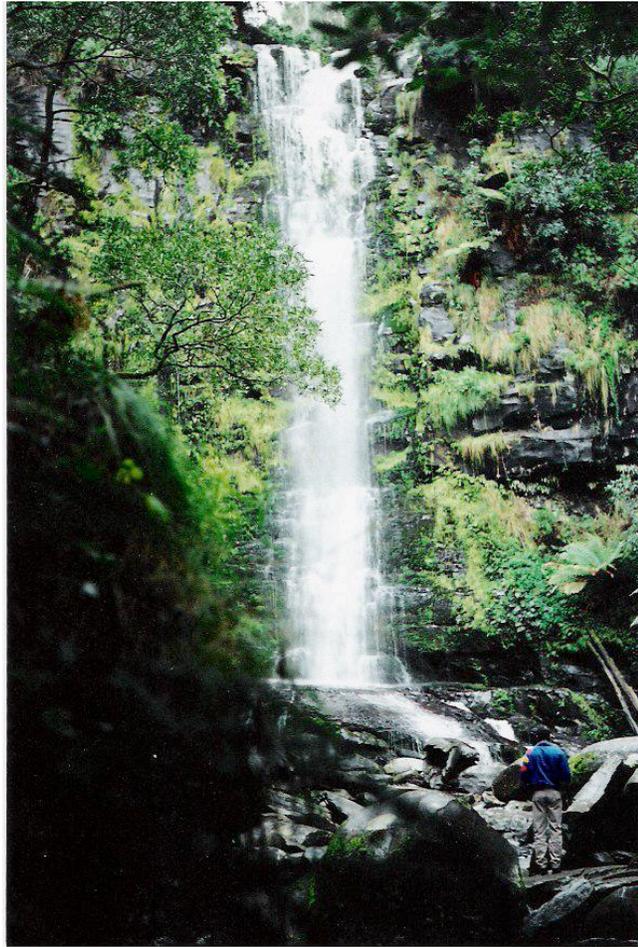


Chapter Thirteen

Imaginary Isle of Tasmania

"Welcome to Tasmania, the land of Adam and Eve. That's Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve...."
--Ferryboat captain announcing the end of the passage from Melbourne.



Columba Falls outside St. Helens, Tasmania

Tasmania was not off to a good start.

I had already paid \$120 Australian one way for a plane trip so short that Southwest Airlines or any regional U.S. flier would have charged half that; the Tasmanian shuttle bus driver had dropped me off on the wrong side of town; and it took me two hours to get the right directions only to discover it was two kilometers away and up an incline. In addition, the inside of the Launceston City Youth Hostel was as unpleasant a pleasant surprise as I've ever had.

While I was greatly relieved to finally reach my destination, I wasn't thrilled to discover it had the charm of a highway pileup involving a military barracks, a dilapidated brick school and a turn-of-the-century insane asylum. Backpacking had taught me not to be too terribly picky, but this place represented a new high in low. The dorm beds were hard, military-style cots covered by paper thin mattresses just thick

enough to allow guests to feel every single spring jutting out of the bed frame. The large common area looked like an abandoned school lunchroom with chairs and tables removed and the space filled up with stacks of stuff ranging from old bikes and hiking equipment to randomly placed piles of unidentifiable things. The only break in the collection came at the far end of the room where the owner had installed a useable common area with a TV, a large dining table, and a check-in desk where he seemed to have planted his wife because she was always there. He also seemed to have permanently installed himself into a chair in front of the television because I can't recall him ever getting out of the chair my first night there until they locked up the hostel at midnight, sharp. I can't rightly say he ever left the chair that evening, but they turned out the lights and it was too hard to tell.

I still can't figure out why it wasn't called "The Stay Anywhere But Here First" hostel.

I planned to leave Launceston the next day, but stayed on because the car-rental agencies were closed Sunday. Tasmania may not be big, but the amount of ground I hoped to cover in a week meant buses weren't a viable option.

The delay reshaped my view of Launceston. Although I initially saw it as a small, boring town with recalcitrant bus drivers and inert hostel owners, the island's second-largest and third-oldest city has a nice downtown area sprinkled with plenty of colonial Victorian architecture and surprisingly pretty parks on its outskirts. My favorite was the Cataract Gorge overlooking the area where the North Esk and South Esk rivers join to form the Tamar River. It may have been only a 15 minute walk from downtown Launceston, but the 20 minute hike on the Cataract Walk to the bottom of the gorge and the return on the Zig Zag walk made me feel miles away from any town. I admit the swimming pool filled with screaming kids on the other side of the gorge took away from the effect, but it was still gorgeous.

Even Doug, the hostel owner, showed surprising animation my second day at the hostel, giving a woman who was minding her own business a stern lecture. Apparently, he thought she had earned it when she called from a distance out of town and asked if there were any couples rooms available even though she wasn't married. He refused to rent her one. What Doug didn't know was that she was asking for a couple riding along with her. While he changed his ruling on the couple's room, he still felt somebody needed to know right from wrong, and she was in the area at the time. I wasn't there, but heard about it later when the woman walked into the kitchen and said, "The manager's bloody Fruit Loops, he is. He just gave me morals lecture."

