

i r e h r e a k e r



\_ STORY BY NATASHA CICA \_ PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON KIMBERLEY

IN THE 45TH YEAR OF THE HIGH-MINDED ANTARCTIC TREATY, THE  
TWIN THREATS OF TOURISM AND MINING ARE CIRCLING  
THE ICY WILDERNESS OF THE SOUTH POLE



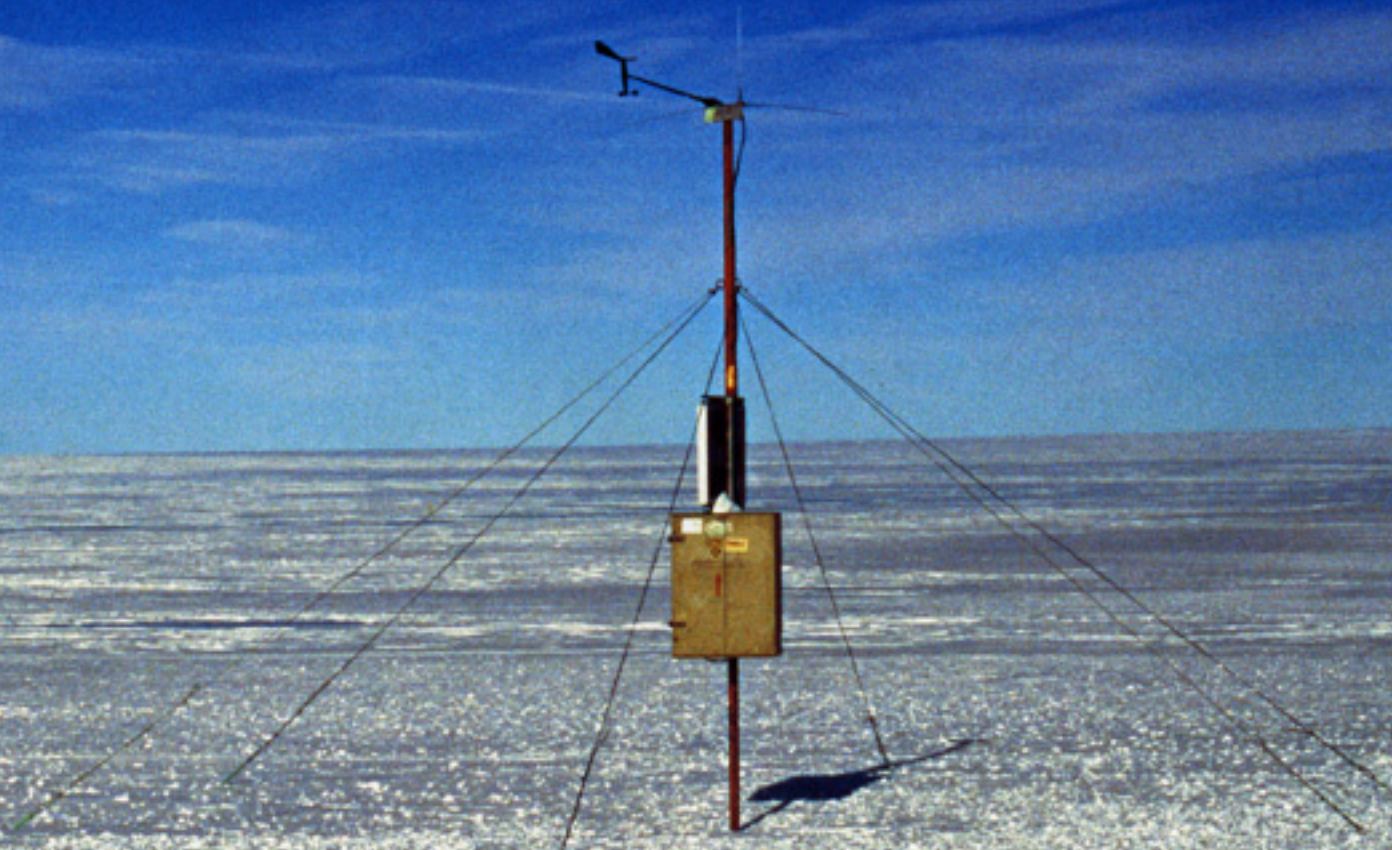
IN A COLD JUNE AFTERNOON in Hobart, the dim light

is almost spooky. It's the midwinter solstice, an evocatively pagan time this far south. Down at Constitution Dock the sky is low and sleeting. An icy southern wind blows doggedly off the harbour, and nips at my ankles dashing up the worn sandstone steps of Henry Hunter's ornate 1863 museum building. I'm ushered through to the wood-panelled sanctum of the Royal Society of Tasmania Room – named for another colonial artefact, a scientific society established in the 1840s by polar explorer and Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Franklin. Assembled inside is a quirky assortment of academics, Canberra bureaucrats, bearded scientists, and curious members of the public.

