

Ian Hughes

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# Across the Wide Brown Land

Tasmania 2007



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# Preface

One of the problems with the working life, when your employment comes with predetermined vacation periods, is the probability that when you're going on holidays so is everyone else.

So, as we reach the ends of our working lives, we look forward to getting away for a little break when everyone else (or nearly everyone else) is at work.

Of course, while you're actually in the workforce whatever special deals are on offer never coincide with the times when you (and everyone else) would be able to take advantage of them.

Having got our few commitments out of the way in early November, Madam and I had decided to head off somewhere for a little holiday sometime before school breaks up for 2007.

The only question was where to go.



Perth? Adelaide? Somewhere else?

A reluctance to allow travel arrangements coincide with electoral events meant we would be waiting till early December before we headed off.

While there was an awareness of the impending launch of Tiger Airways, we hadn't made any definite plans when 'Er Indoors went for a little web surf in mid-November.

And there it was. Mackay to Melbourne. Direct. No stopovers or transfers. \$9.95.

That sounded good.

The next issue was where to go from Melbourne, assuming there were further flights in the same (or a similar) price bracket.

Perth? One cheap fare left, and regular pricing for the return leg? Try another destination.

So how about Launceston?

There and back for another \$9.95 each?

It looked like that was where we're headed.

That explains why, on the last day of November, we were heading south through torrential rain which, unsurprisingly to observers of Bowen's rainfall patterns started precisely at Longford Creek.

We were bound for a rendezvous with the Better Five-Eighths of the Cox Combo.

She had generously offered a spot to park the car and a lift from there to the airport.

# Getting There

### Friday, 30 November

Arriving at the airport, we found, unsurprisingly, those involved with the check-in procedure were still learning the ropes.

When boarding commenced, I noticed the luggage being loaded via the old conveyor belt, rather than stowed in one of those handy containers which slot neatly into the underbelly of the modern airliner.

Maybe delays associated with baggage handling created the need to fill in time.

Or perhaps it was a fledgeling airline setting out to reassure travellers they were in the hands of seasoned professionals.

Whatever the reason was, we ended up with a lengthy address from the flight deck before the aircraft finally departed.

That combination of factors meant touchdown in Melbourne some three hours later was fashionably late.

When we arrived in the Baggage Claim area, we found ourselves in a zone that bore more resemblance to a zoo enclosure than the Arrivals area of a contemporary airport.

Still, for \$9.95 you don't go 'round expecting the Palazzo Versace.

Once we'd located the luggage, it was time to board the Skybus in search of the accommodation.

Melbourne's Skybus takes you to Southern Cross which then links you to tram, rail, coach and shuttle bus options.

That must be close to the optimum means of transferring arrivals from the airport to their eventual destinations with minimal fuss.

Despite the relatively spur-of-the-moment decision to head towards Launceston, the travel and accommodation arrangements were the result of extensive and detailed research by 'Er Indoors.

While the Atlantis may not have been exactly two hundred metres from Southern Cross, it was within comfortable walking distance with an outlook across the Telstra Dome.

Our plan to head into the city for dinner went out the window and inquiries at the front desk indicated a reasonable Italian eatery on a nearby corner.

An hour or so later, after a risotto, it was time to think about post-prandial refreshment.

Further inquiries resulted in a visit to an outlet a hundred metres from the hotel, and a bottle of Coonawarra Cabernet provided a suitable opportunity to reflect on the day's adventures and ponder future travel plans.

### **Saturday, 1 December**

The flight to Launceston departed mid-afternoon, and Madam had an opportunity to indulge in retail therapy before lunch and the transfer to Tullamarine where we had another delayed departure.

Launceston Airport is comfortably south of the city itself.

Once negotiations associated with car rental had been completed, we headed a little further south to the accommodation at historic Clarendon House. It's one of Australia's great Georgian Regency houses, located on the banks of the South Esk River - the river that runs through The Gorge in Launceston.

The mansion itself was built in the 1830s for James Cox, a grazier, merchant, and son of the man who supervised building the first road over the Blue Mountains in New South Wales.

On arrival, we found a wedding reception in progress. We decided the festivities did not need to be disturbed by mainlanders in search of their overnight accommodation.

A phone call was all we needed to catch up with the proprietor, locate the accommodation and arrange for dinner and a bottle of wine.

