

Sequestered in Tasmania

Waiting for the Virus Down Under Down Under.

By
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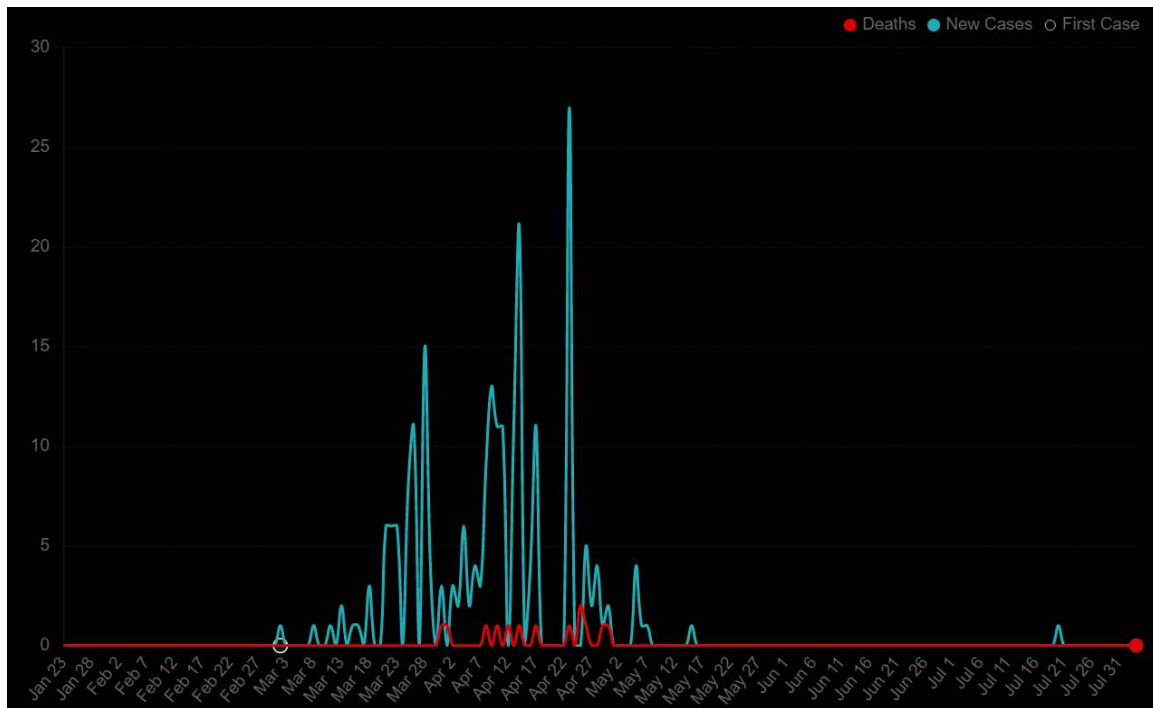


Watering up during the lockdown at the Port Arthur Historic Site, Tasmania, one of the Australia Convict Sites.

Photo by Jeffrey M. Stander

For the last several years my wife Kathy and I have been sailing on our live-aboard sailboat across the notorious Bass Strait to spend summers in Tasmania. This year we were all set to depart to the Big Island on March 21st to sail north when news of the border closure was announced. We could have gone anyway (the mainland borders were still open) but we decided to wait for two weeks and see how things developed.

The news was full of COVID-19 articles. Because we are older than most we are more vulnerable to the SARS-CoV-2 virus; thus we paid special attention to the news reports. At this time Tasmania was way ahead of the rest of Australia (and many other countries) in establishing a hard border; being on an island state off an island country made it easier to manage exogenous sources of infection (i.e. only people arriving by boats and planes). Tasmania was fortunate to have the leadership of Premier Peter Guttwein who, unlike many state and national leaders, actually listens to his science and medical advisors.



Daily New Cases in Tasmania – June 23 to August 3, 2020
 The single case on July 21 was from a returning Tasmanian in isolation
 (Source: <https://www.statnews.com/feature/coronavirus/covid-19-tracker/>)

Our clear choice was to turn back, spend winter in Tasmania, and hope the boat heater continues working; Tasmania can get very cold in the winter. We headed down the eastern shore towards Port Arthur at the southern end of the Tasman Peninsula and there we hunkered down for the next several weeks, feeling fortunate to be so totally isolated in a very uncertain time. The usually busy Historic Site was empty as no one was allowed into any public site in the entire state. We anchored up at the top of the Port Arthur bay and found ourselves strangely happy to be so alone.

The state stuck to its strategies until the infection was controlled. No travel, no groups, no sundowners, no restaurants, no pubs or bars, no barbershops, no gift shops, no close contact with others, and (worst of all for the true Ozzie) no football games.

Tasmania is a beautiful island state south of the mainland of Australia and is home to over half-a-million people; in normal times we have **3.5 million tourists and other visitors** each year, so Tourism is a big part of the Tasmanian economy.¹ Because of the lock-down and hard border closures, there has been no external tourism since March 20th. Except for essential and medical workers, no one was allowed into the state without spending two weeks in at-home quarantine; later, when quarantinees routinely violated their sequestration, quarantine was only in supervised government lodging – a good use for the empty hotels.

As the number of cases dropped to near-zero in May we were able to sail to Cygnet, a more populated town, happily meeting with friends as the restrictions eased, and re-stocking the boat with provisions. With the single exception, on July 20, of a traveler in quarantine, there have been no new cases of COVID-19 in Tasmania since May 15.

¹ <https://www.tra.gov.au/Domestic/domestic-tourism-results>

The complete lack of COVID-19 flu in the state (at the moment) is working against people retaining their flu avoidance behaviors. Now people are shaking my hand, giving me hugs, eschewing masks, and reducing their social distancing to less than a meter. Some people argue “there’s no virus, why do we have to keep borders locked, tourists out, and not go to the pub?” I answer “because that’s WHY there is no virus here”. It’s hard on the state’s economy and especially on the large and small businesses which depend on tourists, but the equation is simple: **open up the state and people will die**. Let the cruise ships arrive and more will die faster.

A solution will happen, probably by the end of the year. We hope for a medical breakthrough in vaccines, monoclonal antibodies, or treatments as yet undiscovered. Then we can face the deteriorating environment and wrecked economy. In Australia, we have faced unstoppable fires, uncontrolled floods, and now a pandemic. (I’m waiting for the rain of frogs). As other Australian states have relaxed their restrictions, COVID-19 has broken out again; right now there is a huge surge in Melbourne and a cluster in Sydney. The breakouts appear to be the fault of numerous people not obeying the rules and not paying attention. We have that in common; many citizens appear to have a vision that ends at their nose. They defend their right to not wear a mask against my right to not have them give me the virus.

It’s still not bad compared to the States. Everyone here is aghast at what is happening in America. The USA has 21 times more per capita COVID-19 cases than Australia². Why did the USA not follow the successful example of other countries, including Australia and New Zealand? The US government and leadership failed to a) follow the plan³, b) enforce effective countermeasures to contain the infection early on, and c) let science be the driver. On top of those failures, we also have the insanity of politicizing a disease.

America seems so insane to us dwellers down-under it seems impossible to believe what we are reading and seeing.

We live in interesting times.

² 1374 vs 65 per 100,000 population. Same source as the above chart.

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/pdf/pandemic-influenza-implementation.pdf>