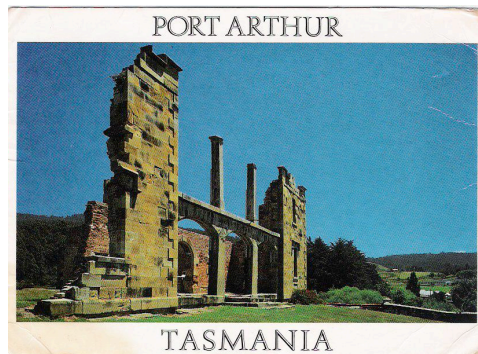


Chapter Fourteen

A Haunting We Will Go

"Port Arthur Estates: If you were a convict, you'd be home by now."
--David Volk, during the Port Arthur Ghost Tour



Beautiful Screamer: If you lived here, you'd be home by now.

When people ask me what it was like growing up in North Fort Myers and Cape Coral, Florida I used to describe my hometown as "A pimple on the ass of humanity." Then I would tell the story about how Thomas Alva Edison approached city fathers offering to make it the first city in the world with electric lights, only to have the locals reject his request out of fear the lights might scare the cows. When I was feeling generous, I might say, "It's not the end of the earth, but you sure can see it from there." The sentiment isn't original, but it fits a town where when I was growing up no one had had an original idea in years.

I never considered "end of the earth" a compliment until I arrived at Port Arthur--an hour before the start of its nightly Ghost Tour. Located an hour-and-a-half southeast of Australia's southernmost city, it seemed like a far more attractive edge of the world than I could have imagined. It's now a well-tended national park with picture-postcard-perfect burned-out brick ruins surrounding a large grassy knoll, giving the place the feel of a university campus that was just abandoned and left to the elements when students stopped coming, leaving the faculty nothing to do but stray off and find other jobs.

One look at the place and I could see why the mythical administrators might have been reluctant to leave such clean beaches; clear, green, water; the forest that surrounded it all; and a night sky that was filled with more stars than anyone who lived in a city farther north could have ever imagined existed.

The truth is far less romantic. The small piece of land at the end of the Arthur Peninsula was home to the most notorious prison in Australia's history, and almost every building's past is soaked in blood. In the never-completed church, prisoners fulfilling suicide-murder contracts killed each other. In the model prison, the first facility in Australia to use solitary confinement, prisoners kept for months at a time from basic human contact went insane. At the same time, many prisoners were victims of death-by-medical treatment when doctors bound their fresh wounds in bandages that had been used on other prisoners who died after their wounds became infected. The disaster of a prison finally closed in 1877 and ex-convicts gave tours, until most of the buildings and the town that surrounded them burned down during bush fires in the 1890s.

Although visitors to the site had reported ghost sightings dating back to the 1800s, no one capitalized on them until the 1980s when a local company began running a nightly ghost tour. Once I read about the tours in an in-flight magazine on the plane I flew into Tasmania, I knew I had to go on one. The magazine recommended reserving a week in advance, but I didn't get the chance until the day before I drove to Hobart, the city closest to the prison. Figuring the worst the ticket office could say would be "no," I tried my luck and got one of the last tickets available. It wasn't cheap, but the conversation I had with two American newspaper reporters I met on the two-hour bus ride out to Port Arthur made it well worth it.

Once darkness fell, the guide called the group together, chose three brave souls to carry the lanterns that lit the way for the group and said, "The tour will last an hour-and-a-half or until the first sighting" before she walked off, leading the way to the prison's church, telling gory tales of ghost sightings as she went.

Like the church, all the stops on the tour were places notorious for violence and repeated ghost sightings. As an example, she told the story of a man killed when the church was being built. Although he appeared to be an innocent victim when another prisoner struck him in the head with a pickaxe, prison officials later discovered a towel under the man's hat, indicating the man knew the attack was coming and wanted a way to soften the blow.

The tales grew more wonderfully gruesome at each stop.

At the parson's house, for example, children have seen a kind older woman who wants to play with them, while all of the adults who have stayed in the house have reported ghostly attempts on their lives ranging from knifings to attempted strangulations. At another popular spot on the tour, the model prison, half a recent tour group said they heard a barking sound coming from one of the cells. The one they pointed to turned out to be that of a man left in solitary so long that he reverted to childhood and spent the last days of his life barking.

A quick check with the lantern showed the cell was empty, but that wasn't enough to allay the fears of half the visitors who took off for the parking lot followed by others who hadn't heard it, but were spooked nonetheless.

And then there was the skull on the infirmary table that launched itself off the table and flew at the crowd. Although further investigation revealed that the skull got its animation from a rat that had become ensnared inside a prisoner's remains, panicked and tried to escape, most of the people on the tour didn't stick around long enough to find out. In fact, most had skidded out of the parking lot by the time the rat was rescued.