Dinner was a steak dish and a seafood platter, both part of wedding catering arrangements. The request for a bottle of something red resulted in a Yalumba Y Series Merlot at a standard mark-up. A less considerate operator might have sent us a bottle of something more expensive, with a more extravagant mark-up.

The accommodation in a cottage that dates back well into the century before last was comfortable. It delivered a good night's sleep utterly undisturbed by revelry occurring across the paddock.



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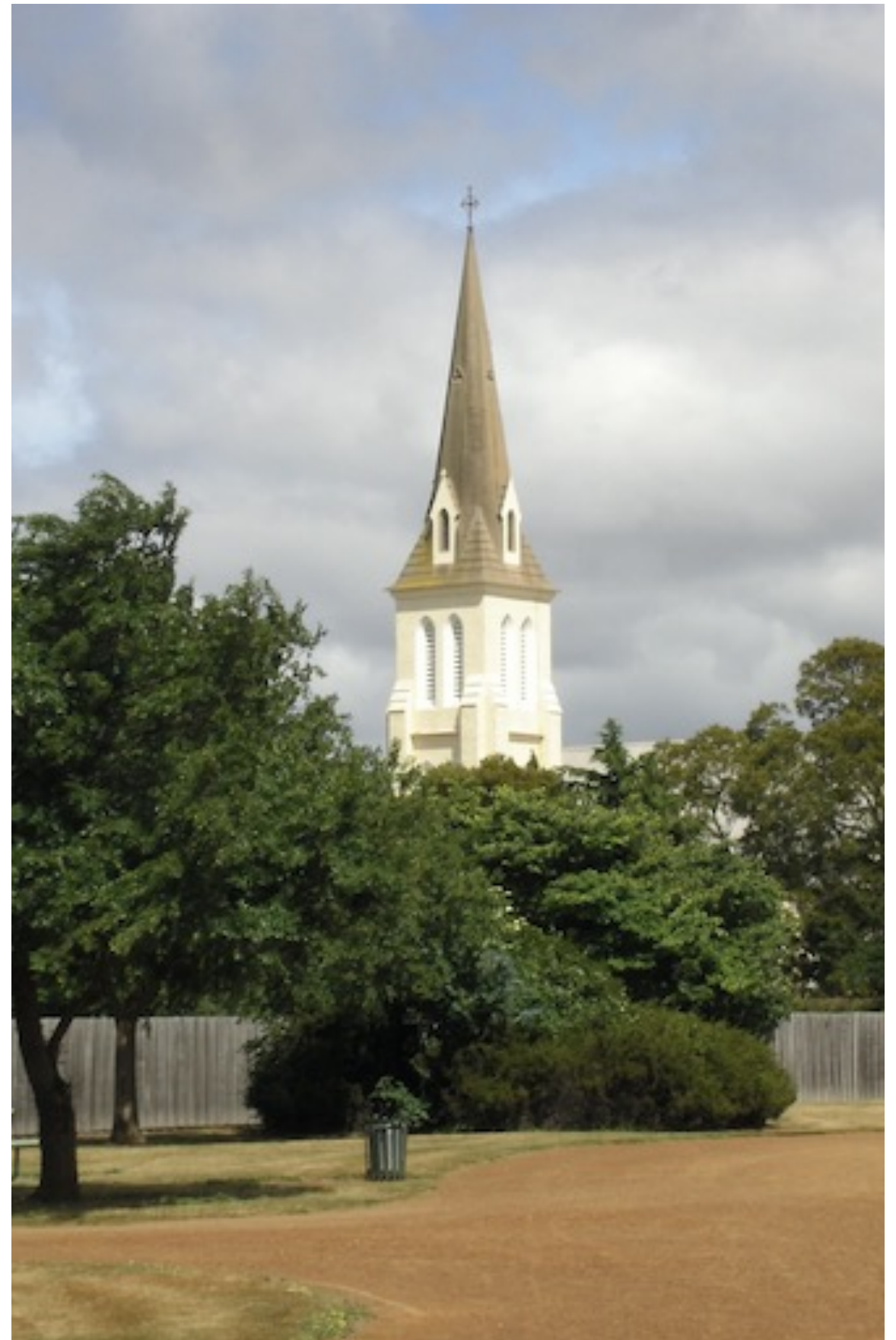
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## **Sunday, 2 December**

On Sunday morning, once breakfast was out of the way, we had time for a stroll around the grounds and the outbuildings. The latter include a dairy, butcher's shop, a bakehouse, a large stable, a gardener's cottage and a walled inner garden. Once that was out of the way, we retraced our steps to [Evandale](#) since Madam wanted to take a walk through the Sunday Markets.

