

Kind Island locum: more than just the cheese

Light Arts David Miller



'I ALWAYS WANTED TO GO to King Island.' Many people respond like this when I tell of my recent locum experience as a grey nomad doctor. Even though it was for just a few days, it was great to mix with the welcoming community of 1700 locals.

'If you live here you have to face your demons,' the director of the King Island cultural centre told me.

Certainly there are no night-clubs and few teenagers.

High school goes up to year 10 and then it's boarding school in the outside world.

King Island is a land splinter west in Bass Strait. At 64km long and 27km wide, it's mostly flat and green, dotted with black and white cows. A lack of foxes means that feral flocks of ex-domestic turkeys, handsome pheasants and peacocks roam freely around paddocks.

Before folk arrived, there lived a huge colony of elephant seals. Extinction took place within 2 years and by 1805 all were gone. The sailors involved had lived under violence of the lash and could see only the prize money of oil and skins. Elephant Seal Bay wistfully survives only in name.

A tragic legacy of shipwreck followed discovery by Dr George Bass in 1798 that Tassie is a separate land mass. Ships exhausted by the long passage from Europe took advantage of the Bass Strait short cut, while risking a perilous passage called the 'Eye of the Needle'.

With GPS navigation this is history, but in the 1800s sail-

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ing ships relied on the newly invented chronometer, basically a windup clock to determine longitude position. If it went haywire or someone forgot to wind it up, then the ship and those in her risked death. **

The most poignant shipwreck was the Neva, with a cargo of Irish convict women bound for Botany Bay.

It was wrecked on the northern tip of Cape Wickham such that wailing laments of the doomed women and children, still shackled below deck, could be heard from onshore. The

captain saved himself by lifeboat and received no criticism at the subsequent inquiry; such was the status of his cargo. During a recent reparation ceremony, Irish linen washed in the sea at this forlorn place was taken to Cork Prison where today's female inmates lovingly fashioned memorial bonnets, one for each of the 224 women.

Another shipwreck was the Cataquaui. It remains Australia's greatest peacetime maritime disaster. The root cause analysis sheets the cause home to an abrasive relationship between the ship's doctor and the captain, who was goaded into carrying full sail, because it was to be the last night at sea. Passengers were already dressed in their finery for the Melbourne landfall when the Cataquaui was impaled on the foam-gnashed fangs of King Island with a loss of 400 souls and nine survivors.

Lack of jobs is today's problem on King Island and closure

of the abattoir has turned the pretty seaside town of Grassy into a virtual ghost town.

What of the practice and the hospital?

It was busy enough and everybody was bulk billed. The patients have the much-loved Dr Ruth who needs a regular associate rather than FIFOs such as myself.

Multiple casualties are not unknown, such as a group of Chinese golfers driving on the wrong side of the road. The Flying Doctor is the only backup.

Golf is the dream. I'm not a golfer, but I find it hard to understand how anybody can accurately hit a ball through the Roaring Forties.

There is cheese; lots of it, and a grateful patient even gave me some. In the confines of the tiny Saab commuter aeroplane, my travelling companion complained my souvenir cheese bag had the aroma of an axilla.

If you ever visit King Island, you have to fly because there is no passenger ferry. The locals won't let you forget to take home the cheese. King Island cheese is the best and very cheap to buy on the island. Even the French love it, because it's a Chernobyl-free product.

** *From Longitude by Dava Sobel – 'the story of a lone genius who solved the greatest scientific problem of his time.'*

