

A VISIT DOWN UNDER (Winter/Summer 2024) - June 2024

In late January I met up in Sydney with my daughter Leanne (she having flown west from Michigan and I having flown east from Paris) for a whirlwind three weeks in Australia.



After enjoying handsome historic buildings (we are both architecture buffs) such as the Queen Victoria Building (shopping mall), boat and bus tours, we headed to Tasmania for a week.



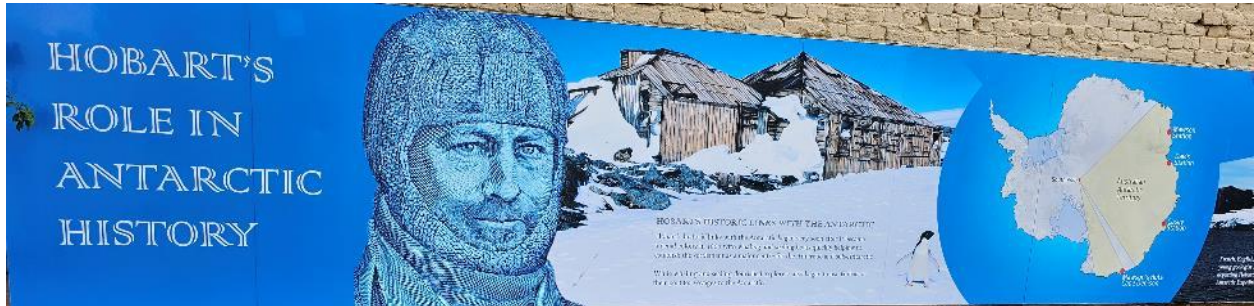
In Sydney's Hyde Park, Moreton Figs are the stately trees and Ibis abounded, even in the midst of downtown.



Immediate first impressions included that I had never before seen most of the vegetation, I had no idea of the wealth of the late 19th C that created such opulent structures, and every hotel room had complimentary tea bags plus milk. Also, the first penal colony was in Sydney, not Tasmania, pontoon airplanes (flying boats) were created there in 1914 at the same time as elsewhere in the world, and I would only be able to buy wine at (not always easy to find) "bottle stores" often with such playful names as the Thirsty Camel. Australian humor continued with the chain of The Grumpy Baker and many of the winery names such as Upside Down and Every Man and His Dog. Happily, sourdough seemed to be the most prevalent bread on offer!

We arrived in Hobart on Australia Day January 26 which marks the day in 1788 when the first fleet arrived in Sydney Cove and raised the Union Flag of Great Britain. At least one sign we saw indicates original people refer to it as Invasion Day.

At Fellini's on the wharf, I had one of the best tomato sauces I have ever had, we heard Scottish bagpipes played by men in kilts and waved goodbye to the Viking cruise ship that had visited for the day. Hobart is the second oldest city in Australia after Sydney, was a whaling capital and remains a resupply and departure point for Antarctica, 42% of which is claimed by Australia.



This sculpture pays homage to the huskies who served the explorers and scientists in Antarctica from 1898 to 1994.



We did a day trip to the Port Arthur penal colony and along the way saw many of the fine structures built by convict labor such as this 1825 stone bridge in Richmond still in use.

We also learned

that convicts were hired out to families as personal servants for which they received their food, clothing and housing. Of the 75,000 “settlers” transported to Tasmania between 1803 and 1853 only 10% ever went back to England.



When visiting the tranquil Port Arthur penal colony (opened in 1830 and closed in 1877) it is difficult to imagine the hell on earth of the place.



Our ticket included a short boat trip on the bay from which you see the Point Puer Boys prison that “welcomed” 3000 boys as young as 9 between 1834 and

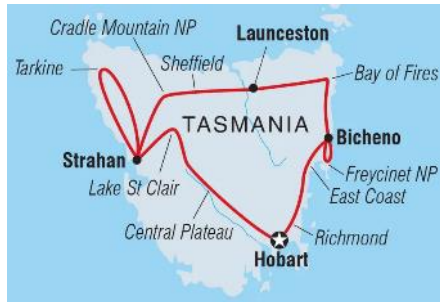
1849, as well as the Isle of the Dead where about 1000 convicts are buried in unmarked graves.

By the time the penal colony closed it was a largely self-sufficient community where prisoners sawed wood, built ships, laid bricks, cut stones and made tiles, shoes, iron castings and clothing, valuable trades for those who lived to see the outside world.