Doug's odd animation continued the following day when I drove my rental-car back to the hostel to get my stuff and he told another backpacker, "If you'd been a little more persuasive, you would have been able to convince him to take you to the mountains." Never mind that the mountains were in the north and I was headed south....

Doug wasn't the only one acting strange. After months of sporting a thick beard I woke up wanting to shave it. I'm not sure why because it wasn't really bothering me. Maybe it was just time. Maybe it was because the couple I was going to visit told me they wanted me to speak to the students at their school. The only thing I do know for sure is there's no way in hell Harrison Ford could have shaved his beard as quickly as he did in "The Fugitive." Even with scissors and a razor it still took more than an hour.

The shock of seeing a clean-shaven face in the mirror may have provided the jolt I needed to prepare me for driving Tasmania's hilly, rolling highways, especially using a steering wheel on the wrong side of the car to drive on the wrong side of the road.

Sure, I probably could have gotten around without a car, but I knew I'd never forgive myself if I hadn't tried this experiment in cross-cultural cruising. After a few close calls, I finally got the hang of it and

tore off through lush, hilly countryside resembling that of New Zealand minus hairpin turns and fast drivers.

I hate to admit it, but the GM jingle is right: "It's not just a car, it's your freedom." Although I'd had glimpses of what the phrase really meant back home when my car was in the shop for more than a day, I hadn't developed a fine appreciation of the sentiment until I had spent two months out of the driver's seat. Consequently, I wasn't in any rush to get where I was going. I took my time because I knew it was going to be 10 months before I would be behind the wheel again once I left Tasmania.

About an hour outside of St. Helens I began looking for a phone to call Jim and Karen Fidler to get directions to their house. The only place I could find with a pay phone, however, was a pub proclaiming it had a pig that drinks beer out of a stubbie (small beer bottle). It wasn't the first I'd heard of it, though. I'd seen signs advertising the amazing animal as far back as Launceston.

"I see that you have a pig that drinks beer out of a bottle," I said to the bartender.

"Yep," he said.

"Is it a big deal for a pig to drink beer?" I asked.

"Not really, pigs love beer," he replied.

"So, what's the big deal then?"

"Pigs don't like stubbies."

Ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer.

Still, it was my first sample of what passes for culture in rural Tasmania in what I expected would be several days of seeing how people in another country live and work. This far from the States, I expected conversation to cover anything and everything from Vegemite and dingoes to the fact that this small island had just passed a law making homosexuality illegal when most of the places where I had lived had long since moved beyond that issue and were now discussing the merits of benefits for domestic partners. I saw the tiny town as a small bit of salvation a world away from the U.S. Presidential campaign, overhyped commercialism, and bad sitcoms of my homeland.

No such luck.

I did get a chance to drive through tiny downtown St. Helens and through beautiful farmland on the way to the Fidler's house. I even got a nice tour of the Fidler's home, the portion they built themselves, the fruit and vegetable garden, the pond and fields surrounding the house. Then Jim Fidler proceeded to tell me about an interesting character I would be meeting at the school the following day, art teacher Ian Summers, and Summers' love of a strange radio show with such odd fictional sponsors as Bertha's Kitty Boutique, Guy's Shoes and a restaurant called "Cafe Boeuf." When I told Jim the name of the radio show and said it was one of my favorites, he had to call Summers. The next thing I knew I was sitting in a living room in the middle of Tasmania, an ocean away from the nearest National Public Radio station and thousands of miles away from the fictional town of Lake Wobegone, Minnesota talking about Garrison Keillor's show, "A Prairie Home Companion."

How bizarre.

The conversation took an even stranger twist when talk turned to the subject of TV sit-coms from the U.S. This has always been a sore spot for me because it's always seemed to me that the people who are responsible for deciding which shows get international distribution always pick the worst ones. Of course, that's not saying much because most sit-coms that make it on to American airwaves are pretty dismal to begin with, but I still felt the need to apologize for coming from a country that has inflicted "Roseanne" and "Married With Children" on the planet. I was quick to point out there were a few notable exceptions, such as "Friends" and "Seinfeld," which had just begun airing throughout Australia. I wasn't surprised they agreed with me, but I was shocked to hear them criticize my shows as being as bad as the rest. They admitted there were a few high quality shows from the U.S. including one they called "the best sit-com ever to come out of America" and then went on to sing its praises. I was even more stunned to discover which show they were talking about: "F Troop," the frontier version of Hogan's Heroes where the American Calvary play the Germans to the American Indians' brand of heroes who always outsmart the military half-wits.

I struggled to be polite and not laugh in their faces.

I guess it shows there's no accounting for taste.

The next day was the first time I experienced what I call the phenomenon of "tourist as attraction." Instead of being a visiting observer, I became the observed when I visited the Fidler's school and talked some of the classes. Jim, the school's vice principal, initially told me I would just be talking to his writing class but later asked me to talk to a class of second and third graders. I had already planned out a short speech telling the writing class about writing for a living, but had no idea what to say to the younger kids, so I just took questions.

