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NEXT STOP | HOBART, AUSTRALIA

Tasmania Goes Boutique, Nice and Slow

By SHARON OTTERMAN

IT'S Friday afternoon in the Tasmanian capital, [Hobart](#), and the crowd at Retro, a harborside cafe adorned with free-form mosaic [art](#), is decidedly offbeat. A fleece-clad couple sip lattes and a spiky-haired musician carrying a guitar case greets a friend. A cyclist in spandex pedals by so slowly that his wheels barely move.

Just above the port, strong westerly winds buffet the 4,166-foot-high [Mount Wellington](#), bringing icy air from one of "the world's longest uninterrupted stretches of ocean. At its peak, stunted eucalyptus trees take on spectral shapes, and the views seem to stretch toward Antarctica. But the weather in Hobart's coves, sheltered by the mountain, is balmy. At the cafe, there's mist, then a sun shower, then a rainbow, then brilliant sunshine.

Change happens slowly in Hobart, and that's the way the residents like it. Balanced on the southern edge of [Australia](#)'s smallest state, 150 miles south of the mainland, Hobart, a city of 195,000, has been spared the scars of rapid development. Sandstone warehouses from the port's whaling days and Victorian era-gingerbread houses have been lovingly preserved. Squid boats still dock at the active piers, laced with 19th-century drawbridges. The nation's oldest continuously working pub, the Hope and Anchor, serves beer from the 175-year-old [Cascade Brewery](#), just up the mountain.

Yet a sense of energy animates the city these days, fueled by an artistic undercurrent and celebrated natural surroundings. Hikers swing through town before setting off to explore the region's temperate rain forests and pristine seas. Foodies arrive to sample the world's largest supply of wild abalone, as well as wild duck, hare and other local game. Farmers experiment with niche-market products like artisanal goat cheese and milk-fed lamb. And vintners grow cold-climate [wines](#) in the Coal River Valley, just 20 minutes outside Hobart.

The changes are echoed in the city. Architects are updating venerable structures with steel and glass. Artists are moving in, attracted by the city's still-mellow vibe and proximity to nature. And tourism is way up, in part because major [cruise](#) lines now make Hobart a regular stop.

"I moved to Hobart after 10 years in Brooklyn because I thought Australia is the best country on earth, [Tasmania](#) the best part of Australia, and Hobart the cultural epicenter of Tasmania," said Brian Ritchie of the rock group the Violent Femmes, a recent immigrant to the city. "Within 24 hours of landing here, I did unscheduled performances and recording sessions because the musicians are not too paranoid to say, 'Let's try something.'"

Much of Hobart's new sense of style is centered along its harbor, site of Australia's second settlement in 1804. Convicts from the British Empire and gold prospectors created a rowdy, whiskey-soaked district. Today, young professionals linger at cafes and browse through Tasmanian art galleries tucked into old sandstone

warehouses.

The harbor's cultural revival began with the Salamanca Arts Center, which restored seven warehouses in the mid-1970s and turned them into exhibition halls and studio spaces for contemporary artists. On a recent visit, an eight-foot-tall Mobius paper strip hung in the main gallery, part of a biannual art festival that drew plaid-skirted schoolgirls and culture seekers from mainland Australia.

The [Henry Jones Art Hotel](#), just across the pier from the Art Center, is the other anchor of Hobart's renaissance. Opened in 2004 in the shell of a 1860s jam factory, the hotel updates the building's sandstone facades and corrugated iron roof with industrial-sleek steel and glass. In the hallways and guest rooms, works from emerging local artists — most of it for sale — hang amid glowing wood beams. Each Friday, the hotel offers a Champagne-soaked art tour, which attracts art-savvy travelers from [Adelaide](#), [Sydney](#), and [Melbourne](#), along with a smattering of American and British guests.

Other high-end boutique hotels are on their way. A Tasmanian architect, Robert Morris -Nunn, who designed the Art Hotel, recently completed work on Hobart's most luxurious hotel to date, the 11-room [Hotel Islington](#). The hotel, in a restored 1847 country manor, evokes a private hilltop home. A [Picasso](#) etching hangs in the foyer, and windows and furnishings are drenched in fine Jim Thompson silks.

It's a far cry from the country-town feel of the rustic taverns and flowery B&Bs that still typify most Tasmanian lodging. Tasmania “is becoming a boutique island,” said Nicholas Parkinson-Gates, the Hotel Islington's impeccably dressed general manager.

The dining scene is also changing. Traditional, hearty pub fare like Cornish pasties and spaghetti bolognese (in its very mild Australian incarnation) is still everywhere. But sneaking onto menus are items like scallops with truffle oil and fresh oysters drizzled with limoncello. At [Restaurant 373](#), a new minimalist-style bistro with crisp white tablecloths, locals tuck into nouvelle dishes that blend native ingredients with international flavors, like wallaby filet with sweet potato rösti and Tasmanian pepper berries.