The mystery of the migrations and settlement of Oceania was finally partly solved for me when I learned that the ocean was about 140 meters lower than it is today and thus migrators had much shorter canoe trips between landmasses.

The next day we started our seven day “Highlights of Tasmania” tour with Intrepid Travel. We



were a group of 17 people with a driver/group leader in a comfortable bus purpose-built to handle the terrain and towing a trailer with our luggage. I had no idea that Tasmania is the size of Ireland. And Australia is virtually the size of continental USA but with today’s population of 26 million versus USA of 333 million.

While Hobart is the second driest city in Australia after Adelaide, we spent most of the trip on the windward side of the island. So even though it was summer, the weather was cool with many rainy spells. Leaving Hobart, we traveled the lush Derwent Valley with orchards, sheep, hops and other agriculture before arriving at Mt Field National Park.

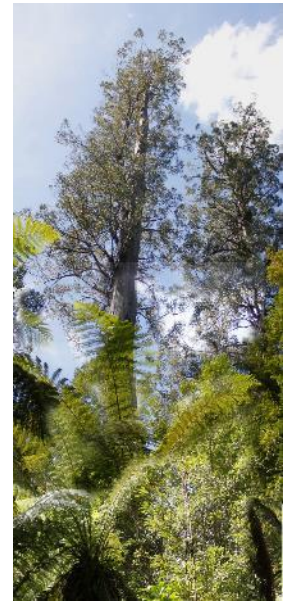


Throughout Tasmania drivers are reminded to reduce speed at night because “roadkill” is a major problem as many of the local species are nocturnal. There is a volunteer veterinary service to help save the animal or dispose of it humanely.



In the parking lot it was raining on one side of the bus and not the other! The walk through this temperate rainforest was reminiscent of the Pacific Northwest but with completely different plant species.

Note the size of fern trees compared to me and at Russell Falls.



We were to learn that while there are 29 main species of Eucalyptus (gum) trees, they self-hybridize creating more than 200 varieties, some occurring in only one small area such as the Forth River. Nine of the species are peppermints. This forest also contained the planet's tallest flowering tree, another eucalyptus variety, this one nicknamed Centurion.

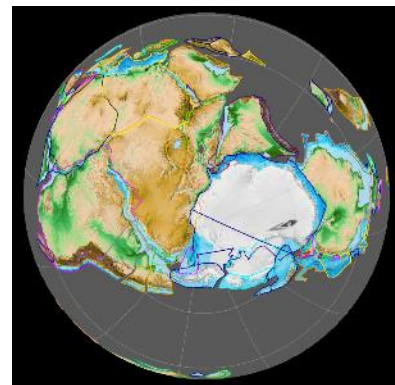
We later contrasted this lush verdant landscape and waterfall walks with the Queenstown denuded landscape where all vegetation was extinguished by the sulfur used in the process of smelting copper from the local mines.



More contrasts would greet us the next day as we encountered 30-meter-high sand dunes amid the rain forests of myrtle, leatherwood and pine trees that also existed in Patagonia and New Zealand millennia ago.



420 million years ago there was a super continent called Gondwana



which consisted of what are now South America, Africa, the Indian subcontinent, Saudi Arabia, Australia and New Zealand. (Picture centered on the south pole attributed to By Fama Clamosa - Own work, CC BY-S).



Instead of a rather rugged hike, Leanne and I chose the option of a boat trip to the Gordon River for the day. The entry into Macquarie Harbour is very tricky as it is only 75 meters wide with strong currents. It was called Hells Gates by the prisoners held on Sarah's Island in

the harbor, considered the harshest penal colony in Australia.



But once inside, the harbor is six times the size of Sydney's. The area is rich with Huon pine which has a very large amount of resin and also is made into beautiful art work. In the 1970's logging it was banned since it takes 1000 years of growth to reach usable lumber size. The cruise commentary was rich on the region's

history, especially the Aboriginal people who survived two ice ages! There is extensive fish farming of ocean trout and salmon with a fast-flowing flushing mix of fresh and salt water. Seals are the major predator.



