

OPINION

TasWeekend: Road trip reveals state's treasures and charms

CHARLES WOOLEY hits the road and finds the Tasmanian charm of old is still out there and still worth looking for – and it now comes with bonus ice cream.

CHARLES WOOLEY, Mercury

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Cosy Corner beach in the Bay of Fires.

IT was a road trip and purely for fun. I rarely travel for pleasure. “Travel is travail,” I tell friends who quite wrongly think my life is all beer and skittles.

Well, there is some beer and skittles — but also a camera crew, a shooting schedule and a producer along to help me find my notebook and phone as well as the beer and the skittles.

This time, none of that: it's just two blokes, old enough to know better but still young enough not to care that they don't, heading north up the East Coast on the A3.

My companion is an old mate, John Cowley, a national newspaper legend who is now quietly secluded in Tasmania running tourist accommodation in Battery Point, plus the luxurious Blue Lake Lodge on a huge waterfront wilderness estate high on the Central Plateau.

We were both absconding from responsibility and, in no order, I can remember we ate dozens of the best oysters with bread and butter and a squeeze of lemon, all washed down with vodka; we discussed the meaning of life with lobster fishermen in gritty waterfront bars; sampled a few distilleries and checked out the vineyards. Nothing disappointed.

No notes were taken and we played hard, so I am light on detail. But I do remember a very large pig at a place called The Pub in the Paddock, and it was drinking beer from a stubby. I do hope I wasn't looking in the mirror. We also had fun in St Helens in an eccentric little karaoke joint called the Kazbar. I do hope we didn't sing.

We were never lost, heading north and keeping the sparkling blue sea and the blinding white beaches on our right. "This is the best coastal drive in Australia," John told me. "Better than Cairns to Port Douglas because the sea and the skies are always blue and there's no one here." He was right. There was not a figure in the landscape and not another car in sight. This was the road trip of my childhood, and certainly nowadays best enjoyed in winter when the tourist hordes are somewhere else.

It is the Tasmania I love. I like my roads empty, narrow and winding and prefer my bridges humpbacked and with "no passing" signs (please don't write in. I won't read it). Sadly the romantic old bridges are being replaced here as everywhere in order to "improve the tourist experience".

We had glided north through some of the world's best waterfront real estate populated only by sheep. Past lovely Lisdillon and Swansea and Cranbrook. It was all rolling hills, stonewalls, hedgerows and the occasional old stone shepherd's hut perched on the seashore. But where was the shepherd?

I remember the famous English photographer Antony Armstrong-Jones, aka Lord Snowdon, telling me why he fell in love with Tasmania: "Because it has something you just can't find these days. A beautiful gentle landscape with lovely old buildings, but it's so wonderfully devoid of people," he enthused.

"It reminds me of childhood in that better place called the Past. You should treasure and hang on to this. You have no idea how rare and precious your island is in this overcrowded world."

I think some of us are slowly getting the idea, Antony. When we passed through Swansea the radio was talking about military exercises in Queensland and how a Chinese spy ship was shadowing our ships.

A military expert was saying: "You don't spy on your friends, you spy on your enemies — or people you expect to become your enemies."

We agreed that possibly the former mayor of Glamorgan Spring Bay, the late Michael Kent, might have saved us from aggression by getting in early and selling Swansea's Cambria Green estate to the Chinese. After all, a military invasion is unnecessary if we sell it cheaper than it can be conquered.



Kilometres of pristine beaches – and not a single person in sight.

But we kept moving. This wasn't going to be that kind of column. No pictures, no notes, no politics, no trouble. This week I was only looking for the charm, which was readily found in the uncrowded landscapes and on the empty beaches of the East Coast.

Where else can you find the best surf and sand stretching for kilometres and, like Robinson Crusoe, search in vain to find another human footprint? On our way back, the place did get crowded at the ice cream shop at the Coles Bay intersection. The joint was full of Chinese tourists. I don't like queuing, but I had been there some years ago and, although I couldn't remember the flavour, I did remember that the wait had been worth it.

"G'day Charlie, haven't see you for a while," said the ice cream man.

"Hello, yeah, it must've been a couple of years."

"Three years ago to be exact, Charlie, on the 30th of December. You'd been staying with your mate Dr Rob at Coles Bay. What would you like this time?"

"Mate, you've got a hell of a memory. But there's such a big choice here I'm not sure what to choose and you're so busy."

"Do you want what you had last time?"

"I can't remember what it was."

“It was strawberry with a chocolate top and you liked it.”

And I liked it again. Somehow the ice cream man had frozen time. Three years had passed and nothing had changed.

He served up the same delicious scoops of that old Tasmanian charm and familiarity I grew up with.

It's still out there and it's still worth looking for. The ice cream was just a bonus.