[Evandale](#) is a historic town with heritage buildings in what looks to be close to original condition.

After a lap around the markets, we headed along the main street, past art galleries, antique shops and craft boutiques before hoofing it back to the car for an excursion in search of a historic bridge or two.











We stopped briefly in [Campbell Town](#), but since the bridge was a fair step away from where we could park the car, we headed on to Ross.

The main road between Hobart and Launceston bypasses [Ross](#) but, turning off the highway we came to the third highlight in twenty-four hours.

It seems [Ross](#) has not been adversely affected by modern tourism. The town is beautifully preserved.

While we were by no means the only tourists rubbernecking around the relics, there was plenty of elbow room. What brought most of them to Ross was, of course, the convict-built stone bridge dating back to 1836.









It might be the third oldest bridge still in use in Australia, but the highlight is the intricately carved work on both sides of the bridge.

Just spectacular.

It's no wonder the work won the stonemason Daniel Herbert a free pardon from his sentence. After a wander around the

village the most straightforward choice for lunch seemed to be a scallop pie from the bakery - an option we'd heartily recommend to anyone else visiting the vicinity.

With lunch out of the way we headed northwards and decided not to worry about the bridge at Campbell Town.



Someone wanted to check out the [National Rose Garden](#), located on the banks of the Macquarie River at [Woolmers Estate](#) in [Longford](#).

A quick check of the options persuaded us to try the self-guided tour of the grounds.

In addition to the Rose Garden and the traditional Kitchen Garden, it takes in the working horse stables, blacksmith shop, a shearing shed, cider house and the coach house.

The Rose Garden covers two hectares and traces the evolution of the rose, from the 18th and 19th centuries to the present.

While I've got to admit roses don't do a great deal for me, any possibility of boredom was more than negated by the stroll around the historic buildings.

Again, just magnificent and a fourth highlight.

So, in less than twenty-four hours we'd encountered Clarendon House, Evandale, Ross and Woolmers Estate.















I was looking forward to the overnight stop at [George Town](#), one of Tasmania's most significant historical townships.

It took us just under an hour to wend our way north from Woolmers Estate, through Launceston and along the East Tamar Highway to the outskirts of George Town.

Unfortunately, the town turned out to be an administrative centre driven by recent industrial development rather than the historic village I'd been expecting.

En route, we diverted to [Three Wishes Vineyard](#). Partly because it was on the way, partly because it was open on weekends but mostly because I was after something to drink after dinner.

Like the other wineries, we visited there were only a handful of wines on offer.

Airline baggage limits and the cost of freight to the Deep North tended to rule out significant purchases.

Still, it was evident if this was any indication of what lay in store, we were in for a very good time indeed.





Our accommodation in George Town was [The Grove](#), an elegant stone house built in 1829.

Once we'd checked in, we discovered the only historical walk option comprised a long wander around sites scattered through what was, in essence, a bit of suburbia.

If we hadn't experienced the highlights mentioned above in the past twenty-four hours, we might well have been inclined to follow the route laid out in the guidebook.

We opted for a drive out to [Low Head](#) instead.

It was just after five when we pulled into the oldest continuously used pilot station in Australia, in use since 1835.

As a result, we didn't get a chance to check out the [Maritime Museum's](#) collection.

After a walk down to the waterside, it was back into the car and off towards the lighthouse.

It was built in 1888, replacing an earlier structure erected by convicts in the 1830s.

From the lighthouse, there's a view across the Bass Strait, but hunger pangs were starting to set in.

As a result, we didn't waste much time heading back to The Grove, then hoofing it a block or so to the [Pier Hotel](#) for dinner.

We started with half a dozen Oysters Kilpatrick.

Madam had been generous enough to pass me the oysters from the previous night's seafood platter (I'd had the steak) which were quite superb *au naturel*.

While there was nothing wrong with the Kilpatrick, in hindsight, we should have gone for the unadorned option.

Then, when we returned to the cottage, we continued the process of converting a pair of Pinot-sceptics.