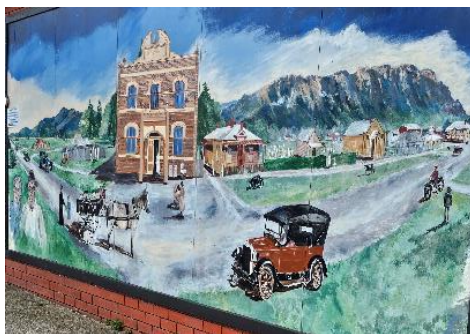
On one of the evenings in Strahan we enjoyed an audience-participation comedy about "The Ship That Never Was". It is based on the story of prisoners on Sarah Island in 1834 who tried to steal the last boat they had built in their shipbuilding yard to escape. We all loved it!



As our group leader is a tree specialist we were immersed in the subject. There is only one native deciduous tree in Australia, the tanglefoot or deciduous beech which grows only in the highland areas of Tasmania. It is more shrub-like than tree-like. We passed through huge areas of replanted forests of two types. One, a genetically modified Eucalyptus

that is ready to harvest for pulp in just 12 years, and another, *pinus radiata*, for lumber. Much of these industrial forest products are for export. The cider gums produce a syrup like maple syrup.

En route to Launceston we stopped in Sheffield, a small town where mural painting began in 1986. In 2003 they added an annual mural street art competition as a way to attract tourists. The nine invited artists' 2023 entries were on display, the theme was Spirit of Adventure. Each year's winner remains on display and the others are for sale just before the following year's competition. In 2007 the Chinese singing idol Eason Chan came to Tasmania to make a promotional DVD. He spray-painted a mural of his flight over Cradle Mtn which thousands of Chinese come each year to see, including some the day we were there. These are a couple of the many murals on the town's building facades.



Smokey Hill was typical of the steep, often narrow and winding roads that our leader skillfully navigated. So named because the trucks' engines smoke on the way up and the brakes smoke on the way down. Oversize loads such as these were a common phenomenon.



Another small town, Derby, became celebrated when starting in 2015 it took advantage of the tailings from its tin mining history to create mountain bike trails and it is now Australia's mountain biking capital attracting 30,000 visitors per year.

In addition to the rich and diverse landscapes, I found the human history equally interesting. For example, in the early 1950's the Hydro Electricity Commission set about electrifying Tasmania. However, postwar Britain could not supply the needed material and so they were forced to buy from Germany and Japan against whom they'd been fighting so



recently. Workers were scarce also, and many came from Europe. This photo from 1953 shows Latvian, Polish, Lithuanian and Dutch men receiving their citizenship at the ceremony honoring both completion of a dam and the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

The tin mining began in 1874 and in addition to mainland Australians, the largest number of workers (~1000) came from China. Although almost all went home, vestiges of their culture have been preserved in the Duan Gi Temple in the museum in Launceston.



A woman of Cork, Ireland descent, who was transported as a child, made her home and raised her family in the Pyengana Valley. When her sons discovered a waterfall, said to be the tallest in Tasmania, they named it Saint Colomba, as she had also been banished from Ireland.



For visitors, these small towns have other things going for them. The institution of bakeries where wonderful baked products (especially the meat pie brought from Britain) to take care of all your breakfast and lunch needs are available as well as town-maintained clean public toilet facilities.

As we prepared to turn the corner from the west coast to the dry east we traversed the Tamar Valley where white opium poppies are legally cultivated providing half the world's supply for medicines. (Photo Driver Dave own work).



We didn't have any visiting time in Launceston which is a port where the junction of the North and South Esk rivers form the Tamar River. We stayed in the Penny Royal hotel, a beautiful stone complex originally built in 1840 as a corn mill and moved, along with its windmill, stone by stone from a location 54 km away to create the hotel.



As we departed for Bicheno we visited Cataract Gorge where I did not make the walk from the parking area (near the swimming pool) to the suspension bridge (stock photo Bob T).

However, we did see wombats there in the wild and had previously seen the echidna which, like the platypus is a monotreme, or egg-laying mammal. It has quills somewhat like a porcupine. The wombat is a marsupial like the kangaroo although with its pouch in the rear of its body.



Then the magnificent Bay of Fires of colorful orange granite rocks following which we stopped at a farm's pond to see platypuses. It turns out the males have a strong venom, but as they were in the water we weren't going to be close to them, so our leader didn't mention that detail! The platypus has a duck's bill, a

beaver's tail, and an otter's feet.



