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FEATURES

Rome? I'd rather be in Hobart

We've ruined the world's must-see cities. So head to the unsung backwaters, starting with Tasmania's surprising capital

AA Gill | Published: 22 November 2015

Print



Constitution Dock, in Hobart

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In 2014, there were 37.4m scheduled airline flights. That is 100,000 take-offs every day and, of course, 100,000 landings, bringing more than 1bn tourists to the world. And on one day last July, I think most of them had decided to visit Rome. Unfortunately, so had I.

Rome is one of the most enduring and elevating cities ever conceived. There is more here to wonder at and lift the heart than anywhere else I know. Rome should be on everybody's bucket list. And, apparently, it is. I always thought that the eternal city would eternally rise above the polloi. But I found myself in a slow, bad-tempered shuffle of resentful, frustrated gawpers, and for the first time minded the presence of other people. The realisation that we are making some of the before-you-die destinations too crowded to enjoy, the moribund traffic in Istanbul, Moscow or Mumbai, has to be considered before you ever go on a short visit.

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So I've started compiling a list of cities to visit that you might not have considered because there were bigger places to see first. Now, the fact that they are backwaters adds to their attraction, and their unconsidered charm makes them even more desirable. So, in what I hope may become an occasional series, I want to commend Hobart to you.

Even for those who make it all the way to the antipodes, Tasmania is rarely a must-see. The island that was once Van Diemen's Land, discovered by Abel Tasman, who laughably managed to miss the rest of Australia altogether, has always stood apart from the continent, an inward-looking rural rock, mild on one side, battered by the mythic Southern Ocean on the other, gently mocked and easily ignored by Australians. Because of its roughly triangular shape, a "map of Tas" is an Aussie euphemism for unkempt pubic hair.

Hobart, the state capital, has the three things that in my experience make for great cities: a moment of vaunting affluence, a long period of decline and a shock of eccentricity.



It's a pearl: local oysters

It was whaling that gave this city its initial cachet, an oil boom that lit the world with blubber. Then Hobart declined into jam-making and apples. Tasmania is famous for its orchards and, oddly, apple-pip jewellery, which is an acquired aesthetic. It sagged into a stasis of a backwater, surrounded by spectacular country for hiking and logging. You walk through boughs and meadows that look like Elysian gardening. A fair proportion of the world's medicinal opium grows here in Tasmania's indigenous forest, because this is a peculiarly law-abiding community that prefers its grog and private singular vices to drug-dealing or chasing the dragon. There is also an extraordinary ark-full of madly bizarre wildlife, from wombats to pademelons, quolls, Tasmanian devils and the poison-spurred, lactating, egg-laying platypus, and its only relative, the equally eccentric echidna.

The shock of eccentricity was the obsession of David Walsh, a native of Hobart who lives quite a long way up a number of spectrums. As a young man, he went to a bookshop and read one book, a chapter of it at a time, because he didn't want to buy it. It was a manual on how to gamble and he started to make a fortune. He then gambled the fortune into a bigger fortune, and gambled that fortune into a simply titanic one. And out of that he built a museum.

Lots of philanthropists bequeath museums, but no one has made one quite like Mona, the Museum of Old and New Art. As you approach, it seems like an undistinguished but

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perfectly nice single-storey building, on a pretty promontory that is best reached by the specially built riverboats that sail up the River Derwent. But underneath there are three huge floors of basement, accessed by a descending spiral staircase that drops past an astonishingly beautiful sheet of underground rock. You work your way back up through the galleries to the light.

The art is a singular collection of ancient and modern artefacts, curios and concepts, from early Egyptian to 20th-century found objects. In a world where contemporary art has become a cynical investment and vanity of billionaires, Walsh's collection is still the individual notion of a singular character who cares little for provenance or famous names. It includes Sidney Nolan's huge montage Snake and the Belgian Wim Delvoye's Cloaca Professional, a room-sized machine that replicates the human digestive tract and, at the end, produces utterly realistic turds that even smell authentic. It's one of the great moving works of the 20th century, and worth a trip around the world all on its own. There is also a wall of perfectly elegant casts of vaginas that you can buy reproduced as soap in the gift shop. And a very good cocktail bar.



Sidney Nolan's 150ft-long Snake mural at Mona

Everyone from the taxi driver to the shop assistant will tell you that Walsh's weird and monomaniacal presence has revitalised and changed everything. Rents were low here; there was a lot of empty space. So young artists and entrepreneurs inspired by the museum have come to start workshops and studios and restaurants. There is a gastronomic boom that isn't based on property prices or bankers or the international rich, but just on young chefs who want to experiment in a place they can afford, who are drawn to space and diversity and organic home-produced ingredients.

Tasmania is where the green movement was born. It's not a faddy, fashionable moan about diets and intolerances here. It isn't a proselytising minority interest; everybody does it. I had some of the most interesting and heart-made food here, the best slow-roast pedigree pigs, the spectacular Southern Ocean fish and chips, and an ice cream that was based on Elvis's last meal, peanut butter, jam and bacon bits.

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Hobart is a museum with a great town attached. And there is nowhere else I know that has quite the same synthesis of old, new, indoors and outdoors, sophisticated and handmade, all set in a landscape that will stay with you for ever. You walk along a dramatically romantic coast through the flocks of sea birds and the fringe of dunes and eucalyptus forest. This should be on everybody's recycled bucket list.

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AA Gill was a guest of Tourism Australia (australia.com).

The gallery

Entrance to Mona costs £12 (mona.net.au).

Hotels

Mona has eight of its own high-design one- and two-bedroom pavilions on the River Derwent; from £304, B&B. Doubles at the Islington Hotel start at £185, B&B (islingtonhotel.com).

Flights

Airlines flying to Hobart include Singapore Airlines, via Singapore and Melbourne; from £985 return. Or try British Airways, Emirates or Etihad.

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