That process continued once we hit the wine trail the following morning.

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# Monday, 3 December

Since our last two nights' accommodation was on the west bank of the Tamar, we headed back to Launceston tracking clockwise around the [Tamar Valley Wine Route](#).

The decision was prompted by a slightly higher number of wineries with a five-star rating in James Halliday's Australian Wine Companion 2008.

Our first port of call was [Bay of Fires](#) at Piper River, where the first wine on offer was the current vintage of Arras (rated 96 by James Halliday). Not a bad way to start a tasting tour!

The Riesling was outstanding, and I could have happily walked away with a dozen bottles if we weren't subject to constraints associated with baggage limits.

At our next stop, we were introduced to a possible solution to that problem. Buy a couple of bottles and place them in a box, then keep filling the box.

The last winery on your itinerary will send it to your home address.

In hindsight, this was an option we could have chosen, but I have doubts that I would have been able to keep it down to one box.

Stop Number Two was [Dalrymple Vineyards](#) on Piper's Brook Road. Once again, everything was good, and the Pinot Noir was excellent.

We left with a 2006 Pinot which ended up in the clutches of the Cox Combo as thanks for the parking facilities they provided in Mackay.

Down the road from Dalrymple, we turned off the main road onto a circuitous path which eventually brought us to the cellar door at [Piper's Brook](#), which was also a suitable lunch venue.

The Chardonnay and Pinot Noir rated highly, though I didn't mind the Pinot Grigio either.

After lunch, we were back on the road through the vines to [Jansz Tasmania](#), dedicated to producing sparkling wine, and they do it rather well. They also offer freight-free delivery throughout Australia for half a dozen bottles.

They're part of the Yalumba group, which meant Angaston was the point of departure for the Premium Non-Vintage Brut Cuvee that found their way to our doorstep.

We'll be back for more.

Once we'd found our way back to the highway, the next stop was [Brook Eden](#), a delightful spot overlooking wetlands.



The vineyard is home to several peacocks, a Jack Russell named Chilli and wines that prompted me to sign up for their Vintage Club.

That involves agreeing to buy a 6-bottle tasting pack each year at a discounted price (which more or less offsets the cost of freight).

I'd rate it alongside Pfeiffer's in Rutherglen as a winery I've taken a particular shine to, though that's not to disparage any of the others we visited.

Every one of them was excellent.

It's just that I thought Brook Eden was particularly excellent. Regardless of excellence, after five wineries in a couple of hours, the palate tends to become a little tired.

Although the prospect of visiting a lavender farm doesn't exactly fill me with unalloyed delight, I didn't mind the detour into [Bridestowe Lavender Farm](#).

Madam positively loved it.

From there, we headed back towards the wine route. We made a slight detour at Lilydale to visit [Providence](#), the oldest vineyard in Tasmania.

The cellar door is an agent for some other small Tasmanian wineries.

Though you can only taste the Providence range, they do ship freight free by the dozen anywhere in Australia.

That's a service I'm planning to utilise in the not too distant future.

We had a minor hiccup on the way to our accommodation for the next two nights as Murphy's Law struck.

In the directory, the street was located precisely at the junction of two facing pages.

In real life, it was around a blind corner with absolutely no indication that it was coming up.

Still, we were able to loop back to it and establish landmarks that saved us from overshooting the corner for the rest of the stay.

The cottage at [Protea Hill](#) has spectacular views across the Tamar Valley.

After an excursion in search of dinner, we found ourselves on the veranda, enjoying Providence Riesling from the last stop on the wine trail and watching rain squalls move up the river valley.

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# Tuesday, 4 December

The weather outlook was always going to have a significant influence on our plans for Tuesday and Wednesday. We were under strict instructions from Warbo to make sure we visited [Cataract Gorge](#).

Fortunately, after overnight rain, Tuesday dawned fine and clear.

We headed off after breakfast in search of somewhere to park the car for the day.

In downtown Launceston, inexpensive parking was difficult to find.

Fortunately, we found a spot slightly off the beaten track near the Launceston Rugby Club (\$4 for all-day parking, thank you very much).

It was conveniently close to the restaurant complex at Home Point, the ferry terminal and, most importantly, the [River Edge Trail](#) which took us to The Gorge.