The sidewalks still tend to roll up early in Hobart, but a growing number of trendy bars vie for the city's budding Euro-chic crowd. Patrons at [Tavern 42 Degrees South](#), arguably the city's hippest bar, nod to lounge [music](#) as they recline on 1970s-style blue-vinyl couches. Yet, casually dressed patrons in fleece jackets and jeans also linger at the bar, keeping the scene low-key and neighborhoodlike.

The real action takes place during the day, when nature beckons. Alpine terrain and sweeping views are as close as the top of Mount Wellington, a short drive from the city center. From its peak, bicyclists can zip downhill through towering eucalyptus forests — almost no pedaling required — past the Cascade Brewery and all the way into town.

At the base of the mountain is the tranquil Silver Falls. Eight-foot-tall tree ferns bend over the path, and a gurgling brook rushes over mossy boulders. The air is so clean and icy, it tingles when breathed. At the foot of the path, the rustic Fern Tree Tavern serves Devonshire tea and spirits to chilled hikers, as it has for more than a century.

A 40-minute drive south of the city is [Bruny Island](#), a place of rolling hills, curved white-sand [beaches](#) and

turquoise bays. Pontoon boats take visitors off shore into the Southern Ocean where low-flying albatross swoop over schools of dolphins. Fur seals laze on rocky outcroppings. Thick strands of bull kelp, which can grow more than a foot a day, frame the stone walls of towering sea cliffs.

“It reminds me of how Australia was 20 years ago,” said Greg Parnell, a retired air force pilot from Adelaide, as he stood on a pontoon boat, marveling at the spectacular scenery. “It’s so natural, so beautiful.”

Next to him, Colin Langhan, the boat’s captain, chimed in. “Hobart’s a place where you can still catch a fish, talk to fishermen on the docks, drop into a bar and meet the locals,” he said. “You can’t really do that in Sydney anymore.”

VISITOR INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Qantas has flights from Kennedy Airport to [Hobart](#) starting at about \$1,750, with stops in [California](#), then in either [Sydney](#) or [Melbourne](#). Low-cost flights within [Australia](#) from Melbourne and Sydney are also available. JetStar and Virgin Blue have one-way flights starting at 69 Australian dollars, \$60 at 1.164 Australian dollars to the U.S. dollar.

WHERE TO STAY

Rooms at the Henry Jones Art Hotel (25 Hunter Street; 61-3-6210-7700; www.thehenryjones.com) start at 260 Australian dollars a night.

The Islington Hotel (321 Davey Street; 61-3-6220-2123; www.islingtonhotel.com) opened in 2006 and has three types of rooms: formal in the main house, contemporary in the [garden](#) house and standard and superior rooms in each. Doubles start at 400 Australian dollars.

For a blend of privacy and style, visitors can rent a restored Victorian-style home. The Kinvara House (86 Forest Road; 61-3-6278-8232; www.tasmanianindulgence.com.au) has sweeping views of the city starting at 242 Australian dollars a night. For cheaper digs, doubles at the funky Edinburgh Gallery Bed and Breakfast (211 Macquarie Street; 61-3-6224-9229; www.artacom.com.au) start at 120 Australian dollars.

Discounts are available in the winter season (May to September). Check www.wotif.com for last-minute hotel deals.

WHERE TO EAT

In North Hobart, Restaurant 373 (373 Elizabeth Street; 61-3-6231-9031; www.restaurant373.com.au) and Amulet (333 Elizabeth Street; 61-3-6234-8113; www.northhobart.com/amulet) serves seasonal entrees with local ingredients.

At the piers, [Mures](#) (Victoria Dock; 61-3-6231-2121; www.mures.com.au) offers pristine Bruny Island oysters for about one Australian dollar each. Around the corner is Tavern 42 Degrees South (Elizabeth Pier; 61-3-6224-7742; www.tav42.com.au), for Tasmanian rieslings and other local [wines](#).

THINGS TO DO

The Salamanca Arts Center (77 Salamanca Place; 61-3-6234-8414; www.salarts.org.au) has contemporary art shows. Mount up for a three-hour descent of Mount [Wellington](#) with Island Cycle Tours (281 Liverpool Street; 61-3-6234-4951; www.islandcycletours.com). The cost is 65 Australian dollars a person. Tasman National Park (www.parks.tas.gov.au) has lovely coastal scenery. Mount Field National Park, 50 miles from Hobart, has rain forests, waterfalls, alpine tundra and summer [skiing](#). Hobart is also a jumping-off point to southwest [Tasmania](#), a place where no roads go. Par-Avion Wilderness Tours (Cambridge Airport; 61-3-6248-5390; www.paravion.com.au) has tours starting at 195 Australian dollars.

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