

## TASMANIA

When I was nearly 21 years old, I spent 6 months touring and working in Australia. I spent Christmas in Sydney, and most of the Spring picking fruit in Renmark on the Murray river about an hour north of Adelaide. When I'd earned enough money to travel a bit more, I headed off to visit some old friends in Melbourne, and bought a ticket to Tasmania.

Tasmania is a large island just south of the main continent of Australia, across the Tasman Straits. It is so far south, in fact, that it is subject to sudden storms which come up from Antarctica. There is a weather station on the southwest side of the island which gets wind which blows 12,000 miles across the southern seas, missing the southern tip of Africa, meeting no land until it reaches Tasmania. A wild, windy, stormy place.

I'd decided to walk the Overland Track, a foot trail that reaches from the south coast nearly to the north coast, passing directly over the mountains in the interior. There are cabins every 5 miles or so along the way, so a backpacker can make the trip comfortably in about 5 days. I would start on the south, and walk north. But first I'd have to reach the trailhead.

The ferry from Melbourne left me on the north coast, so I began hitch-hiking the only highway available, which followed the coast east and then south in a big circle round the island. I'd just made the east coast and was sitting at a turn in the road munching on wild blackberries when an old Ford sedan came 'round the curve and slid to a stop. A young Tasmanian about my age asked me where I was headed and when he heard I was going to take the Overland Track he told me about a National Park at the southern tip of the island, not far from Hobart. He invited me to come along, and we decided we'd spend the whole day leisurely working our way down the coast.

In Australia, this meant that we'd be passing quite a few pubs along the way, and Mick being a true Australian, we stopped in at every one. Three pubs later we were standing around a pool table drinking our pints when a couple of young ladies caught our eye. We looked, and they looked back and smiled, and Mick struck up a conversation with them.

They were both nurses from Melbourne, come down on holiday for a short tour of the island. They were both riding motorcycles, so we stepped out front to have a look. They were friendly, hard women, good-looking in their own way. I was impressed, and asked them if they'd ever seen the National Park, and would they like to come along with us. They said they would, so Mick stopped at a bottle shop and bought some tubes of Foster's lager and set them on the front seat.

The women were following us southward along the winding two-lane highway. Mick had me opening beers and passing them to him. He held the open cans out the window and the women came up alongside and took them from his hand. A real gentleman. We continued this way until we reached the next pub, when we stopped again for a chat. I watched Mick's eyes as he talked with one, and I strode over to the other, took off my vest and draped it over her shoulders. That settled, we went in a couples and played a little more pool.

When we reached the National Park, I set up the tent while Mick and the women went into town to buy food for supper. Mick and I trudged off to the camp toilets for a conference. We cooked some canned stew and some sausages over the fire and drank some beers and stretched out our sleeping bags, two in Mick's tent and two in mine. We talked and sang and drank whiskey from a bottle passed 'round the fire, then slipped into the bags for a bump and a roll before sliding off into dreamland.

In the morning, we bid our ladies farewell. Mick drove me into Hobart and said good-bye. I checked into the youth hostel and explored Hobart for the rest of the day. It was a quiet, clean, charming small town in those days, and I returned to the hostel just as the lights of the houses came on in the low hills falling into the evening. I found out that the Queen was celebrating her Silver Jubilee, and I promised myself that I'd be among the throng alongside the main street tomorrow when she and Prince Philip walked by.

The next day, early in the afternoon, Queen Elizabeth and Prince Andrew did in fact walk right down the main street of Hobart, shaking hands and waving to the crowd. As she came by I thought to stick my hand out, but when the time came it seemed a bit forward to extend my hand first, and I hesitated. The moment passed, and I watched her disappear into the distance.

I stocked up on food and supplies at the grocery on the way out of town. French bread, muesli and powdered milk, dry salami, fruit, nuts, and some candles. My first ride out of Hobart took me all the way to the southern trailhead. I swung my backpack onto my shoulders, grabbed the handle of my guitar case, and stepped happily onto the trail.

I strode steadily along through light woods until I came to a pond, where I stripped naked and took a short swim. I sat on a log, letting the sun and the breeze dry me off. I made the first cabin by late afternoon, fixed a simple supper, and walked back to the nearby lake to wash the dishes. When I returned to the cabin, I found the door partly opened, and there was company inside.

I had left a candle burning, and in the dim light I could make out some small, shadowy shapes on the table picking at my dried salami. I thought they were rats, but soon realized that they were opossums! Rather than scolding them, I lit another candle, opened my guitar, and sat down at the table. When they realized that I wasn't going to chase them away, they sat down at the edge of the light and listened my singing, a private concert in the woods. When they'd had enough, they slowly filed out the door, leaving me to my amazement and an early sleep.