I'm not the world's most experienced traveller, but there can't be many cities around the world with an area of such rugged and unspoilt natural beauty so close to the central business district.

We took the Zig Zag track, which came with a health-advisory suggesting the route was not suited for the unfit.

Since our fitness level comes from an hour-long morning walk five days a week and not much else, I wasn't confident of staying the distance.

Still, we handled it without too much difficulty.

Along the way, we enjoyed spectacular views before descending to the suspension bridge across The Gorge.

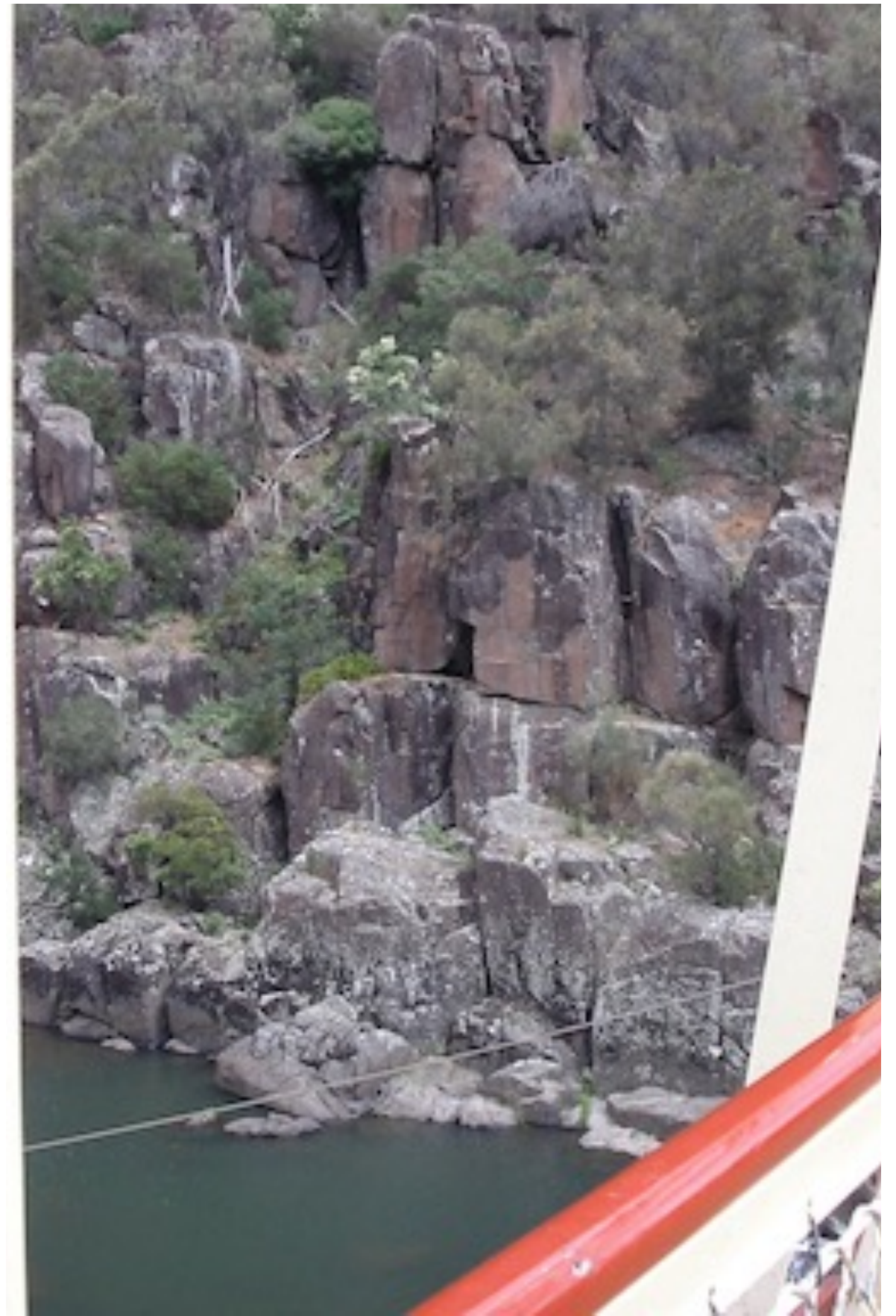
We'd delayed our departure until well after rush hour subsided, diverted from the car park to the [Tourist Information Centre](#), and avoided any sense of urgency along the trail.

