



Four days of bush walking, mountain climbing and wombat spotting in Tassie's alpine country rounded off with pancake guzzling and belly laughs in Tasmazia.



Cradle Mountain

Wombats, Wilderness and Wonderful Wackiness

Words: Fiona Lohrbacher
Images: Juergen Lohrbacher

When you step into Cradle Valley you step out of reality into a timeless world where the internet and mobile phones don't exist (but fortunately flushing toilets do if, like me, you have a little person who refuses to use 'black-hole' toilets).

It's a fantasy world where wombats rule; where the only sound is the harsh cry of the currawong or the distant yodel of triumph from a hiker on Cradle summit. Where carnivorous plants hide, like trolls, beneath bridges. Where real trolls seem to lurk in the eerie green twilight of the Waldheim rainforest and giant spiders seem to hide in the shadows amongst the gnarled, twisted, moss-covered tree mutants. This is the glorious land of Cradle Mountain that inspired Austrian Gustav Weindorfer's dream of a national park, a dream that came true in 1971.

In 1912, Gustav built the Waldheim chalet, his home in the wilderness. The Waldheim huts, behind the reconstructed chalet, were our home in the wilderness for four days. The

huts are basic, but warm and comfortable. The water from the taps is peat-brown, icy and sweet as nectar. The alpine air is clear and so fresh that your body demands deep breaths. Never before had breathing been such a pleasure. And never before had I been so glad of my thermal underwear, despite the bright March sunshine. On cold nights it was a little wearing to drag myself out of a snug, warm bed to go out to the toilet block, but there were rewards; the breathtaking vista of zillions of stars in a sky free from light pollution, and the quoll that ran through my torch beam was an added bonus.

There is wildlife aplenty at Waldheim. Our nearest neighbours were a family of wallabies that grazed behind our hut, a pair of possums that partied on our roof, and a wombat that left his calling card, distinctive square-shaped poos, outside our front door. Wombats are justifiably proud of their scats, it's not every animal that does square poo. They like to leave them in prominent places and pile them in artistic sculptures.

The buttongrass plains of Cradle Valley are wombat territory and dusk is the time to get up close and personal with them. The boardwalk from Waldheim to Ronny Creek is Wombat Central and it wasn't just the kids that got excited as we spotted our first wombat in the distance. It's a rule that the first wombats we spot are always the most distant and the further we walked the closer they got until finally we came across a large fellow chewing grass right beside the boardwalk. Camera in hand, I snuck stealthily up on him but, obviously used to the paparazzi, he chewed on unconcerned, even when my feet were right next to his head.

A little way above the boardwalk a mother wombat napped outside her burrow while her energetic youngster tried his darndest to get at the teat underneath her. But she wasn't budging, even as her offspring wriggled under her leg. When we turned our attention to this cute display, our yellow-toothed friend put his chin up on the boardwalk and glared at us, as if to say, 'What about me then, eh?' When we finally moved on, so did he, as if realising his 15 minutes of fame were over.

We did have human neighbours too, fortunately. For when I unpacked my carefully organised provisions, enough to ensure we wouldn't have to venture out into reality for the duration of our stay, I discovered a devastating oversight – no teabags. Suddenly our four days of freedom had turned into a four-day sentence of tealelessness. So next morning I went on the scrounge. The inmates of the next hut were moving out and I humbly asked if they had any teabags to spare. 'Have you got any Tim-Tams to swap?' was the jovial reply, followed by, 'Do you like Earl Grey?' Well, Earl Grey is only hubby's favourite brew so, with many grateful thanks, I

returned in triumph to prepare the morning cuppa and salvage the trip.

The mountain wears many faces. In shy vein it peeps coyly out from behind wispy shreds of cloud. On 'I want to be alone' days it retreats invisibly behind a solid wall of cloud, disappointing camera-toting day-trippers. In winter, its jagged, rugged peaks jutting through the snow look forbidding and unwelcoming. But on its friendly days, the picture postcard perfection of its silhouette against a cornflower-blue sky inspires the energetically disposed to scale its magnificent heights. And, as the Tasmanian weather is predictably unpredictable, you strike when the iron is hot.

From Waldheim to Cradle Summit is four hours of steady up and, after three of them, ten year-old Ahren was finished, his legs refusing to go any further. Kitchen Hut at the base of the summit provided a welcome rest. At first sight you wonder about the sanity of the architect. Above the ordinary front door of the two-storey hut an extra door hangs, poised between heaven and earth, like an entrance for angels or fairies. But a snow shovel next to the door hints at harsh winters, when the lower level disappears beneath two metres of snow and the door hanging in the ether is the only entrance.

This is where the track disappears and the final ascent to the summit involves clambering over huge dolerite boulders. Magically, Ahren's energy returned. Revitalised, he sprang onto the rocks like a young mountain goat, happily scrambling ahead of his big sister who proceeded in a far more cautious manner, painfully aware of the long drops between the boulders.

The view from the 1545-metre summit is the reward for the hours of hard slog. It's not so much a view as an alternate reality. As you gaze

out over an endless relief map of the glaciated landscape you know how Jack's giant felt as he surveyed the world beneath his beanstalk.

This magical world also offers easy walks for the short of leg or breath and, while the energetic members of the family tackled the mountain, the five-year-old and I enjoyed a pleasant stroll along the Cradle Valley boardwalk. Here we disturbed a city of skinks sunning themselves on this bright autumn day. The sunlight was magnified by the reflections of 1000 natural mirrors, the shiny hard pandani leaves, the bleached boards of the boardwalk and each tiny drop of moisture that sparkled like a diamond on the coral leaf ferns. I was aware of the irony of needing my sunnies while still wearing my thermals. That's Tassie for you.

