



Tasmania

An Epicurean Adventure

Tasmania is close to New Zealand but surprisingly distant in our perceptions. Positioned away from the well-worn tourist routes to Sydney, Melbourne and Queensland, it's an intriguing 'alternative Australia' set in pristine ocean waters. Unspoilt by heavy industry or large-scale agribusiness, Tasmania is the home of a new breed of luxury lodges, boutique vineyards and gourmet dining experiences. Philip Tetley-Jones went there to check out the fare.

"Has he seen The Bottle?" My lunch companions put down their cutlery and exchange significant glances. "What bottle? I ask, my curiosity piqued. It transpires that the oldest surviving bottle of Australian wine is lovingly stored at the very restaurant where we are dining.

Meadowbank Estate is described as "a venue obsessed with fine food, wine, art and landscape." The creation of Gerald Ellis, who combined his interests in farming, wine and tourism to create this unique tourist attraction, it includes a superb restaurant and wine-tasting facility with a collection of curios that bring the history of Tasmania to vivid life.

One of the most intriguing of Gerald's curios is the aforementioned bottle of red wine from the early nineteenth century. At least we think it's red wine, as no one is going to be prising open the cork and inspecting the contents any time soon. It was vinted from some of the earliest grapes grown

in the colony of Van Diemen's land (as Tasmania was known to the early settlers) and stored in a forgotten cellar that was walled up for over a century. When the cellar was re-opened the contents were auctioned, and Gerald managed to obtain a bottle of the precious fluid. It's a distinctive reminder that the tradition started by these vinicultural pioneers has now become a mainstay of the modern tourist industry.

Meadowbank Estate is just one of the wineries open to visitors in the Coal River Valley a short drive north of Hobart. If you're wondering why you haven't seen many bottles of Tasmanian wine on this side of the Tasman Sea, that would be because the island's vineyards and levels of production are at the boutique end of the scale – a far cry from the mega regions of the mainland. Tasmania is the home of superb Riesling, Pinot Gris and Pinot Noir, the fruits of a cool wine climate not so far removed from our own. Producers such as Josef Chromy, Frogmore and Domaine A have become

names to impress those in the know.

For a visiting New Zealander, the landscape is comfortingly familiar but intriguingly different just when you least expect it. You could be relaxing on a cruise down the sheltered coves of the east coast, when you suddenly catch sight of a majestic sea eagle. There's nothing quite like that at home!

Reminders of the island's convict past are another hint that Tasmania has a colonial history that's quite distinct from ours. Perhaps you'll spy an early 19th century woolshed that's built half in sandstone and half in brick. It seems that skilled ex-convict labour was used to start the building, but then word of the gold strikes in Victoria reached the island. All the masons left to find their fortune and the farm's owner had to switch to more prosaic brick. In New Zealand it would have been corrugated iron.

Unlike most of the Australian mainland, the distances between towns are manageable and the landscapes vary considerably within a few short hours. There's the rugged coastline of the east, the fly-fishing lakes of the Tasmanian Highlands and several clusters of winegrowing regions within easy reach of the two main cities, Hobart and Launceston. Wilderness lovers can head to the unspoilt natural parks of the west, while history buffs can explore the colonial relics of the state's early days as a convict settlement.

We began our gourmet tour where most people do – in the capital of Hobart. Situated on the sheltered eastern side of the island, Hobart is a compact city of handsome sandstone buildings dating from the early colonial period, with a waterfront that's a model of sensitive redevelopment. Think the Viaduct Basin with less glitz but a tad more style. Base yourself in a boutique hotel or short-stay apartment in the centre of it all, and give yourself over to a day or two exploring the surroundings.

Our first morning was taken up with a drive to the top of Mt Wellington, the hulking peak that provides a backdrop to the city. In less than 15 minutes we had left the suburbs behind and were driving through eucalyptus forests that still bear the scars of decades-ago bush fires. Starting out in fresh spring sunshine, we were totally unprepared for the icy blast that greeted us at the top, making it all but impossible to remain outside without having your face frozen.

The winds were blasting straight up from the sub-Antarctic ocean, yet a few kilometres downhill Hobart was basking in pleasant spring sunshine. It was a salutary reminder that Tasmania is an island of microclimates, with temperate forests, rugged mountains, lush vineyards and sheltered coastal zones providing an abundance of varied regions to encourage the cultivation of all sorts of produce.

The ocean is an all-surrounding presence. Catching the





Peppermint Bay Cruise will take you on a day-trip out the Derwent estuary and down past Bruny Island to tranquil Peppermint Bay. Along the way we saw a whale lolling in the estuary and pair of sea eagles enjoying a fishy feast, before tying up in Peppermint Bay itself. Lunch was a treat in Woodhill, a delightful seaside restaurant and providores store that showcases the best in local produce.

Excellent dining was to be a constant theme of our visit. Tasmanian produce is extremely well regarded, with first-rate fruit, cheese and seafood the standout. You can enjoy oysters and crayfish in a brasserie that focuses on fresh natural flavours, or treat yourself to the creations of chefs who have taken their benchmarks from Sydney or New York. Match the dishes with wines produced in the same area to see how the whole epicurean package comes together with flair and originality.