Why are we here? It's a party, albeit of a somewhat sober sort – at least until we adjourn for bubbles and brie. Tomorrow's the 45th anniversary of the Antarctic Treaty coming into force. As an early claimant of 42 per cent of the territory of Antarctica, Australia has long played a significant role in the affairs of this treaty, a charmed multilateral child born amid Cold War conflict. It was opened for signature by Australia, Argentina, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway, the UK, Belgium, Japan, South Africa, the Soviet Union and the US in 1959, following successful international scientific collaboration during the International Geophysical Year in 1957-8. The treaty froze territorial claims over Antarctica, dedicated its use for peaceful and scientific purposes, and prohibited nuclear explosions and the disposal of nuclear waste. The treaty's 1991 Madrid Protocol additionally banned mineral exploration in the continent in perpetuity, although that is subject to formal review in 2048.

So far, this framework has successfully maintained the continent on Australia's southern borders as a protected, demilitarised reserve. The Antarctic Treaty system hasn't been grubbed domestically by wedge or partisan politics. A clean-enough centre also seems to be holding internationally, where the treaty now has 45 signatories, with more likely on the way, possibly including Malaysia as the first Muslim state to establish an Antarctic presence. The treaty does paper over geopolitical cracks, and the pace of once-a-year, consensus-based decisions can be little short of glacial. But is that necessarily a problem? As one player in treaty affairs observes: "It's like the UN – except it works."

Scrutinising the need for change is the objective here. Antarctica is the world's final frontier. It holds a special place in our collective imagination. We see it simultaneously as untouched wilderness and untapped resource. And that combination potentially spells trouble. Already, managed exploitation of Antarctica adds up to bigish business for tiny Hobart. Our southernmost capital supports an Antarctic sector employing 800 specialists locally, with particular strengths in Antarctic and temperate marine science.



It's a little known – and remarkable – fact that Hobart has launched expeditions to Antarctica and the southern oceans for around 200 years, and is today the established base for the Australian and French national Antarctic research ships *Aurora Australis* and *L'Astrolabe*. The city houses 15 Antarctic-focused organisations, including the Australian Antarctic Division and treaty bodies Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) and Council of Managers of National Antarctic Programs (COMNAP). An air link will open this summer between Hobart and a snow pavement near Casey station.

Each June, Hobart's Antarctic community turns on an increasingly popular Antarctic Midwinter Festival. This year's festival served up huskies and history, films and readings, an ice sculptor called Kenji Ogawa and Artie the talking penguin. It also showcased *Islands to Ice*, a new Antarctic exhibition at the state Museum and Art Gallery – opened in March, it had clocked an astonishing 50,000 visitors by the end of April.

July brought weird and wonderful waves of international delegates into town for some serious Antarctic brainstorming, culminating in the annual Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR)/COMNAP conference, the world's largest meeting of Antarctic scientists. That's an awful lot of beards exploring subjects such as 'magnetosphere/ionosphere/mesosphere coupling' and 'characteristics of ice shelves, ice tongues and icebergs'. Delegates could check out sleek German snowmobiles at the trade show, enquire about the fuel spot price from BP Australia Ltd, buy a Tasmanian sculpture or ... retire for more bubbles and brie, at schmick local eateries.

All this flows right back to that bottom line of course. Total annual expenditure by Antarctic-related organisations and groups in Tasmania is estimated at \$126 million. There seems little doubt that growing this niche is both feasible and desirable, and a business unit within the Department of Economic Development is dedicated to developing the state's Antarctic economy.