Next day, I learned two important lessons on our walk around Dove Lake. Lesson one – don't sit under a tree with a currawong in it, ugh! However, currawong poop, being a collection of chewed seeds, is a darned sight easier to brush off than say, seagull poop. Lesson two – don't wear thermals when the walk requires a bit of energetic up and the sun is splitting the sky. Phew!

Leaving the Cradle of Heaven to head home, we were reluctant to re-enter reality so we headed straight for The Promised Land, just up the road from Paradise and Nowhere Else. For this is the home of Tasmazia, the most magical place in Tassie.

We stopped only to take pictures of one of those echidnas that Tourism Tasmania obviously put along roadsides specifically for tourists to photograph and arrived at Tasmazia in time for breakfast. Eating at Tasmazia's Pancake Parlour is serious business. The Pancake Parlour makes the biggest, thickest, fluffiest pancakes, I kid

Clockwise from far left: Sitting on top of the world – Ahren Lohrbacher surveys the view from Cradle Summit. ❖ Welcome to wombat territory – a denizen of Cradle Valley's buttongrass plains. ❖ Tasmanian pandani stand sentinel over Waldheim chalet, Gustav Weindorfer's home in the clouds. ❖ Doorway to nowhere – Amber Lohrbacher explores Kitchen Hut, Cradle Plateau.





Clockwise from top left:

Cracking up - Mia Lohrbacher balances a house on her head in the Village of Lower Crackpot, Tasmazia. ❖ The end in sight. Ahren Lohrbacher nears Cradle Summit. ❖ Smile for the camera. A baby echidna poses for the tourists near Cradle Mountain.

you not, and it's a challenge to finish just one plate-sized pancake covered with ice-cream, wafers and chocolate sauce. We'd brought our appetites, but even our hungry kids had to admit defeat.

Tasmazia has been deservedly voted among the world's top 10 family attractions. Eight gloriously crazy mazes await to confound visitors as well as the wonderfully wacky Cubby Town and the marvellously loony Village of Lower Crackpot. We split up and plunged straight into the Great Maze, reputedly the world's largest hedge maze. Our goal was the Three Bears Cottage but there was lots of fun to be had getting there. A surprise waits in every dead end, including wacky signs to crack you up. My favourite was: 'Before you criticise someone walk a mile in his shoes – that way you'll be a mile away, and you'll have his shoes.' Red-spotted fairy fungi nestled in the shelter of the maze's high hedges, proclaiming, 'Yes, Tasmazia is Fairyland.'

Cubby town is kids' paradise and what grown-up can resist revisiting their childhood and crouching down to enter the cubby fire-station, schoolhouse etc. The Spooky House is only for the daring and a great place for prankster dads to sneak ahead and wait in the pitch dark to give their kids an extra scare. But terrified children bite and theirs weren't the only screams coming from the dark!

In the Crackpot Correction Centre the kids had lots of fun being guillotined, stretched on the rack, burnt at the stake, pilloried and locked in the stocks. A totter across the balance maze led to the whimsically wacky world of Lower Crackpot. This is the most awesome model village in the world ever! No quaint replica English cottages here. Every crazy house in Lower Crackpot is a monument to the Laird's wicked sense of humour. Funny it is, politically correct it ain't. Just try not to chuckle at the remains of Nancy the Witch, wrapped around the pole she crashed into, or the menu on the Roadkill Café.

On a more serious note, the memorial to asylum seekers reveals the compassionate, non-conformist hearts of the Laird and Lady of Lower Crackpot. It's a gentle reminder of the real world we're heading back to. Thank goodness we're going back with full tummies. ❖

FACT FILE



Getting there

Cradle Mountain is 85 km or 1.5 hrs from Devonport, 181 km or 2.5 hrs from Launceston via the Bass Highway and 4 hrs 20 mins from Hobart via the Midland and Bass Highways.

Where to camp

Waldheim Cabins, 8 bunk cabins, 4–8 berth, shared toilets. To book visit www.parks.tas.gov.au or telephone (03) 6491 2271. No dogs allowed.

Discovery Holiday Parks, Cradle Mountain, cabins, caravan and camping sites, www.discoveryholidayparks.com.au/tas or telephone 1800 068 574. No dogs allowed.

If walking the 6-day Overland Track, huts and tent sites are available. Bookings are necessary between October 1st and May 31st. www.parks.tas.gov.au

Park fees apply for entry to the Cradle Mountain Lake-St Clair National Park and are available from the Cradle Mountain Visitor Centre.

When to go

October through to May are the warmer and therefore most popular months. School holidays are the busiest times with January the busiest month. February is usually the warmest month in Tasmania. If you want snow, then July–September offers the best chance.

According to the Parks & Wildlife Service, Tasmania, "The weather is at its most stable during late summer and autumn. The Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park has a high annual rainfall, and sleet, snow and driving winds can occur at any time of the year. However, bad weather should not deter the well-prepared visitor as the sheltered walks in the valleys, and waterfalls, are at their most spectacular in periods of wet weather."

Further information

Cradle Mountain National Park information www.parks.tas.gov.au

Tasmazia – The Promised Land, 45 minutes from Cradle Mountain, www.tasmazia.com.au, (03) 6491 1934, open all year, Pancake Parlour is closed Christmas day.



© Commonwealth of Australia (Geoscience Australia) 2012