It isn't all about wine, though. Stopping at Bothwell, a few hours north of Hobart, we were treated to a tour of a working whisky distillery where the sweet, alcoholic fumes permeated the time-honoured stone buildings. Nant Estate has been created on the site of one of Tasmania's original flourmills, dating from 1821. Running water turns the original granite millstones that grind the local grain – grist to the mill indeed! The estate produces its own malted barley, which is fermented with local water and distilled on site to produce a clear grain spirit with a fiery but sweet taste. The youthful spirit is then aged in oak barrels, eventually transforming into a fine single malt that shares affinities with the finest Scotch

and Irish whiskies but is 100% Tasmanian in its refined but powerful character.

Another day trip took us to one of the most unusual places I have visited in two decades of travel. Just up the river from Hobart you will find Moorilla – a unique combination of art museum, microbrewery, winery, luxury accommodation, performance space and restaurant. Occupying a magnificent site overlooking the Derwent, this idiosyncratic venue is the pet project of a millionaire who made his fortune through betting and now enjoys the financial freedom to pursue his eclectic interests.

As well as containing an excellent brewery and winery, Moorilla is open to the public for concerts, functions and restaurant dining. A massive redevelopment is under way as the owner pursues his interest in art with the creation of the Museum of Old and New Art – a personal collection of priceless objets d'art gathered under the eternal themes of sex and death. Moorilla promises to become a must-see for anyone interested in cultural consumption as well as gourmet indulgence – and I can recommend the Estate's Muse Pinot Noir very highly indeed.

As you will have gathered, my Tasmanian tour was themed around an epicurean exploration of the island's attractions. We barely scratched the surface of the healthier, outdoor pursuits that are available, not to mention the unique wildlife that still calls Tasmania home. I have heard great things about the wilderness lodges in the west of the island and the world-famous scenery of the Bay of Fires. Perhaps next time.



Great places to stay on your Tasmanian break

The Islington, Hobart. An elegant stone building from the Regency period, beautifully updated to create a fine boutique hotel. Spacious suites with sumptuous décor that blends dark wooden heritage furnishings with contemporary art. Promotes itself as “the last luxury outpost before the South Pole.” **Hargate, Launceston.** Enjoy a unique ambience in this immaculately restored guesthouse full of French antiques and personal butler-style service from the proprietors. Silver service at breakfast and a glass of Armagnac in the evening are designed to help you relax and enjoy life at a more leisurely pace. **The Priory Country Lodge, Bothwell.** Tasmania's newest and most exclusive country lodge provides the ideal base for a hunting and fishing holiday in the centre of the State. The four-bedroom stone manor house has been stunningly refurbished and complemented with a BBQ pavilion and sauna to warm up those chilly winter nights. **Henry Jones Art Hotel, Hobart.** The venerable sandstone IXL jam factory on the waterfront has been re-invented as a stunning new concept in hotels. A brilliant blend of old and new, the HJ also functions as a gallery of art produced by living artists and takes its cultural responsibilities so seriously that it has its own curator on the staff. **Sullivan's Cove Apartments, Hobart.** These warehouse conversions offer an excellent alternative to conventional hotels. Relax in a very spacious apartment that's literally minutes from the nightlife and markets of downtown Hobart. If you don't fancy cooking breakfast, check out Machine laundry café in Salamanca Square and enjoy your Eggs Benedict in the company of busy tumble dryers.

Gourmet highlights

Dining at Stillwater. A spectacular setting over the Tamar in Launceston is complemented by the best Tasmanian produce cooked in a modern fusion style. Relaxed dining with a great wine list. **Cruising to Peppermint Bay.** A relaxing way to see the Tasmanian coastline and nature at its best, capped by a lunch break at Woodhill – think delicious fresh seafood, salads, cheeses and locally smoked produce. **Wine tasting at Josef Chromy Wines.** Josef Chromy is a giant of the wine industry, having built several successful enterprises since arriving as penniless Czech refugee in 1950. His latest venture in the Launceston area combines modern facilities with attention to quality that has resulted in one of the best wine ranges you'll find. **Eating seafood on the waterfront.** Marque 4 is one of Hobart's premier restaurants in the dock area. Tasmanian specialities such as stripey trumpeter (a local fish), scallops and oysters are highly recommended. **Dining at Piccallily.** Try the tasting plate menu at this intimate restaurant in the Battery Point area of Hobart. Instead of conventional starters and mains, enjoy four to six plates in any order and any combination of savoury or sweet. The pithivier of quail stands out in my memory – an exquisite miniature pie. **Sipping single malts at Nant Estate.** High quality grain, peat and water make Tasmania a natural for the crafting of traditional whisky styles. Nant is a newish operation in a converted stone mill but already its production is attracting attention. If you like what you taste you can buy a barrel and sell it back to the Estate for a guaranteed return, or look forward to sipping your own personal brand in five years time.