Antarctic Tasmania's general manager, Ben Galbraith, tells a good-news story of constructive collaboration on matters Antarctic: between federal, state and local politicians, of coalition, Labor and even Green persuasions; between national governments and scientific teams; between public institutions, private industry and the university sector; and across disciplines from astronomy to the arts. Galbraith articulates the benefits of Antarctic engagement in broad terms.

"We're creating a knowledge society. We want to attract and keep more high-quality researchers, such as mathematical biologists and climatologists – we also have a responsibility to train up the next generation. We're taking a long-term view of developing that pool of talent and building a networked Antarctic community," he says. "Our role is also to facilitate the understanding of the importance of Antarctica, not just economically, but also socially and culturally, and to locals as well as visitors. My feeling is that development is starting to be driven by a recognition that culture and economics are mutually beneficial, not siloed activities."

While faithful to the spirit of the Antarctic Treaty, such sentiments sound too good to be true. Aren't collaborative ventures in the service of common human good about as viable as snowflakes in hell? In our economic rationalist, profit-driven times, isn't Antarctica just another resource waiting to be exploited?

It's not only Galbraith who would answer "no". Addressing Hobart's midwinter treaty forum, straight off the plane from representing Australia at this year's Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting in Edinburgh, Chris Moraitis of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade describes such gatherings as a "breath of fresh air in the international diplomatic world". That's more than diplo-speak for 'Better than Beirut'. It's an allusion to what Sir Guy Green, Tasmania's widely respected former governor, and now its honorary ambassador to Antarctica, calls the "civilising umbrella" of the Treaty system.

"I'm generally appalled by the low grade of environmental debate these days," Green observes. "It's polarised; it makes selective use of evidence; it's ideological; it's emotional – all the things that distort rational debate. Yet the Antarctic community stands in wonderful contrast."

It's hard to find anyone who'll prick the balloon of Antarctic exceptionalism. Much was accordingly made earlier this year of Queensland National Party Senator Barnaby Joyce's views on Antarctica. Profiled on ABC-TV's *Australian Story* riding the *Aurora Australis* on a parliamentary research visit, Joyce set a feral cat among the petrels by pronouncing that Australia should mine Antarctica before someone else did, as a legitimate assertion of sovereignty.

There were howls of outrage. Joyce was promptly jumped on by WA Liberal Senator Ross Lightfoot, chairman of the External Territories Committee. "There's no chance of exploitation of the resources there, biological- or mineral-wise," he said. "I'm against it; the committee's against it; the government is against it; the Labor Party is against it; and the United Nations is against it as well ... You might as well start thinking of exploiting minerals on the moon."

**IF MINING'S OFF** the visible agenda, how about tourism? The industry is largely self-regulated by the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), which was established in 1991 to advocate, promote and practise environmentally responsible private-sector Antarctic travel. The overwhelming majority of Antarctic tour operators are IAATO members, and the body's rigorous guidelines have been progressively folded into more formal Antarctic Treaty regulation, which in turn influences national laws.

"I've seen both scientists and tour operators in action in Antarctica – the latter are often more environmentally rigorous," comments Dr Julia Jabour, an Antarctic tourism policy expert at the University of Tasmania. "The tour operators know if they get found out doing something



wrong, the heavens will open and they'll be so regulated they won't be able to move," she says. "It's in their best interests to not only protect their product but their rights over their product as well."

IAATO reports tourist numbers, but no one caps the total, and commercial visits to Antarctica have risen almost exponentially over the past decade. Last summer more than 30,000 mainly ship-based tourists visited Antarctica, around 28,000 of whom set foot on the continent after landing in small groups. Tourism is concentrated around the Antarctic Peninsula, using South America as a gateway. Galbraith estimates that Tasmania captures only a paltry portion of the Antarctic tourist market – less than 1 per cent. That's because ship-based tourism using Australian gateways only effectively targets Antarctica's eastern sector, comprising geographically remote, and even colder, terrain that's less appealing to most visitors.

So only a handful of operators have regularly used Hobart as a working port. Christchurch-based Heritage Expeditions has taken small natural history tours on a Russian ship to New Zealand's sub-Antarctic islands and the Ross Sea area of Antarctica. And American operator Quark Expeditions has run month-long Great Antarctic Explorer tours taking in Hobart, using the Russian icebreaker *Kapitan Khlebnikov*, carrying about 100 passengers. Last season also saw two established Sydney-based outfits operating out of Hobart – renowned Antarctic and Everest expeditioner Greg Mortimer's adventure company Aurora Expeditions, and Orion Expedition Cruises, offering five-star luxury trips to Macquarie Island (territorially part of Tasmania), Commonwealth Bay and the Ross Sea.

