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Tasmania, off Australia, Is Nature-Lover's Dream

AP Associated Press

By CARRIE OSGOOD Associated Press
HOBART, Tasmania January 3, 2012 (AP)

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Last March, I embarked on a mini-road trip around Tasmania, the island off the southeast corner of Australia that is about the size of West Virginia. Tassie, what Aussies affectionately call their smallest state, is a nature-lover's dream, with enough history and culinary delights to satisfy urbanites. While its landscape has similarities to New Zealand's North Island, with lush, rocky, "Lord of the Rings" countryside, it is unequivocally Australian, with carnivorous marsupials, eucalyptus forests and a mellow, rustic spirit.

Tasmania is best explored by car, which can be daunting for independent travelers. Like other Commonwealth countries, motorists in Australia drive on the left, in cars where the driver sits on the right. Yet it is rather easy to "hire" a car in Australia. Foreign drivers licenses in English are honored, and insurance is incorporated into the affordable rental package.

I must say that I enjoyed the challenge of driving on the opposite side of the road. Sure, it can be frustrating when you flip on your windshield wipers even though you meant to activate the turn signal. And it can take a little time adjusting your instincts when making sharp turns. But the sensation of driving on the left forced my brain to alter its perspective, which I found to be quite relaxing.

Driving a lovely little car like the Nissan Micra, a four-door variation of the Volkswagen Beetle not available in the U.S., made the driving experience that much more fun. The roads in Tasmania are narrow, winding and frequently only two lanes with no shoulder, so driving the compact car helped the roads feel a little more spacious.

I based my trip in Hobart, the state's capital city of more



AP

In this March 25, 2011 photo, kangaroos play at the Tasmanian Devil Conservation Park on the Tasman Peninsula, Tasmania, Australia. While its landscape has similarities to New Zealand's North Island, with lush, rocky, "Lord of the Rings" countryside, Tasmania is unequivocally Australian, with carnivorous marsupials, eucalyptus forests and a mellow, rustic spirit.



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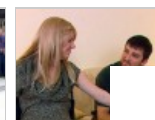
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than 200,000 people in the southern part of the island. It was raining when I arrived, so I thought it was a sleepy little town. But when the sky cleared, the city came alive with its active harbor and the vision of towering Mount Wellington. While not as culturally gregarious as other parts of Australia, the residents were warm and kind.

My favorite part of the city was the festive Salamanca Market, mingling with artisans, buskers and locals celebrating their sunny Saturday. I purchased quality souvenirs and gifts, while savoring delicious, fresh, local food.

When I visited Hobart's helpful tourist information center for assistance coordinating my itinerary, the woman I spoke with recommended nearby Mount Fields National Park, calling it "magic."

Much to my delight, the park's diverse scenery was breathtaking. I especially enjoyed the two-hour hike that took me through a lush, fern forest passing three magnificent waterfalls, including the wheel-chair accessible Russell Falls. I wove around massive eucalyptus trees that radiated the most intoxicating fragrant scent. Just relishing the simple act of breathing centered me, infusing a visceral pleasure from being in such a beautiful place. It was magic, indeed.

The Tasman Peninsula, an hour southeast of Hobart, is one of the main tourist destinations in Tasmania, saturated with a wide range of attractions, including dramatic ocean scenery, historical landmarks and an animal park. The panoramic views from my coastal walk along Waterfall Bay in Tasman National Park were jaw-dropping, with spectacular rock and sea formations, and waterfalls that dove off high cliffs into the rich teal-blue ocean.

The Port Arthur Historical Site, the convict settlement that housed some of the worst British criminals in the mid-1800s, is the most significant cultural landmark in Tasmania, and has the tour buses and school groups to prove it. Once I escaped the crowds, I appreciated the place more than I expected. Roaming through the historic buildings, exhibitions and ruins transported me back in time. The grounds were compelling, and I could feel the melancholy remnants of the area's dark history.

Having grown up watching "Looney Tunes" cartoons, I could not visit Tasmania without seeing a real Tassie devil. I visited the Tasmanian Devil Conservation Park in time for a feeding. The dark, dangerous, dog-sized animals running around like maniacs put on quite a show. They made disconcerting crunching noises while gleefully devouring animal bones. It was sad to learn that a widespread, deadly disease forced nature's most endearing garbage disposals to be added to the endangered species list.

I capped my road trip by driving up the east coast to Freycinet National Park. I stayed in Coles Bay, the gateway town to the picturesque peninsula. While my weak knee stopped me from hiking down to dip my toes into pristine Wineglass Bay, I still made it up to the lookout and was





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able to explore other nooks and vistas throughout the park. Strolling barefoot along the silky-soft, white-sand Friendly Beaches was an unexpected highlight.

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While I didn't have enough time to explore Tasmania's many other sites, I'm glad I left this glorious corner of the world with plenty of excuses to return.

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In this March 25, 2011 photo, kangaroos play at the Tasmanian Devil Conservation Park on the Tasman Peninsula, Tasmania, Australia. While its landscape has similarities to New Zealand's North Island, with lush, rocky, "Lord of the Rings" countryside, Tasmania is unequivocally Australian, with carnivorous marsupials, eucalyptus forests and a mellow, rustic spirit. (AP Photo/Carrie Osgood)

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In this March 25, 2011 photo, a Tasmanian devil is seen at the Tasmanian Devil Conservation Park on the Tasman Peninsula, Tasmania, Australia. While its landscape has similarities to New Zealand's North Island, with lush, rocky, "Lord of the Rings" countryside, Tasmania is unequivocally Australian, with carnivorous marsupials, eucalyptus forests and a mellow, rustic spirit. (AP Photo/Carrie

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In this March 24, 2011 photo, Russell Falls in Mount Field National Park is shown in Tasmania, Australia. While its landscape has similarities to New Zealand's North Island, with lush, rocky, "Lord of the Rings" countryside, Tasmania is unequivocally Australian, with carnivorous marsupials, eucalyptus forests and a mellow, rustic spirit. (AP Photo/Carrie Osgood)

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This March 25, 2011 shows the hospital ruins at Port Arthur Historical Site in Tasmania, Australia. While its landscape has similarities to New Zealand's North Island, with lush, rocky, "Lord of the Rings" countryside, Tasmania is unequivocally Australian, with carnivorous marsupials, eucalyptus forests and a mellow, rustic spirit. (AP Photo/Carrie Osgood)

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In this March 25, 2011 photo, Waterfall Bay in Tasman National Park is shown in Tasmania, Australia. While its landscape has similarities to New Zealand's North Island, with lush, rocky, "Lord of the Rings" countryside, Tasmania is unequivocally Australian, with carnivorous marsupials, eucalyptus forests and a mellow, rustic spirit. (AP Photo/Carrie Osgood)

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This March 27, 2011 photo shows Friendly Beaches in Freycinet National Park, Tasmania, Australia. While its landscape has similarities to New Zealand's North Island, with lush, rocky, "Lord of the Rings" countryside, Tasmania is unequivocally Australian, with carnivorous marsupials, eucalyptus forests and a mellow, rustic spirit. (AP Photo/Carrie Osgood)

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In this March 27, 2011 photo, The Nuggets, islands off Cape Tourville, Tasmania, Australia. While its landscape has similarities to New Zealand's North Island, with lush, rocky, "Lord of the Rings" countryside, Tasmania is unequivocally Australian, with carnivorous marsupials, eucalyptus forests and a mellow, rustic spirit. (AP Photo/Carrie Osgood)

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