"Is your bank Trust Bank?" the first questioner asked, and then all the kids broke out in a hearty round of laughter. To this day, I still have no idea what the hell they were talking about, but it still makes me laugh.

As silly as it was, the first question opened the floodgates and gave them license to ask about a variety of subjects ranging from sports and food to what things cost back home. They seemed especially perturbed when I told them a can of coke costs 50 cents back home (perhaps because it was \$1 here, which is only slightly more expensive). I was just glad they didn't ask what a Big Mac costs because I couldn't have named the figure to save my life. They also invited me to join them in the pool for their Physical Education class.

The final question from a little girl at the back of the group caught me by surprise: "Are you Superman?" she asked, convinced she already knew the answer.

That one still baffles me. I may be a former newspaper man with curly hair and round glasses, but I looked nothing like Dean Cain, the star of "The Adventures of Lois and Clark," which had just started showing in Australia.

Then Jim left me at the school library where my age, height and need to tuck my legs under the chair so I could sit at one of the kid's tables made me stick out like a lawn flamingo in a desert. It's nice to know some things never change. I may have been thousands of miles away from where I went to school, but I still felt as out of place in the little library as I would have had I been sitting in the one back in my hometown. The only thing I could think of doing to occupy my time was get caught up in my journal, a struggle that lasted almost my entire trip.

Less than an hour later I was standing in front of Jim Fidler's writing class enthusiastically talking about what I did for a living, which isn't easy to explain to adults, much less middle-school students. I talked

about how I looked for assignments, how I did my research, what I wrote about and whom I wrote for. I even showed them my Macintosh laptop computer and its credit card sized modem then fielded questions on everything from what life was like back home to whether or not I had a girlfriend. One seventh grade girl even floored me by asking, "Is it true that most Americans think Tasmania doesn't exist?"

I didn't know how to answer the question or where it came from. The best I could figure, she must have thought the only time most Americans had heard of the island was when they watched cartoons featuring the Tasmanian Devil.

The class's final question also surprised me because it was so similar to the last one from the second graders.

"Do you write for the Daily Planet?" an older boy asked, referring to the paper where Clark Kent works.

"No, but I will if Perry White calls and offers me a job," I shot back, quite proud of my comeback. Sadly, no one got the joke. Apparently, they aren't as up on their American culture as they thought.

Before leaving school for the day, I answered a long-standing question I had about what teachers did when they went to the faculty lounge. As it turns out, my assumption was correct: they do sit around, drink coffee and talk about their students. And they NAME NAMES. On the day I visited they talked about a note from parents who were taking their children on a long trip to Indonesia and asked if their kids' teachers would give them assignments in important areas for the duration of the vacation, so they could keep up with their classmates. Although the Fidlers had traveled throughout the world, I was surprised to hear them oppose the idea. The phrase "important areas" bothered Karen Fidler because it required teachers to rank the importance of their material. At the same time, Jim said giving the students assignments would deprive them of the interactions they would have with their classmates. Their positions surprised me because I thought the interactions these children would have while visiting a foreign country were as important as sitting in an assigned seat behind John or Michele.

I had long believed cultural experiences were important, I just had no idea that I was a walking, talking one. Or so Jim told me. Apparently, my lecture was all the students could talk about, but not for the reason I'd hoped. Instead of being interested in what I did for a living or my computer, they were more shocked by my flair for the dramatic, my use of my hands and wild gesticulation as I talked. Although I hadn't noticed it up until this point, Tasmanians are quite conservative and reserved when they talk and not given to expressing emotion. As Ian Summers put it, "Something happens around age 10 so that kids here are no longer allowed to enjoy themselves. Maybe their parents take them aside and talk to them." As a result, I was a shock to them.

"They talked about you for quite some time after you left," Jim said, adding, "I told them they would have to get use to other cultures."

Gee, thanks.

As much as I liked St. Helens, there were still two places I wanted to see before I left Tasmania, so I headed southwest to Hobart, but not before quick stops to say goodbye to Jim's class and to Summers. I took a few pictures of the class, answered more questions, and left amid the sounds of applause and students pounding desks.

That's a good sign, isn't it?

Summers took the opportunity to show me his collections of model ships and antique cameras, leaving me to drive away asking why I couldn't have had such a cool art teacher when I was in school.

As St. Helens receded in my rearview mirror, my attention shifted to my speedometer and my surroundings. While I still didn't understand how to convert metric measurements to the ones I grew up with, there was something incredibly freeing about spending hours driving down a rolling two-lane highway that seemed to be Tasmania's equivalent of America's Coast Highway with the windows down, the wind blowing through my hair and the car's speed topping 100 kilometers per hour, even if it was only about 60 miles per hour. As I overlooked the craggy Pacific Ocean shores it felt like I wasn't just driving, I was orbiting the earth.



It's not just a car, it's your perspective: A few of the views out my car window on my way into Hobart.