The coastline had dazzling white (quartz) sand beaches and clear turquoise waters.

That evening arriving in Bicheno at sunset we hoped to see the tiny "fairy" or blue penguin as it leaves the ocean to return to its nest and young. However, as it was molting season, they remained reclusive as they are very vulnerable. We did see one running across the road and later



on, a group of them in a pool at Kangaroo Island Wildlife Park.

We were, however, able to revisit the bay in day light with its dramatic view and blowhole.



The day trip from Bicheno was to Freycinet National Park. However, I and one other tour member realized we weren't able to do any of the walks so

we stayed behind. The Rainy Day Ice Creamery, Puzzle Shop and Laundromat in Bicheno provided a fascinating non-nature diversion.

Our final (and very full) day began with a visit to East Coast Natureworld, a sanctuary dedicated to rehabilitation and conservation of Tasmania's wildlife. We arrived in time for the morning feeding where we watched five Tasmanian Devils compete and tear apart a fresh wallaby leg consuming everything including



the bone!

Historically, the devils cleared the roads of roadkill, and it was when this wasn't happening that it was discovered the population was suffering from facial tumor disease, a transmissible type of cancer. This is decimating the population. One isolated population (that feared crossing a bridge) was spared.



We learned that each animal has unique markings, like our fingerprint. They mate once a year in March and after a 3-week gestation the females may lay up to 50 eggs, but as there are only four teats in her pouch that is how many will survive. She carries them in her pouch for about five months.

After spending a lot of time getting to know the devils, we met our first kangaroos, a mother and her Joey.



A number of other local species are housed here such



as quolls, wombats, owls and white wallabies. The latter



occur in greater numbers due to fewer predators than on the mainland.

We drove down the sunny dry east coast stopping in a couple more small towns before reaching Hobart and our final stop – a drive up to the 1200-meter summit of Mt Wellington. It was a very



windy day and as the temperature dropped one degree centigrade for every 100 meters of elevation gain it was very cold and almost impossible to stand in the howling wind at the top! However, the views were magnificent.

The rock formations and the twisted tree trunks gave me a feeling of being in Jurassic Park.



We headed again to the wharf for our dinner that evening and saw Nicko's cruise ship Vasco du Gamo departing. It is on a six-month around the world cruise. I was moved by the sculpture Footsteps Towards Freedom (artist Rowan Gillespie, Ireland) commemorating that from 1803 to 1853, almost 13,000 convict women together with 2,000 children arrived in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania).



The next morning before flying back to Sydney I had a chance to enjoy some of Hobart's urban art and historic buildings.

After spending the night at Sydney Airport's Pullman Hotel, we flew to my next priority destination, Uluru, formerly known as Ayers Rock. My objective was to better understand Aborigine history and culture, having admired their art over the years.

After spending the night at Sydney Airport's



First a bit of pre-history. The Aborigines of 65,000 years ago were originally Melanesians. As the sea was a lot lower, Australia and Indonesia were attached. Kangaroos were 3 meters tall, wombats were the size of rhinoceros etc. There are

Aborigine communities throughout Australia, the one in Uluru dates from about 36,000 years ago. Each has its own language and customs.



In 1873 the explorer William Gosse named Ayers Rock for the sponsor of his expedition. Uluru is 1142 feet high above ground but extends four to five times that in depth. It is officially the world's largest monolith.

Nearby Kata Tjuta was named "The Olgas" after the then-queen of Wurttemberg. It is sacred for male ceremonies.

The National Park of 512 square miles was created in 1958 and not until 1985 was a community of Aborigines permitted to return to live on their sacred ancestral land. When western scientists came, they discovered the depth of these original people's knowledge of plants and survival mechanisms.



The pre-dawn walk was magical as the mountains' colors changed dramatically with the changing light. The sun rose as we were having our continental breakfast.

Some plants whose roots go deep enough to survive in the desert might be 1000 years old. Many of the plants require burning to accomplish new growth which was done about one year ago. This was an



unusually wet year so the vegetation was quite green.

This is the tree the explorers called an oak. I have no idea why since it doesn't look anything like an oak, is not deciduous and is

actually a eucalyptus.

There is a third mountain here, Mt Conner, to the south, that was sacred to women. It is owned by a cattle family so there are no visitors allowed.



It is nicknamed Fooluru as many people mistake this mesa for the monolith Uluru.



