

TO LAUNCESTON, WITH OEUVRE

Disconnecting to reconnect, **Luke Dodemaide** travels to the famously isolate isle of Australia and goes where no iPhone has gone before—just don't leave the golf clubs behind. Welcome to Tasmania.

TO MOST PEOPLE, and especially city dwellers, the very idea of travel by ship is an antiquated one. You depart from the port. You retreat to your cabin. You travel by sea. You are free to roam the crevices of the vessel, alone or otherwise, and drop in for a glass of wine and liaise with the shipmates. In fact, with all the vestiges of yesteryear on the way to Tasmania, it is tempting to imagine Abel Tasman, who first dropped in on the Apple Isle in 1642, doing all these things—except, that is, catch the 10.00pm screening of *J. Edgar*. And yes, I'm almost certain Abel didn't bring his car... with three sets of golf clubs in the back. But you get the point.

The Spirit of Tasmania provides an alternate route than the more traditional flyover option, and has been doing so since 1985, two years after arguably Australia's greatest nautical success, when John Bertrand skippered *Australia II* to the 1983 America's Cup. With Australia being the rare country that also doubles as continent,

Over dinner, much to the chagrin of my partner, I field a few phone calls. Yes, I'm aware of her work. No, I will not be able to make that tee time tomorrow. Yes, we can address later. Then, eventually, it stops. Reception goes. It is only us and the sea we're 'girt' by now. Herein lies the first jolt of escape.

Through the night, the trip to Tasmania from Melbourne takes around eight hours. On arrival, there is a certain sense of achievement. As if—between the wine and the steak and the sleep—you did something to get there. Travelling by air is one thing. Making it to the other end of the Bass Strait, through the sea we are 'girt' by, is another.



On disembarking at dawn next morning, you take your car from the bowels of the ship and are greeted with the Devonport sunrise, creeping over the hills along the Mersey River, at the north tip of the island. As far as first impressions go in travel, you will find few more impressive than this. Utterly untouched,

you could equally argue the views are as rugged as they are refined. This is what you come to see.

Looking for a bite to eat, the two of us are recommended—as in: “You simply must try...”—the Raspberry Farm Café, which is located about 20 minutes from the port. Here, the pancakes are topped

with freshly picked raspberries and the big breakfast's sourdough bread lined with almost maple-esque jam. For the sweet tooth, raspberry lattes are also on offer—but for me, the regular will do just fine, even by a Melbournian's standards. On the chillier mornings here, the open fireplace proves as much of a hit as anything on the

menu—and it certainly takes effort to tear yourself away from.

Launceston is then a 70-minute drive away. Yet at this hour, with traffic as mythical and unseen as the Tasmanian tiger, it feels much quicker than that. Launceston is the second-largest city in the state, and it located

in the Tamar Valley, an area that found its formation in volcanic activity that took place 10 million years ago.

On the way, we stop at local national park called Cataract Gorge. The expansive inland lake comes with a distinct Canadian feel, so much so that you almost expect a score of salmon to ripple through the water. It is one of the true natural treasures of Tasmania. With a host of viewing sites, there is plenty of opportunity to feast your eyes. On the way to the golf course, it is the perfect sight of pleasantries to steel yourself for a round of golf. Which, in Tasmania, often comes at The Country Club, located in Prospect Vale on the outskirts of the Launceston town.

The Country Club is certainly as advertised. You have tennis courts; first-class dining; the mini-casino and a multi-coloured score of various polo shirts atop consistent khaki pants. Yet none of these reasons, of course, is why we're here—which is to play golf. An early Peter



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Thomson and Mike Wolveridge design, it carries the unique bunkering and mounds aligning their fairways that came to be their signature, with the 18-hole course at a nudge over 6,000 metres. Beginning with an island-like tee shot across a pond, this course is not scared to show its teeth, and its creativity, early. “The first hole is always the one people talk about,” club pro David Cramp tells me. “The first shot over the lake is a little unusual, and then you have a hundred metres from the first tee to the ladies’ tee. It’s a bit daunting.” As a first hole, it drops you into the

jaws of the course early. This is not the easy-going ‘resort golf’ you often find on stay-and-play complexes such as these. Cramp likens it more to a “semi-links, semi-parklands” style. “I think it was designed to be more a links style course, but Steve Wilson, the greenskeeper, has transformed it into more a parklands course.” Yet once you cross over to holes 12 through 16, the feel of the course definitely changes up. The tug-of-war between parklands and links gives way to the latter, and you are challenged with a few long par 3s that really hold the key to

going low at the Country Club. “Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, we call it ‘Amen Corner’ actually. You get to the 13th tee, a par 3, it’s always blowing.”

In total, there are six par 3s and five par 5s—a rather unique set-up. “All the par 3s are all strong—178, 170, 170, they’re all long par 3s. So to get a good score off the blue tees, you need to play those six par 3s well.” And it is one, holding both the Tasmanian Open and Tasmanian Amateur every year, that has tested the best in Australian golf. “Ricky Kato did well here in the Tasmanian

Open last year at the open for three days, getting as low as 15 under, but then in the end he went back to 9-under to win it—a 9-under winning score in four days in perfect conditions in the summer, so it doesn’t play easy.” In fact, the recently released USGA course rating of 73 against 71 par makes it one of only two courses in the state that rated a full two shots over par—the other being the hallowed Royal Hobart. Whether you dunked your ball in the first, or came home punch drunk through the last, the surrounding area offers plenty of

fine establishments to turn your focus elsewhere.

While the region is blessed by wineries particularly the superb Josef Chromy, and a wide-array of cheese delicacies that are exported throughout Australia and overseas, you cannot forget Tasmania boasts of its beer—think Cascade and James Boags—as much as it does anything else. These breweries date as back as far as 1820. James Boags, for one, has been around since 1883 and is hard to avoid in Launceston, and the factory’s machinery features in the

shallow Launceston skyline something like Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory in Ronald Dahl’s classic novel. Here, the oompa loompas give way to men and women in overalls, who breakdown the science of Boags beer with the kind of attention you would expect if they were splitting the atom. Between the ales and the lagers, its James Boags Premium to the classic Boag’s Draught, the recently released English-inspired Wizard Smith Ale proves a hit among tasters, especially when matched with the cheeses in a true taste of Tasmania-rama. The Boags draught is matched with the smoked cheddar; the Boags with the blue; and the Wizard Smith Ale with the Brie. Rarely is drinking beer, particularly those readily available at the local pub, steeped in such sophistication. Whether you’re on a boys trip and want to take your beer drinking to a classier level or are travelling with your better half and need a new tactic to get your partner to the bar, the Boag’s tour is sure to give you a healthy serving of barstool conversation to take back home. Which, along with a speciality selection, I do. As Tasmania has a way of slowing the pace of your life and usual 40-hour week to a pleasant crawl, well, call me ‘old-fashioned’ but on heading home there seems no more logical way to travel then back by ship.

Vale, Van Diemen’s Land. ■