry Riesling from the onboard café.

You arrive not at an art museum, but at an anti-art museum. From a windswept courtyard whose ramparts overlook the river, you descend to find a permanent collection containing works by Chris Ofili, Anselm Kiefer, and Damien Hirst. The experience is dominated less by the global brand names than by, as the museum's website puts it, "Stuff David Bought When He Was Drunk" and work that "Annoys Our Female Curators." Perhaps the most notorious piece is *Cloaca Professional*, by Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, a series of mechanical chambers that mimic the human digestive process, turning out, at the far end, poo.

What I loved most about MONA was the way it insinuates its ominous charms into the life of its host city. One morning, I was awakened at daybreak by the strangest sound. For the first time as a traveler, I was forced to ask a concierge, "Excuse me, but did I hear an incantatory mélange of female voices reverberating through the city at dawn?"

The answer was, "Yes, sir." I had heard *Siren Song*, a 28-channel sound piece broadcast from 450 loudspeakers mounted atop various Hobart buildings. The densely layered choral droning sounded for seven minutes at sunrise and sunset, every day for two weeks, as a herald for MONA's well-attended winter festival, Dark Mofo. I found the locals to be almost jingoistic in their pride when it came to MONA. Over and over, I heard: MONA is ours as much as it is Walsh's; it expresses our weirdness, our remoteness, the gloomy ambivalence of our history.

Ours. For Tasmania, this is not a small breakthrough.

After my visit to MONA, I drove out to Rocky Top Farm, Tony Scherer's spread in the Coal River Valley, where Scherer introduced me to the chef Luke Burgess. In 2010, Burgess turned an old mechanic's garage in Hobart — "250 square meters and a tin roof," he told me, "with fire-damaged trusses" — into a 46-seat wine bar and restaurant called Garagistes that had shared tables, took no reservations, and featured the first all-natural-wine list in Australia. International recognition followed, and Tasmania had its first global culinary sensation. But Garagistes quickly became that dreaded thing — a *thing* — and tourists piled in, rushing to upload the experience to Instagram. Owner's fatigue set in, and Garagistes, though a triumph, closed at the end of its five-year lease.

Since then, Burgess has traveled the world, occasionally cooking during chef residencies or at his own pop-ups. But he and Scherer share a vision.

"A garden is a way for me to get out of the kitchen," Burgess said.

Scherer chimed in, gesturing out at his land. "Play your hand right and you can grow anything here." The duo wants to put a restaurant right here: a small dining room looking out on Scherer's farm beside the estuarine byways of Barilla Bay.

If they follow through on their plan, the demand will surely be there. "Every time I go to Melbourne or Sydney, the one adjective I hear is *Tasmanian*," said Kim Seagram, owner of Stillwater, in Launceston, 2½ hours north of Hobart. "Not 'South Australian.' It's '*Tasmanian* scallops,' or '*Tasmanian* oysters,' or '*Tasmanian* spirits.' "



Seagram has been pivotal to the transformation of Launceston, Tasmania's second city, and is an evangelist for the civic power of its gastronomy. Last year, she founded a farmers' market, and she has helped establish the nascent food-van culture in St. Georges Square, where you can now find purveyors of everything from burgers and crêpes to Turkish *kofte*. Stillwater, which opened in 2000 in a beautifully renovated 1830s flour mill, was Launceston's first fine-dining restaurant, offering an elegant but playful take on local Tasmanian produce. Since my last visit, it has also become a community hub, serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner and filled all day long with coffee-swilling, cheerfully yakking locals.

South of the Freycinet Peninsula, on Tasmania's eastern coast, is a small town called Triabunna, from which you can catch the ferry to Maria Island. Maria (pronounced with a long *i*, as in *Mariah Carey*) is shaped like a molten hourglass, with its northern head connected to its southern bottom by a narrow, sandy isthmus. In 1971, the Australian government established it as a national park. Black swans and several species of small marsupials are ubiquitous. With its thick forest and fern gullies, Maria is now a habitat for common wombats, Forester kangaroos, and Bennett wallabies — endangered species that have been introduced from the mainland to help ensure their survival.