Our guide told us one of the stories, of a shape-changing woman who has a sense that her nephew is in mortal danger. She goes through various efforts to protect him, many of which are illustrated by fissures or patterns on the rock.

This panel summarizes it.



We reached the water hole surrounded by completely different vegetation just as the sun was high enough to illuminate it.



illuminate it.

On our return we saw paintings under a rock overhang that primarily tell stories of hunting and travel. The most recent of these have been dated back 5000 years.



hid to wait for animals' return from They only ever took the final animal wouldn't be missed enough for the return to the water hole.



Nearby was the area where young hunters the water hole. in line hoping it animals to not

The handsome ironwood benches have been sat upon by many famous people including the Dalai Lama, Popes and Princess Diana. You can do a walk of 12 km around the base of the rock but on that day it was to be closed from 2 pm on due to high temperatures. It was 110° F outside at our hotel.



The north side of the rock tells their creation story and is still sacred so as we drove that side after our walk no photos were permitted. The rock was closed to climbers in 2019 and it has taken years to remove the trash left behind by them.

The balance of nature here is very intricate. The red kangaroo (about the size of a human) had left the area due to a prolonged drought when the Dingo was introduced from India. The Dingo has the same diet and so fit in well. However, in 2002-3 there was a huge fire that decimated the wildlife. Since the Anangu Aborigines had been forced to leave, no one had been burning with the required timing so the ground was covered with huge amounts of accumulated fuel.

Another not so successful introduction was the camel, which was brought, primarily from India, to transport explorers' expedition supplies and later to serve remote settlements. Called "ships of the desert" they can go 7-10 days without water. There are now 1-1.5 million of them and Emiratis come to buy them for use at home. The problem is that they eat the woody shrubs that take generations to grow. To put distances in perspective, the Australian outback is twice the size of India.



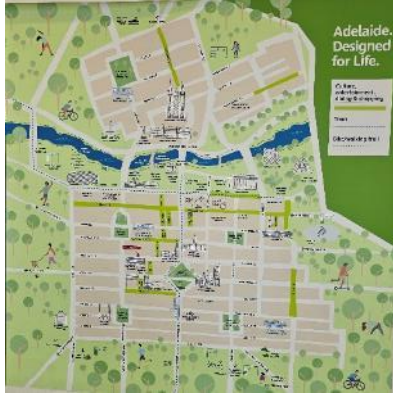
These are ghost gum trees planted in our hotel courtyard which are not indigenous to this area

In the evening, I went to the Wintjiri Wira (meaning beautiful view out to the horizon in local language) spectacle. It takes place on a large viewing platform in the desert with Uluru in front of you. The program I bought included a cocktail with hors d'oeuvres followed by a picnic hamper of dishes made from local ingredients, plant and animal, while watching the sun set. It was altogether too much food and I took a doggy bag back to the hotel. The wine flowed freely.

Once the sun set the "show" began. The ancestral Mala story was told in both English and local language while 1100 red, blue and green drones illustrated the story against the night sky. In the story I learned that the women were left to guard Uluru during the men's travels. This production only opened last year and was years in the creation between the Anangu and RAMUS media architecture studio. Photography was not permitted so these photos are from their brochure.



The next stop on our itinerary was Adelaide where we based for five days to enjoy visits to Kangaroo Island and wineries. The city itself turned out to be very interesting and the free circulator buses made it easy to explore. One caveat, the entire bus system stopped running at 7 pm. So, dinner needed to be early (as we had learned was the norm) or close to the hotel. It was the first non-convict city and was planned with a grid surrounded by 1000 acres of parkland. It



hosts major festivals of the southern hemisphere such as the fringe festival which attracts more than a million visitors. It is also more affordable than either Melbourne or Sydney.

South Australia was the first place to give Aborigines the vote from the founding of its Parliament in 1857, and then to women in 1894. These did not survive the forming of the Australian Federation. Marijuana growth was made legal for personal consumption in 1987 and homosexuality was decriminalized in 1975. Originally founded on principles of religious freedom, it was known as the City of Churches due to the many faiths represented.

Its economic stability has varied widely over history although today employment is largely anchored in health care and social services with an important presence in Australia’s defense and space industries. The covered central market is lively and has a broad cross section of food products available.



The Rundle Mall pedestrian street serves as the shopping “high street” with some fun sculptures and historic buildings.