So it was close to midday when we arrived at the [Gorge Restaurant](#), which seemed like a suitable lunch venue.

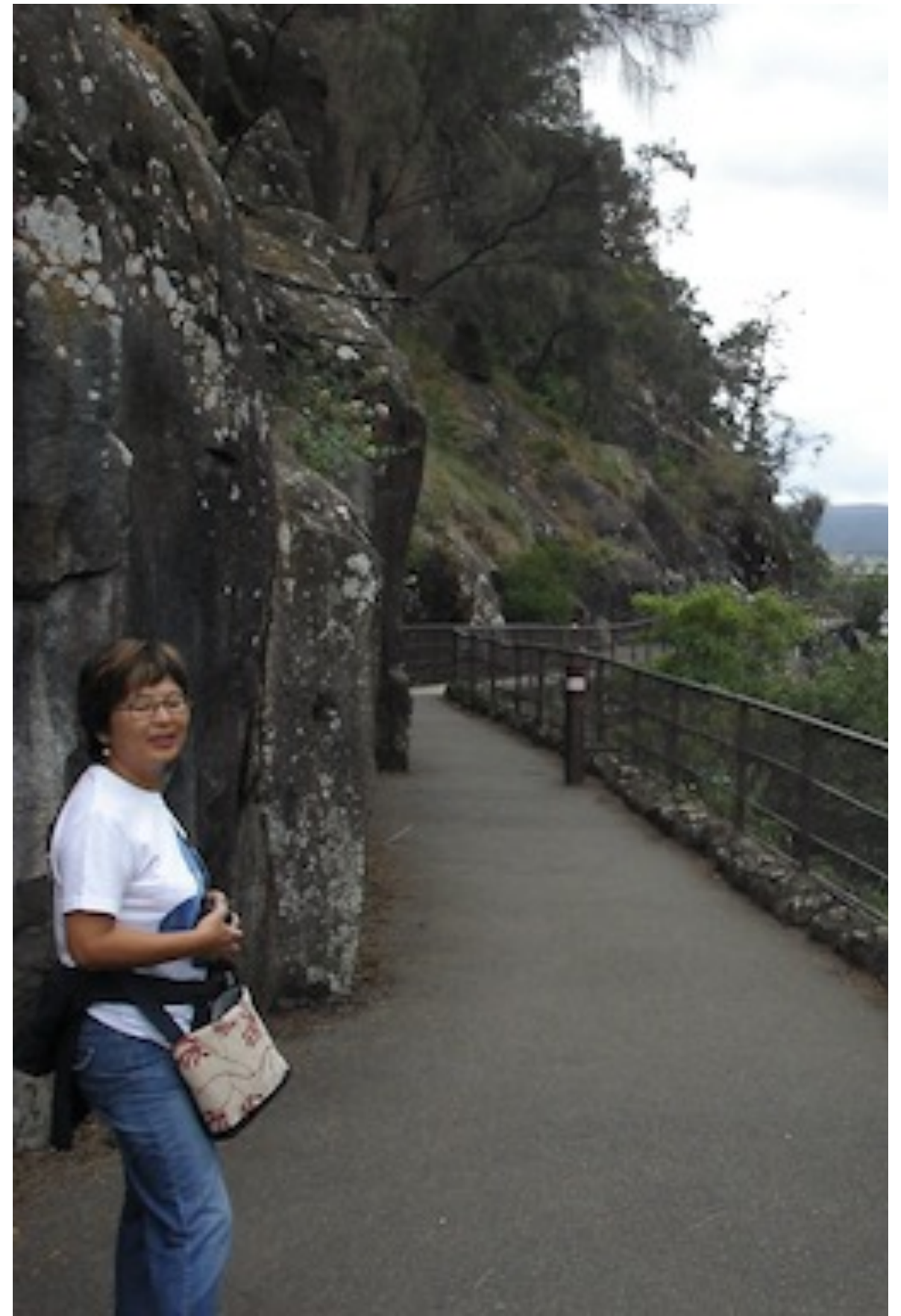
Assuming we get the chance, we'll be returning.













After lunch, we took the much easier path along the northern bank of the [South Esk River](#), with excellent views across the river along the way.

We spent the rest of the afternoon strolling through the downtown area, looking at historic buildings.

