

FOR many, the word 'Tasmania' conjures up thoughts of a mysterious location far away, the home of gremlin like creatures and even a cartoon character. Although it has its own government, this island state is in fact part of Australia and can be reached by direct flights from Sydney or Melbourne in under two hours. After partying for England at the Sydney Mardi Gras or one of the many other annual events held there where better to relax and recuperate than a place I knew nothing of by allowing an organised tour take the hassle out of reserving hotels and sorting out travel arrangements.

However, this tour was no ordinary tour. It was the first-ever gay organised tour of Tasmania. A place where, until not long ago, being gay meant going to prison. This was organised by ex-Qantas flight attendant, Jason Minty who left longhaul flying to return to his birthplace and set up his own tour business.

"I want you to be comfortable visiting here and to bring you back to nature a bit," he told me. I didn't quite know what to expect from a 'gay' tour, in fact such an idea had never appealed. My itinerary was headed 'Eat, Drink, and be Mary' which already had me cringing, but I was prepared to give this, and Tasmania, a go.

On arrival in **Hobart**, the island's capital, I was met at the tiny airport by Jason and soon became acquainted with my fellow travellers for the week, a real 'who's who' of international gaydom. I was travelling with my dear friend Donovan, or Donna D as he becomes when earning his money as a global drag queen. Our group of ten also consisted of doctors, cabin crew, a drug dealer come property developer, a charity worker, waitress and little old journalist me! Our first couple of days were spent at **Lemonthyme Lodge** up in the mountains. This was a three-hour plus drive from Hobart, which gave us a chance to stop off along the way and sample some old stone tea houses still serving a welcome brew to travellers a hundred years on. Our wood cabins were cloaked under a sea of pine trees filtering through brilliant sunshine bringing to life the different hues of brown and red.

Six hours on foot lay ahead as we walked up **Cradle Mountain**, occasionally passing other ramblers as we made our way to the peak. Our party was beginning to gel and after all the initial 'getting to know you' niceties, vulgar jokes and four letter words, we all seemed well at home amongst the

TASMANIAN DEVILS

From a history of institutional homophobia to one of the finest examples of gay rights legislation in the world today, Tasmania is not just a visual paradise of stunning scenery but a place where LGBT's have true equality. SPENCER reports...

group. To demonstrate the new closeness of our party, the only two real girls amongst us, a lovely couple, Liz and Sylvianne, decided to strip off and display their own peaks at the top, much to our approving amusement, whilst turning more than a few heads from other hill climbers!

Back in the Lodge and fully clothed, some sporting aching joints and fresh sunburn, we dined on a variety of Tasmanian traditional cooking and very good local wine. Two days of stunning scenery, good food and clean mountain air was the perfect tonic to detox after Sydney. **Strahan** was our next port of call, three hours drive down from the mountains to sea level. A picturesque harbourside town, it could have been straight out of the film 'Jaws'; tourists milling about amongst its colourfully painted timber boathouses and aging fleet of wooden sea craft.

From here we took the **Gordon River** cruise, a voyage of discovery where **Macquarie Harbour** opens to the sea at '**Hell's Gate**'. Our modern vessel, the Lady Jane Franklin took us past the edge of the Southern Ocean fish farms where prized atlantic salmon and ocean trout are grown for local and export markets, before docking at **Sarah Island**. A guided tour took us around an old convicts encampment and exposed a little of the life so many prisoners once knew. Tasmania's use as a convicts post had turned the islanders against homosexuality and back on the mainland I caught up with an individual who exposed this island's awful treatment of gays and single-handedly got them changed at the UN.

Rodney Croome was born on a dairy farm in rural Tasmania thirty-nine years ago, not far from where Peter Thatchell's ancestors came from, indeed many say he is Australia's equivalent to Mr. Thatchell although Rodney would point out a much less militant one. At University he studied European History where he came out in 1988, and became involved in the Tasmanian Gay Law Reform Group. Their stall at Hobart's weekly Salamanca Market was banned by the council and in seven weeks defying this,



130 people were arrested in what was Australia's biggest gay rights protest. I asked how life was then? "Police would wait outside social meetings and take down car licence plates. There was a ban on discussing homosexuality in schools. Many gays left the island. In fact, because of the hard line of the authorities, many straights believed no gays existed."

This was clearly demonstrated in 1988 when minister Robin Gray famously said at the annual tourism conference, 'everyone was welcome to come to Tasmania including Greenies and Aboriginies but not Homosexuals.' The inbred distain of gays can be traced back to Tasmania's use as a convicts island, housing many criminals of the 1800's. As these were all male penitentiaries, many same sex incidents occurred and love letters between convicts still exist.