Highlights are Adelaide Arcade and Salvador Dali’s Triumphal Elephant.





The day trip to Kangaroo Island organized by Sea Land is long and fully packed. It would have been better to do an overnight as a few on the tour did. The bus departs at 6:30 am (for a 9:30 am ferry) driving the beautiful Fleurie peninsula on route to Cape Jarvis. The land is rolling farmland with cattle and sheep and our informative guide Jenny would be with us all day.

The crossing to Penneshaw takes about 45 minutes. Interestingly this is not a double-ended ferry, so the vehicles (big trucks included) had to back out at the other side!

We then did a circuit, driving about 200 km on the island. There are only 3 towns on the island and a total



permanent population of about 4500 people.

About half the island suffered from a historic bush fire in 2022 and the vegetation is just returning. Much wildlife was also lost. As we drove, we could see the regrowth surrounding the skeletons of tree trunks and when walking admired the amazing diversity and beauty of the plants.

Forty-six species are endemic to the island and as this has been an unusually wet year, greenery was abundant.



European settlement began in 1802 with English, French and American sealers and whalers. There were no native people on the island at the time although they had lived there up until 2000 years previously. However, aboriginal women, who had been kidnapped from Tasmania and South Australia by European sealers, practiced traditional land management and hunting. The town of Parndana was created after WWII as a soldier resettlement scheme (each family was given 1200 acres of farmland) so between 1948 and 1954 the population of the island doubled.

The kangaroos here are a sub-species of the Western grey, with a dark brown, thicker, warmer coat due to the arctic winds. As it was summer, their days were spent mostly in the shade of shrubs, but we did see a few grazing in grassy fields and at the end of the day we visited a wildlife park of those raised by hand when their mothers were killed on the roads. The eagle is



their only natural predator, they only live to about 10 years in the wild, twice that long in captivity. It was really fun to hand feed them at the sanctuary. They are very gentle when holding your hand, despite their claws. And they relate strongly to humans. Apparently even in the wild this

species is less wary of humans than others.

Honey from the Ligurian bee (that has never been cross-bred) is a prized product from the island. Also distilled eucalyptus oil that has been an Australian export since the mid 1800's. We also saw hair sheep, which shed their "fur", increasingly bred because of the lack of sheep shearers.

Our first stop was Seal Bay which is now part of the national marine parks system. 85% of South Australia's sea life is found nowhere else on the planet. The sea lions forage for fish, shellfish, squid and octopus as far as 100 km south towards the arctic for 2-3 days at a time. Upon return they are exhausted and simply rest and recover on the beaches. We were there at mating season



so there was an additional dynamic occurring. The females don't mate until they are about six years old. The pregnancy lasts about 18 months. After birthing and 3-4 months on land she is again pregnant but when her prior pup goes to sea at about 9 months it is using more energy than it can capture for food so she is again nursing it and the new pregnancy goes on hold until the pup is

independent at about one year. The pup eats soft fleshy things until about 18 months old when rocks in their digestive system allow them to digest crustaceans. Sharks are the primary

predators. About one third of pups die before they are weaned. The population at Seal Bay is still declining. Interestingly, female kangaroos have a similar pregnancy cycle.



The males' color darkens as they age and by about 9 years they develop the golden ruff that caused the Europeans to name them sea lions. Females weigh about 100 kg, males 350-400! By 200 years ago they and the fur seals had been hunted for their pelts and oil almost to extinction by the settlers.

The coastal scenery is dramatic and we stopped at what are known as Remarkable Rocks, the result of an up thrusting and sea/wind action over 500 million years. As the photos show, the elements continue to erode them, visibly



even in our lifetime.

The final stop was at KI Wildlife Park where we not only fed the kangaroos but learned about several other species. For example, the Australian pelican has the longest beak of any bird and can stay aloft for up to 24 hours. However, as they can't dive, a group of them drive fish into shallow water where they can capture them.

And finally, that symbol of Australia, the koala. While appearing very cuddly, they are actually shy and wary of humans and scooted up the tree when approached.

They have virtually no predators as their flesh tastes so strongly of eucalyptus – the



leaves are their diet. They sleep 20 hours per day and after having also been hunted almost to extinction for their fur, the population was rebounding before the fire when they were again decimated. However, they are rebounding successfully in the wild and their numbers may have to again be controlled through sterilization programs if they begin to exceed the available habitat.