Even our guide said she had a strange experience when she locked up the model prison after the last tour of the night. She not only felt an invisible hand touch her neck, she also heard someone rattling the door to the prison as she was walking away. She unlocked the door, looked for the laggard then relocked the door only to have the rattling start again as she walked away.

The bone-chilling stories and the fears of potential sightings of our own weren't even the highlight of the tour. Instead, it was a night sky so filled with bright stars that I found no difficulty spotting the constellations I had grown up hearing about but could never see because they were never bright enough for me to tell.

I returned the next day to take pictures and ride out to the Island of the Damned, the prison's cemetery. The boat doesn't stop there, it merely gets close enough for a drive-by gawking, then returns to shore. While I'm not sure if I believe in ghosts, I was hoping to have a sighting of my own either near the island or at the park. Sadly, I didn't have any luck in the haunting department.

My luck earlier in the day made up for the shortage. Although everyone told me reservations were essential for the Cadbury Factory Tour, I got there early enough to squeeze onto a tour with space for one more person.

The Hershey plant back in Pennsylvania may not allow visitors on the factory floor any more, but Cadbury does. And it was glorious. I've always loved factory tours, and this was one of the best because guides take visitors through every step of the process, showing how the company puts the caramel in Caramello, the fruit in

the Fruit and Nut bars, and resolving other confectionery mysteries along the way. During much of the walk-through candy was within arm's reach, but no one ever touched it because we all knew we were going to get samples of every single candy bar as we went. It would have been enough to make me sick if the Fidlers hadn't warned me before I left St. Helens. As a result, I carried most of the samples in a paper towel, ate only a quarter of the chocolates I was given during the tour, and saved the rest for later. Once the visit ended at the company store with its abundance of cheap chocolates and factory seconds, though, the exercise seemed pointless.

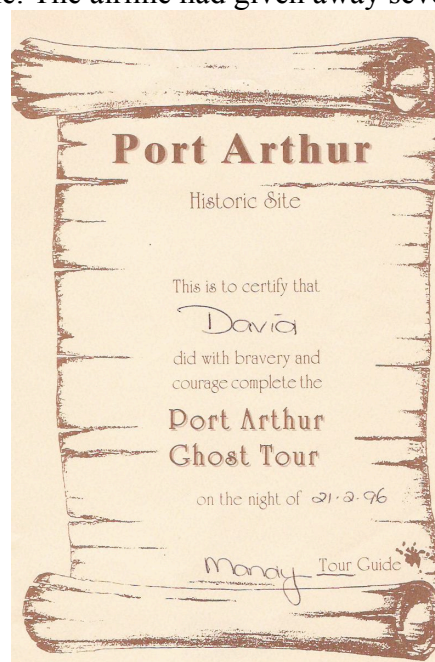
The tour taught me an important lesson about candy I'd never considered before: The U.S. may be the land of plenty in most things, but not when it comes to Cadbury. Granted, we may get Caramello, Fruit & Nut, and Milk Chocolate bars, but that barely scratches the surface. There are Turkish Delights, Roses, Dairy Tops, Take Five, Picnic, Time Out and numerous other bars that have never crossed into America, and I think that's just sad, if not sick and wrong. What do we get in exchange? Hershey's. Puh-lease. Kisses may be good and the candy bars may be tasty, but they pale in comparison next to Cadbury's offerings.

I liked many of Cadbury's candy bars so much I bought a bunch and sent them home to my mother and a friend.

It was so late by the time I finished running around that I went back to my hostel, set the alarm for 6 a.m. because I knew I had a long drive to Launceston before I could catch my 10:35 a.m. flight back to the mainland.

My final drive was leisurely, but more harrowing than I expected when I passed through a small town around the time school was starting and got confused about road rules. Generally, driving on the wrong side of the road wasn't a problem because I could follow the cars ahead of me. The only time the strategy didn't work was at approached T-intersections when there was no traffic and I couldn't remember whether I should turn into the near lane or the far one. I chose poorly and found myself headed straight at an on-coming car. Although I immediately corrected the error, the driver still honked, flipped me off and looked at me as if I should have been driving with an "IDIOT ON BOARD" sign on my bumper. No matter where I drive, the practice of honking at someone who has just made a mistake and corrected it has never made sense. What's the point? The accident has been averted so the honker isn't telling the recipient of the noisome barrage something he or she doesn't already know. They feel bad enough and stupid enough, already. Why compound it? Of course, if the person doesn't make a correction it makes sense, but if they've taken evasive action, I have this advice: GET OVER IT!

As it turns out, I was wrong about my departure time. It was 10:15, not 10:35. I dawdled so much along the way I barely made my flight. Although the cargo hold had already closed and there was no room for my bag except my lap, there was room for me. The airline had given away several, but still had one seat left.



I survived Port Arthur and all I got was this lousy certificate