So, is the sky the developmental limit on this opening front, involving bitter collision between our fantasies of Antarctica as environmental peace park on the one hand, and lucrative cash cow on the other? Galbraith predicts only slow and incremental tourism growth on Australia's side of the continent, pointing to tyrannies of distance and rising fuel

costs – a twin-share berth on the *Kapitan Khlebnikov* already costs around \$US25,000 (\$32,800), and Orion charges from \$17,000 to \$35,000. These economic handbrakes apply across Antarctic territory, of course. As Moraitis wryly observes, a sojourn in Antarctica is "not like a weekend in Bali". Which suggests a cultural handbrake as well – the politically incorrect idea that Antarctic tourists are somehow more discerning and deserving than yobs lobbying into Lombok.

Tourist operators certainly capitalise on the notion of an exclusive wilderness experience to sell Antarctic berths at a premium. Yet there's more to it than that. Antarctic visits tend to fuel passion for the place and its preservation. "When people leave Antarctica, 95 per cent are absolutely committed to ensuring it remains a wilderness place and a place for science," says historian Stephen Martin of the State Library of NSW, who doubles as a tour guide for Aurora Expeditions. "That's one of the big connections between the Antarctic Treaty system and the tourist industry – building like-minded values towards the continent and its potential."

Not that Antarctic tourists are environmentally illiterate before arrival; a third are already members of green groups, according to Jabour. They generally know a human footprint's not a reference to thongs, and are looking for something more than a polar stamp on a penguin postcard.

Then again, the tidy US-dollar trade in tourist tat on the Antarctic Peninsula has to be seen to be believed, according to one regular visitor. That critical sentiment is nicely captured by New Zealand poet Bill Manhire: in his *Visiting Mr Shackleton* (based on entries in the visitors' book at Shackleton's Hut): *Cool! Wow! Beautiful! Awesome! / Like going back in time / Amazing! Historic! Finally! / I am truly blessed / Wow! History! Fantastic! / Wonderfully kept / Shackleton's the man! / Like going back in time / Wow! Cool! Historic! Yo! / Awesome! Privileged. Unreal! / And Thank you, God. And Happy / Birthday, Dad. And Thailand.*

There's currently no facility for overnight tourist stays on

Antarctica, although the research bases of Chile and Uruguay do provide 'educational' sleep overs to some paying visitors. Is the next logical step a hotel, boutique perhaps? "Personally I'm intrigued by that idea," says Martin. "I used to be appalled by it. Cost would be a regulator; it would be incredibly expensive. I don't know what you'd do over the winter – close it? Some of the deep-green people would be vehemently opposed. But I've seen the extent of infrastructure at national bases – I don't think people realise that Antarctica is a settled continent. That's a done deal."

Up-and-coming Tasmanian architect Poppy Taylor, who travelled south last season with a hypothetical brief, part of a research project, to design a research facility on Macquarie Island, is less comfortable with the prospect. "Human impact is the biggest problem Antarctica is facing. To protect it, the best thing is to get out of there – but that's not going to happen."

But would Taylor design, say, Antarctica's first *wallpaper*\*-meets-Huski eco-friendly tourist lodge? "I'd be very morally challenged by that. I think it's another version of the Barnaby Joyce line – you know, if it's going to happen, let's be the first and do it less badly than everyone else. People say that tourists will leave with a passion to protect the place, but ecotourism still remains complex and risky." At this juncture, I wonder why tourists can't just sleep on their ships. After all, some are very large – and luxe – indeed. Californian-based Princess Cruises' massive *Star Princess* accommodates 2,600 tourists and boasts spa and swimming pools, golf course, nightclub, casino, wedding chapel and cigar bar.

Only one prediction is safe – future forays and follies in this vast southern whiteness will keep throwing back unsettling questions. Should law or lobbyists drive Antarctic management? How do we negotiate the competing demands of commerce and culture, nature and society? Humanity is fully capable of degrading everything precious about Antarctica. Equally, the coming crunch times for this continent could prove our finest hour. ■