They are indigenous to Australia and were brought to Kangaroo Island in 1920. We did also see a few in the “wild” near other stops we made.



Our next day trip was a Barossa Valley wine tasting, visiting three distinctively different family wineries. As we passed Jacob’s Creek we learned they produce in a day what the typical family winery produces in a year. At our first stop, Chateau Yaldara, in the Adelaide Hills, they are



experimenting with a range from sparkling wines to tawnies. They have a program where you can buy your tawny by the barrel, either pre-aged or you age it yourself (A\$600 vs A\$700). They plant their vines east to west due to wind conditions rather than the usual north to south for capturing sun. They also retain more of the leaves to protect the fruit. Due to their wide variety of soil types, they can produce virtually unlimited flavor combinations.

We took a break in Tanunda (Aboriginal for water hole), one of the towns settled

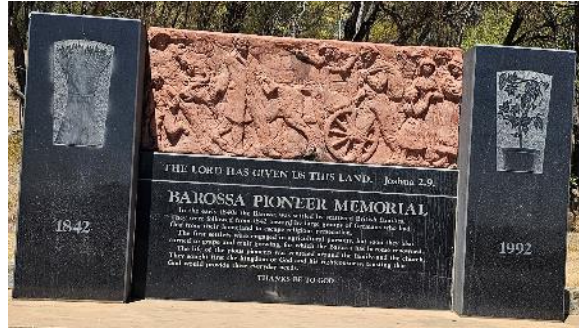
by Prussians in the 1800’s when escaping religious persecution. Brown’s donuts are famous, the local drink is farmers’ union iced milk-coffee and chocolate covered fruit is a regional must-have.



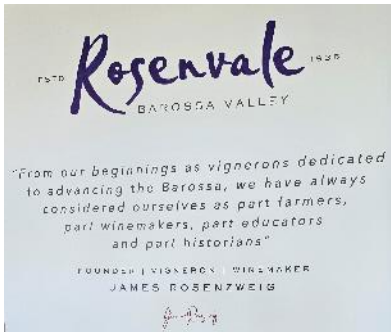
Our second winery and lunch stop was Saltrams where we had a particularly personable host.



At a sculpture garden there was a nice view of the valley and a memorial to the pioneers of the area.



The final stop of the day was Rosenvale Winery whose founder, James Rosenzweig considers himself first a scientist who experiments with every aspect of grape growing and secondarily a winemaker. Their presentation is highly educational. In addition to their superb wines, we loved the original artwork created for their labels.



Before leaving Adelaide I, of course, had to document some of its' excellent urban art.



Our next, and final stop was Melbourne where again we were based at the entrance to China Town, and it was Lunar New Year! So, our district was very lively with music and entertainment long into the night.



After Sunday mass at St Patrick's we headed to the enormous, 17-acre Queen Victoria Market for some final gift buying.



We then spent the rest of the afternoon doing both the up-river and down-river cruises. We learned history, saw numerous sports stadiums, buildings ranging from high rises to banana-ripening sheds, a major container port (handling 1/3 of Australia's container traffic) and a Ferris wheel that was currently for sale!



You could write a whole article just on the stories of the bridges, as many people have. But I found most interesting that the vertical elements in the Bolte street bridge are purely for decoration.



The free trolley system made getting around the central city very easy. And I enjoyed the commentary on the historic circle line trolley.



The central district was astonishingly a No Smoking zone!

Leanne and I explored laneways and as usual took way too many photos of beautiful historic

facades!

Of course, I always have to document some of the urban art.





Station.

I spent much of my last day in two large Aboriginal Art museums adjacent to the huge and magnificent Flinders Street Railway



One night we dined at Stalactite owned by the same Greek family for three generations. In a small-world situation the chef, Dimitra Milios is from Kalamata, where on my Intrepid Travel Greek Food Trip we visited our guide Sylvia's restaurant family.

We know that our itinerary vastly short-changed what Melbourne and Sydney have to

offer for which I offer apologies to my Melbourne and Sydney-area Australian friends! However, in combination with the >25 or so books I have been reading from the American Library in Paris, I feel I have a much better appreciation of Australia and Australians' uniqueness, despite the limited regions we actually visited.

Thank you to all of you who have been encouraging me to make this trip!