While Macquarie House and [Boag's brewery](#) attracted my particular interest, we didn't have time to do the tour. Pencil that one in for next time.

There are plenty of impressive buildings as you make your way around the CBD.

The exercise could be worth repeating if we're back that way again with time on our hands.

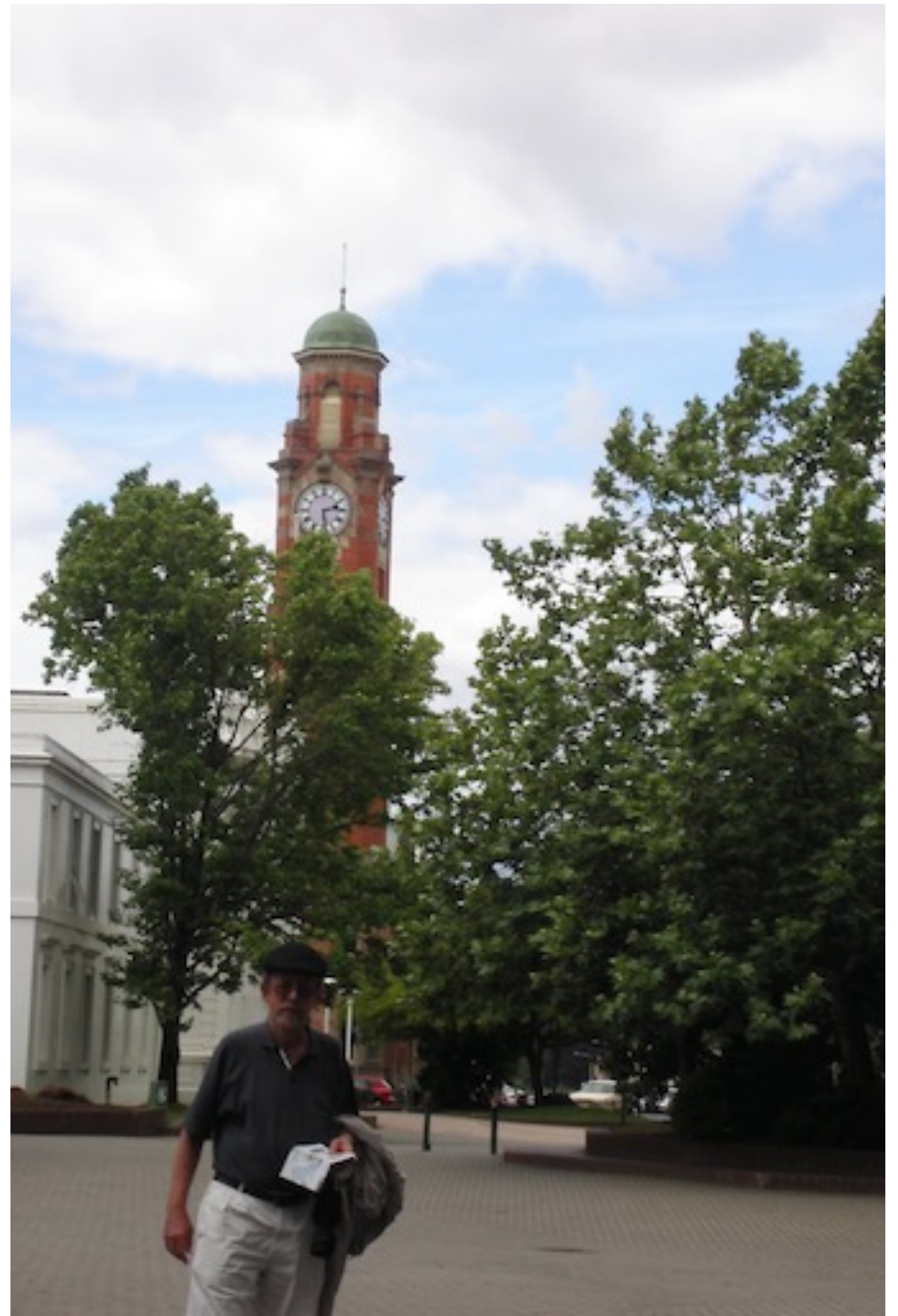
But it was an enjoyable ramble that ended down by the redeveloped waterfront, all apartment blocks and restaurants.

