

The Australian

## Snag is too many people love Tasmania

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Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

As a resident of a pleasant island at the end of the earth, I am oddly qualified to write about tourism. All my life, the population of my state of Tasmania has hovered about the half-million mark. But last year 3.5 million tourists came here. And although they don't all arrive at the same time, our favourite places are also the tourists' favourites. They have become alarmingly overcrowded.

Right now, many Tasmanians are welcoming the uncongested respite from the worldwide affliction that is politely described as "over-tourism". But will we change our minds if those pesky tourists never come back? That is the question.

On the Hobart waterfront at the height of the season when the cruise liners are in, Tasmanians have found themselves strangers on their own island.

On the popular Salamanca strip just before the COVID-enforced quiet, I estimated we were outnumbered 7:1.

Yes, you really can make such a calculation in a place where we all know one and other. And no, we aren't all related — but we can always recognise people "from away".

Before the virus, Tasmanians were starting to avoid the places they love, such as historic Richmond in the south or Coles Bay on the east coast, and even the Hobart waterfront.

As the locals used to say: "It has got so popular, no one goes there anymore."

Tasmanians now look forward to a glorious interregnum between the raising of the local - lockdown restrictions and the restart of tourism. A breather where we once again have our island to ourselves.

Just like the good old days, before we became such a cool cultural destination. Remember when you mainlanders made jokes about us having two heads?

We laughed it off: "Two heads are better than one."

But, secretly, we were embarrassed about our somnolent little island, where the past was embraced and the future was cold-shouldered. I grew up in that Tasmanian backwater, and as a young journalist I had to leave the island for work.

That remains the case for my kids unless they want to be bar-staff, waiters, waitresses and cooks.

Later, I had indulgent mainland employers who allowed me to live in Tasmania and still travel the world. Well, maybe not so indulgent. I remember a snippet of awkward conversation between 60 Minutes producer John Westacott and Kerry Packer from earlier in this century.

Packer: "He lives in Tasmania? Does that cost me money?"

Westacott: "No, Mr Packer. Charlie works for less pay to cover the cost of flying to Sydney."

Packer: "Ah, he's got money has he."

Westacott: "No, he doesn't have money. He's pretty much the same as any other journo."

Packer: (A lengthy silence while KP processes the alien concept of not being rich anywhere, let alone in Tasmania)

"Well he'll never have money, will he? Not if he lives in f..king Tasmania!"

Up to a point, Mr Packer.

Tasmania has never been a place where ordinary folk would come to pursue riches. We have the lowest incomes in the commonwealth but most of us understand that with a life here we have traded quantity for quality.

Simple intuition taught most of us that on our beaches, and in our lakes, mountains and forests, we were bequeathed wealth beyond riches.

We cleverly thought: "Hey, we might even share our paradise with visitors. Surely tourism would be better than hydro dams and woodchipping mills?"

But what's that old saw about being careful what you wish for?

In recent years, Tasmanians have come to experience the many ways mass tourism devalues our natural wealth. Last summer, Hobart's water supply became critically low. Not because the Derwent ran dry but because the infrastructure built for 200,000 citizens could not cope with a million visitors.

Nor could Hobart's modest streets handle the tourist boom. Big-city traffic jams became common in a small town where once we joked that rush hour went so quickly it took only five minutes.

A major social problem emerged a couple of years ago as people with jobs but nowhere to live became homeless. Rental stock had vanished as investment homes were converted to more lucrative short-term holiday lets.

Even off-season, the accommodation was chockers with visitors to popular trendy events such as the Dark Mofo Winter Feast.

Meanwhile, working families were wintering under canvas in the Hobart Showground.

Let them eat a blood orange and cardamom custard doughnut with a Moo Brew Stout.

The familiar and delightful old Hobart colonial skyline has been changed, not for the better, as another 3000 hotel rooms were added during the past couple of years.

Those new hotels are empty now but there are plans for yet more high-rise accommodation in the sandstone heart of the old town. Many locals agree with Tasmanian prizewinning author Richard Flanagan, who described these buildings as "unremarkable, unfriendly and ugly — they show no respect for our city".

Government and developers love to see cranes dominating the city skyline. It is a tangible sign of progress, and any opposition is dubbed as coming from "the anti-everything brigade".

"To enhance the visitor experience," the Tasmanian government supports the creation of a cable car running across the famous fluted "organ pipes" on the face of Mount Wellington. Despite great controversy, the project will likely be fast-tracked to create much-needed jobs in the uncertain post-COVID world.

Yes, we had long grown sick of tourists milling around annoyingly in the entrances to shops and restaurants, and waddling down the middle of the street as though the joint were Disneyland.

Now we are not quite so sure.

Already, one of Hobart's most celebrated upmarket restaurants, Franklin, has announced it will not reopen.

Others are expected to follow.

It looks as though tourism may be like sugar, tobacco and alcohol: we got by well enough before it arrived, but now maybe we cannot live without it.

The tourism mantra "to enhance the visitor experience" is frequently used in Tasmania to justify even the most clearly inappropriate developments.

But now the COVID hiatus has given destinations the world over the opportunity to reboot. In place of "over-tourism", let's have quality tourism with fewer people spending more money and having a better experience.

At the same time, let's also consider the simple proposition that my town (and yours) should be run primarily for the people who live there rather than for people who don't.