Maria was once home to whaling stations and penitentiaries, but now it is nothing if not idyllic. Past the arrival jetty there are the storage silos and collapsed kilns of an old cement plant, leftovers from a 19th-century attempt at industrialization. Farther on, there is a tiny, abandoned settlement. Few people live on the island, but anyone can book a night at the former convict building, which has been repurposed as a modest bunkhouse. A private company, the Maria Island Walk, has built two small encampments made of wood and canvas near the empty white-sand beaches. They also lease the government-owned Bernacchi House, a simple weatherboard cottage behind a white picket fence, with a lavender garden off its small veranda. It is named for an Italian entrepreneur who came to Maria with dreams of building a silk empire. "Out of a brutal past," said Ian Johnstone, the founder and CEO of the Maria Island Walk, "there is a search for harmony here. Between people, and between those people and the place."



If you are lucky, every so often as a traveler you find *it* — a place where past and present, nature and culture, a history of joy and a legacy of suffering all balance upon a point of mutual respect. I found *it* on Maria Island, at Bernacchi, and during hikes with Maddy Davies and Paul Challen, the two guides who hosted me for the weekend, cooking brilliantly simple meals and providing superb company on daylong excursions up the island's dolerite peaks.

On my final morning on Maria, we trekked out to Skipping Ridge, above the Tasman Sea, to drink coffee and watch the sun rise. As a slim cuticle of light broke over a long line of clouds, Challen quipped, "The first person who goes over the edge, we'll get a fence."

"If they put up a fence," Davies replied, "I'm never coming back."

The Details: What to Do in Tasmania

Getting There

Fly to Hobart via Brisbane, Melbourne, or Sydney.

Tour OperatorTra

Big Five Tours & Expeditions: This trusted company's Tasmania offerings range from hiking and beach-hopping on the Freycinet Peninsula to a four-day trek through Maria Island, where you can spot kangaroos and emus in one of the world's most remote wildlife sanctuaries. *12-day trips from \$12,950.*

Hotels

The Henry Jones: This chic space, built inside one of the oldest warehouse buildings on the wharf, has become an integral part of Hobart's burgeoning nightlife scene. *doubles from \$215.*

Highfield House: A Victorian-era estate, once home to noted colonial politician and cricketer William Henty, has found new life as a boutique bed-and-breakfast overlooking the Tamar Valley. *Launceston; doubles from \$132.*

The Islington: Located a quick car ride from downtown Hobart, this property is filled with quirky art and antiques and features a glassed-in atrium for dining and relaxing. *doubles from \$369.*

Macq 01: This sleek 114-room property on the Macquarie Wharf overlooks Sullivans Cove and has a staff steeped in knowledge of Tasmanian history. Don't miss the circular first-floor lounge, which is built around an open fireplace. *doubles from \$315.*

Saffire: Several hours northeast of Hobart in Freycinet National Park, this sister property to the Macq 01 provides extraordinary views of the peninsula's mountains and forests. *Coles Bay; doubles from \$1,650.*

Two Four Two: Just steps from Launceston's city center, this collection of stylish apartments comes stocked with an array of Tasmanian wines for guests to enjoy while grilling on the private terrace. *apartments from \$160.*

Restaurants & Cafés

Bryher: A stained-glass transom window, great coffee, and seasonal menu beckon you to this homey café. *Launceston.*

Glass House: This aptly named bar, encased in glass on a floating pier, serves shared plates like wallaby tartare. Its cocktails perfectly showcase Tasmanian whiskey. *Hobart; small plates \$11–\$26.*

Jackman & McRoss: Locals love this convivial bakery, an enduring fixture of Hobart's culinary scene for its breakfasts and fresh pastries. *61-3-6223-3186.*

Pigeon Hole Café & Bakery: This cool, simple spot is a must for coffee, baked goods, and comfort dishes like pork-and-fennel meatballs. *Hobart; entrées \$11–\$15.*

Stillwater: The pacesetter for Launceston fine dining. The Tasmanian wine list pairs with a menu derived from regional ingredients like Lenah wallaby and Flinders Island salt-grass-fed lamb. *entrées \$16–\$62.*

Templo: This blackboard-menu paradise is a culinary wonder packed into a 20-seat space on a back street in Hobart. Come for the communal dining, stay for the unique wines. *entrées \$13–\$25.*

Museum

MONA: A quick ferry ride up the Derwent River from Hobart brings visitors to this popular museum, home to an eccentric billionaire's private art collection that is by turns irreverent and grotesque. *Berriedale*.