We grabbed a couple of relatively modest, though quite toothsome, serves of fish and chips before we reclaimed the vehicle.

From there it was back to Protea Hill and the bottle of Bay of Fires Riesling that awaited us in the fridge.









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# Wednesday, 5 December

Since we're talking departure day and a flight due to depart in the late afternoon, we had no specific plans for the day when breakfast arrived.

A discussion about our plans resulted in a recommendation we head north and turn off the West Tamar Highway at Rosevears.

We should then follow the road along the edge of the river. It was undoubtedly the best piece of travel advice we'd received on the trip.

Many thanks, Fred.

Two detours off the highway took us past scenes of jaw-dropping beauty with a wow factor of several million.

So high, in fact, that after lunch at Carbone's Cafe at [Beauty Point](#), we decided to make the trip in reverse on the way to the airport.

The southbound journey didn't seem quite as spectacular as the northern leg.







I suspect that the fact we knew more or less what lay in store might have been a contributory factor.

On the way north, we'd stopped briefly at the [Artisan Gallery & Wine Centre](#). A handcrafted timber wine rack caught the eye (it's a pity we don't have room for it in The Little House of Concrete).

From there we turned off onto a track that took us under the [Batman Bridge](#), past a stone convict-built Presbyterian church and on to [Holm Oak Vineyards](#).

I weakened and shelled out for a dozen of the 2005 Riesling (Halliday rating 94).

After lunch, since we still had time to kill before check-in opened, we headed past the airport back to Evandale for a final wander around historic buildings before we departed.

True to form, the departure was later than advertised.

I'd predicted that when we heard the Virgin Blue flight which would be boarding through the same Gate, we would be using was delayed.

Still, we arrived at Tullamarine in daylight and managed to beat most of the mob onto the Skybus, so we got to sit for the twenty-minute trip into the city.



# Homeward Bound

Our accommodation for the next two nights, the newly-refurbished Leo Pacific, was too far to walk at that hour.

So we took the free Hotel Shuttle from Southern Cross, finding in the process that we were the first passengers our driver had delivered there.

Little Bourke Street a block and a half from Chinatown might be convenient in all sorts of ways.

But, as the driver pointed out as he pulled up on the doorstep, it isn't the most excellent option for shuttle buses.

That explains the decision to hoof it to Southern Cross two mornings later.

Regardless of delayed arrivals, once we'd checked in proximity to Chinatown made it easy to find something to eat.

I'd have preferred somewhere licensed.

Still, I thought, there was a bottle shop en route on the way back so I could drop in there if necessary.

Of course, when the time came, it was shut, prompting a decision that for the rest of the trip I wasn't eating anywhere that didn't have a wine list.

Which is not to suggest I was looking for a wine with breakfast at the Cafe Segovia the next morning, or at Knife Fork Bottle & Cork on Wednesday morning, but the option was there.

I'd be more than happy to return to either establishment in the future. Still, there are plenty of other options to explore in Melbourne's inner-city laneways.

After breakfast, there was nothing for it but to head off in search of exciting retail venues with a side trip to Chinatown for yum cha.

Madam rolled her eyes each time she arrived at the agreed rendezvous. Limiting purchases to the new Byrds box set, two New Orleans collections and a Richard & Linda Thompson live set meant the credit card escaped lightly at [Basement Discs](#) and [Greville Street Records](#).

She'd have been much more impressed if she'd been able to see how much I'd put back on the shelves.



That night we headed to [Villa Romana](#) with Madam's Melbourne Mates.

Another go at *spaghetti allo scoglio*, highly recommended after our previous visit to Melbourne, revealed it was still as good as ever.

From there, we adjourned to [Jimmy Watson's Wine Bar](#) for a couple of glasses to round out the evening.

After we'd broken the fast at an eatery a couple of doors down from the Leo Pacific next morning, there was nothing for it but to haul the luggage across to Southern Cross to catch the Skybus.

Before we knew it, we were touching down in Mackay, contacting the Better Five-Eighths of the Cox Combo, handing over the Dalrymple Pinot Noir as thanks and heading homewards.

Given the fact that a survey of the larder once we'd arrived revealed that the cupboard was bare, I guess it's hardly surprising that we ended up visiting Franco at Pizza Pronto.

We left with a family-sized pizza that cost me a little more than my return flight to Melbourne.