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A Time Frozen Tantalisation

BY MELISSA RIMAC

Rich in evocative history, refreshingly uncrowded, and replete with strikingly beautiful places where canine travellers are welcome, Tasmania has a balm that's at its most striking in Autumn.

Each Sunday morning, Launceston awakes to the ringing of bells from innumerable, fantastically ornate churches. The high notes ricochet along the valley then bounce up hills layered with Australia's largest concentration of 19th century architecture.

It's a recollection that, for me, encapsulates Tasmania's charms and our desire to lap them up as often as possible.

I can't get enough of the fact that so much of Tasmania appears to be straight out of a Bonnet Drama. However, it's the peaceful, hassle-free vibe, marked by a lack of crowds, crass commercialism and 'out-of-my-way' haste that's deeply and immediately affecting.

What Tasmania lacks, happily, is an excess of 'No Dogs' signs and their attendant totalitarian attitude. To the delight of our road-trip savvy teenage dogs, Onyx and Pierre, most beaches and public spaces welcome dogs, and the

choice of dog-friendly accommodation gets them wiggling with glee.

Unlike most Australian cities, Launceston is a joy to explore on foot. Stroll just a few blocks from the laid-back city centre and you're rewarded with a panorama of snow-dusted mountains, streetscapes crammed with stately Georgian and Victorian mansions, and a long riverside boardwalk.



Australia's third oldest city after Sydney and Hobart, Launceston has largely been bypassed by the clear-fell development that's annihilated so much urban heritage.

The architectural treasure-trove stretches as far as the eye can see, and thanks to the wrap-around hills, it's easy to orientate yourself. Opting for the adventure of intuitive navigation, we succumbed to enticing streets and narrow lanes, strolling past urbane streetscapes laden with galleries and el-fresco café's, rosebush shrouded cottages and impressive late 1800s facades which once housed ironmongers and wool-stores.



Crystal clear turquoise waters at Coles Bay, located in the Freycinet region on Tasmania's east coast.

Though it's only about 200km from Launceston to Tasmania's east coast, the journey is saturated with scenic and sensory punch: grand Georgian estates; husks of stone barns and churches caramelised by afternoon light, tiny 1800s hamlets such as Fingal and Mangana.

Folded mountains embrace a glassy, gem-hued ocean on Tasmania's east coast. The sky seems to get bigger as we descend from forest highlands. Around the former whaling town of Bicheno, granite boulders are carpeted in orange lichens, and vast sweeps of silvery sand squeak loudly underfoot.

Central Tasmania's burnished flatlands played a pivotal role in the development of the fledgling colony. Along with the most intact Georgian settlements in Australia, the Midlands or 'Heritage Highway' route is sprinkled with erstwhile coach-houses and convict administration centres.

Life was harsh and uncertain in the early 1800s but pioneers found comfort in the regions' resemblance to Scotland. At Ross, processions of perfectly choreographed ducks glide under the elaborately carved circa 1836 sandstone bridge and horses graze contentedly in the main street. At Oatlands, 140 original Georgian buildings imbue the plains with lingering austerity. Amid this un-reconstituted heritage, we almost expect a posse of primly dressed early settlers to rustle

past. Onyx relishes the opportunity to leave his scent over centuries of other dogs' attempts.

Elegant and low-slung, Hobart is a friendly, delightfully walkable city of grand sandstone buildings, shipping merchants, Victorian-styled parks and a flourishing arts scene.



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Once a global hotspot for shipbuilding and whaling and now lined with big wooden 18th century style schooners, yachts and the odd icebreaker, Hobart's working harbour features water so crystalline, large white starfish cluster in the shallows. Fishing boats chug by as we promenade from 'Old Wharf' to Salamanca Place, home to the famed market Saturday, an atmospheric and sociable showcase of fresh produce, art and hand-honed treats.

Many of the former factories and storehouses have been revived as groovy eateries and art spaces where dogs hang out with their people.

From the harbour, it's a short walk to storybook suburbs such as Battery Point, crammed with cute cottages, galleries, cosy cafes and antique shops.

Just a 20-minute drive away is the convict-built Georgian village of Richmond, whose penal settlement pre-dates Port Arthur's. Continuing south towards the Tasman Peninsula, the landscape rears up into a cinematic flurry of dramatic headlands, precipitous cliffs and chalky beaches draped with the branches of ghostly gums.

The lush Huon Valley's antiquated timber villages and soothing mountains meet sea vistas lie about a half hour's drive from Hobart. Heading towards Cockle Creek, the southernmost road-head in Tasmania, the scenes become quite rarefied, with pearly, almost glacial blue water framed by resounding layers of forested mountains.

Little wonder that Tasmania is home to the world's cleanest air and water! Our most recent visit was a too quick, two-day stopover, and yet, as always, Tasmania left us feeling like we've had a thorough mental and physical detox.

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ONYX'S TASMANIA TRAVEL TIPS

Room With a Mood

Perched upon a ridge spilling down to Launceston's gracious city centre One Spencer is a cosy and atmospheric 1870s era bungalow.

Near Bicheno, self-contained Sandpiper Cottages are just a few skips from the dunes. In West Hobart, Pecks On Pine is an atmospheric Victorian timber cottage thoughtfully set up for dogs, within walking distance of the CBD.

www.pecksonpine.net

About a 30-minute drive south-east from Hobart, waterfront Lewisham Retreat in Sorell, is situated near a coastal walking track and several dog-friendly beaches.

Dogs are permitted at many of the beach-fringing camping areas between Southport and Cockle Creek.

One Spencer and Lewisham Retreat bookings, visit:

www.takeabreak.com.au

Feasting

Stock up at Launceston and Hobart supermarkets. Smaller towns usually have an IGA. Hound welcoming eateries include: Cube and Fresh at Launceston, White Dog Café at Bicheno, IXL café at Hobart's historic harbour.

Scenic Romps

Bell Bay, near Georgetown, has several beaches where dogs can massage their feet in the sand and the historic Low Head Lighthouse offers a moody, far-flung vibe. Stunning, dog-friendly southern beaches include Pirates Bay, Eaglehawk Neck, Safety Cove, Carnovan Bay, beaches around Southport (follow the dirt roads).



Mingling

For group dog-training session, taking in city sights and cafes.

More: www.pawsnpeople.com.au, ph 0410 220 870

www.bigearsanimalsanctuary.com

Urbane Pursuits:

www.festivalofvoices.com (don't miss the concerts in the lavishly gothic St David's Cathedral, Hobart).

Further Inspirations

www.tasmaniatravel.com.au

Paw-Friendly Flights:

www.jetpets.com.au

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