The housing of convicts in Tasmania was seen as an unwanted stain on the island and the authorities were quick to capitalise on a link between convictism and sodomy. The locals wanted the transport of convicts stopped because it was linked with gays, therefore homophobia helped stop convictism.

Rodney explained how the island changed back then. "Up until 1853 this place was called Van Diemensland. When convictism stopped, the islanders wanted a new start and re-named it Tasmania after Abel Tasman. All convict sites were pulled down and homosexuality was rejected. They wanted to wipe

away the convict stain, and that stain was homosexuality."

I was interested to find out how Rodney went about changing what was then such solid legislation. Especially as in 1990 the government had rejected decriminalising homosexuality with some in the conservative upper house calling for the death penalty for gays. Rodney explained: "On Christmas Day 1991 we took our argument to the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva. This was the first sexuality case (relating to gays) they had looked at from anywhere in the world and the first from Australia."

As Rodney continued I could sense the memory fresh in his head, his monotone voice becoming more animated as he came to the highlight of his story. "It was my 30th birthday, April 11th 1994. The UN ruled in our favour; that Tasmania's anti-gay laws violated international human rights and must be removed."

This was a great triumph for the Tasmanian Gay and Lesbian Rights Group under Rodney's guidance but it wasn't until 1997 that these laws changed. He continued: "Now there is a mandatory anti-homophobia policy in all schools, polls have shown support for gays is 15% above the national average, and we have exactly the same rights as married couples. This UN case has been used in court cases and lobbying to assist others persecuted in Cyprus, South Africa, Jamaica and the United States."

As I left Rodney I was impressed that a rather mild mannered, some would even say boring individual, has achieved so much on such a large scale. To honour his achievements, in June last year he received the 'Order of Australia', an equivalent to an MBE for his contribution to Gay and Lesbian Human rights.

With so much coastline, I was looking forward to getting on to the beach. I've seen some sand in my time but... Wow! The beach past the **Freycinet Peninsula** at **Wineglass Bay** is quite simply stunning. Craggy rocks form a magnificent backdrop to the fine golden white sand where the warm blue sea meets the land.

On the way back to the capital we stopped off at amazing vineyard by the name of '**No Regrets**' under the ownership of a delightful couple, Eric and Jette Phillips. They have a stall at the weekly **Salamanca Market** but any visit to this beautiful island would be incomplete without a tasteful visit to their stunning winery. Although not generally open to the public, Jason got us in.

A couple of days in Hobart gave the opportunity to sample the many restaurants serving some great Tasmanian cuisine. The cost of eating out isn't particularly cheap, however, you are paying for quality. Having consumed a large number of exquisite desserts, I was happy that Jason had arranged kayaking around Hobart Harbour to work off some of the calories. Such was the interest in our group locally, the daily paper decided to do a photo call with us, prior to our water bound work-out.

For an island with so much history, Tasmania offers the worldly traveller an unusual contrast to mainland Australia. Stunning scenery, excellent food and local wines and friendly local folk make Tasmania, quite literally, a breath of fresh air. With so many places to discover in the world, I would rarely return to where I have been. However, if I find myself in Australia again, this special island and I will meet again.



▶ HOW TO GET THERE

QANTAS have regular direct daily flights from Sydney and Melbourne. See www.qantas.com
Virginblue.com.au also offer low cost flights to Hobart.

▶ WHERE TO STAY

> **Kabuki by the Sea**, Rocky Hills, Swansea. Individual Japanese style bungalows with stunning sea views. Tel: 03 6257 8588

> **Henry James Art Hotel**, 25 Hunter



Street, Hobart. Recently opened artistic accommodation. Tel: 03 6210 7700

> **Lemonthyme Lodge**, Cradle Mountain. Rural retreat with great food. Tel: 03 6492 1112

▶ WHERE TO EAT

> **Lickerish**, 373 Elizabeth Street, Hobart. Run by a trendy girlie couple serving great local produce. Tel: 03 62319186.

> **Athena's on the Pier**, Franklin

Wharf, Hobart. Great seafood and cocktails with a view to match. Tel: 03 62242200

> **Kaos Café**, 237 Elizabeth Street, Hobart. Friendly gay run café with info on local scene. Tel: 03 62315699

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JASON MINTY TOURS - 'Eat, Drink, and be Mary 2005' starts in Tasmania 7th March.

> For more information and prices contact Jason@jasonminty.com or call 613 6225 5331

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