

Tasmanian Design

It's not just natural beauty that makes Tasmania see worthy; equally fascinating are the unusual manmade designs, writes Preeti Verma Lal

Photographs: Preeti Verma Lal

I knew what I wanted to do in Tasmania—hug a koala, go on a night safari to see the Blue Penguins, the tiniest and the noisiest of all penguins, feed the Forrester kangaroos and look for the coy wallabies. But when I walked into the iconic Salamanca Market, I forgot all about the to-do list and gaped at the unusual designs. That initial encounter had me so mesmerised that I walked to the Henry Jones Art Hotel, drove miles to meet Australia's best ornamental glass designer and decided to spend a night in Islington Hotel, the first house built in the snazzy dress circle of Hobart. Yes, I did tick off everything off the to-do list, but if I were to go to Tasmania again, I would go to gape at design and not to hug a koala.

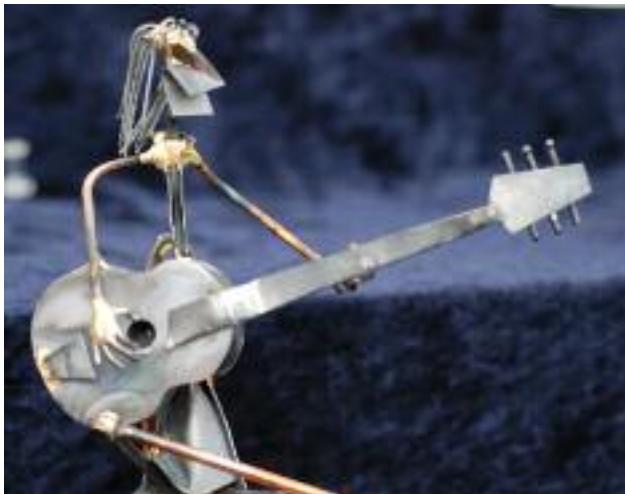


GLASS ACT

If you hold a perfume bottle designed by Richard Clements in your hand, it is difficult to decide, which is more seductive—the bottle or the perfume! So exquisite are Clements' designs that he often works nights to meet the demands that pour in from across the world. Interestingly, Clements was not trained to be an ornamental designer. In London, he took lessons in Scientific Glass Blowing School, the degree that teaches one to make the Petri dish perfect for an experiment. But when making Petri dishes became a dreary chore, Clements took to ornamental glass designing, in the

process becoming one of the first ornamental designers in Australia. Now, many vouch, he is the best in the country.

Working on his cluttered table in his studio in Franklin, a quaint town in Tasmania, Clements now specialises in perfume bottles that have found pride of place in DuPont Glass Collection, American Craft Museum, Perfume Bottle Museum (Japan). Beyond the ubiquitous bottles, Clement designs a lot of eyes and toadstools. The glass eyes are sculpted diligently to look exactly like the photographs and the toadstools so truly out of a fairytale.



SILLY BILLY

If you walk the streets of Hobart and ask for Gerald Hale, you certainly would draw a curious blank. But say, Silly Billy and it would instantly evoke a smile. Perhaps a guffaw too. For Silly Billy is the name that Gerald gives his creations, artefacts made of scrap. An old spoon could become the petrol tank of a miniature motorbike, a tea strainer might metamorphose into the beak of a bird, a fork the claws of a brooding man, the scrubbing wool becomes the sheep's skin and an old typewriter the chaise lounge of an iron shrink. Everything in Gerald's scheme calls for laughter; he turns even the staid astronomer and the jaded psychiatrist into mirth.

Gerald is not tech savvy, not for him sophisticated tools or state-of-the-art technology. All he has for company are some basic tools. "I beat up scrap to turn them into works of art," says a scruffy Gerald who studied Fine Arts in the University of Tasmania. Is an age, when even art is becoming a burden on the environment, Gerald's are not only eco-friendly, they also give you a good reason to smile.

ISLINGTON HOTEL

It is a 150-year old manor, the first house to be built in the ritzy dress circle of the then class conscious Hobart. Adhering to the Regency style of architecture, Islington is often referred to as a curated, luxe hotel, for its walls are lined with an eclectic collection of paintings, including the Central Medallion, a chintz quilt made by Marianna Lloyd, the great grandmother of the present owner. It has only 11 rooms, five still in the original 1847 Regency House. The rooms, surprisingly, have no numbers. You just need to remember the lefts and rights to reach your room! Inside, there's fabric by Jim Thompson, the bathroom has deep bathtubs as well as rain showers and the hair dryer is not left on the shelf, it comes in a dainty white jacquard stringed bag with silk tassles. Replete with six fireplaces, a sprawling garden designed by Andrew Pfeiffer and the best view of Mt Wellington, breakfast in the conservatory is the perfect way to begin a day and if you want to mull over life, there is no better place than the 54 square metre pond that has 14 metre-long Murano glass floats, an installation by Andrea Marucchio. Islington that was in the Conde Nast Traveller's Hot List 2006, in one word, redefines luxe.



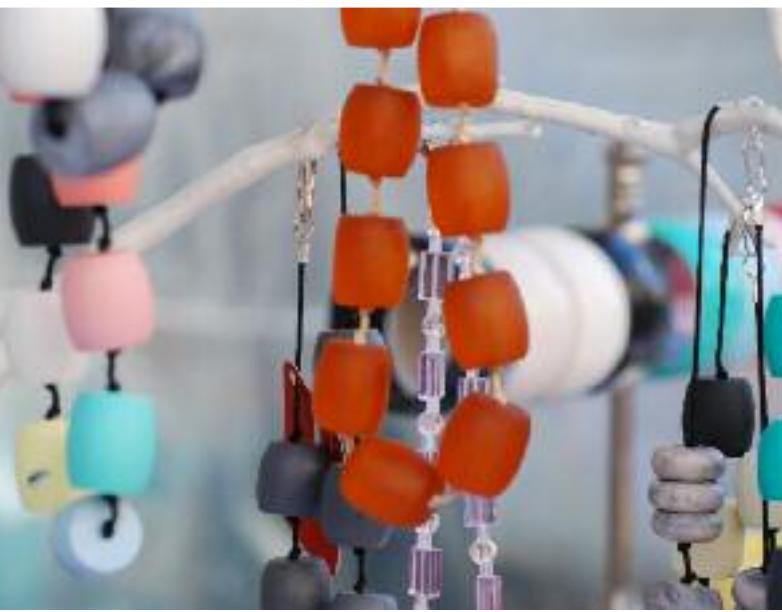


REBECCA ROTH

Tired of the same zircon and swarovski jewellery? How about a pebble as a fashion statement? No ordinary pebble this, not the one you can pick from the sidewalk. How about a resin pebble stringed in black or brown concluding in a silver clasp? Sounds like an albatross around your neck? Resin is what the hip are switching to and Rebecca Roth's resin jewellery are flying off the shelves in the US, Australia and New Zealand.

A mother of two, Rebecca studied the craft of resin making in Melbourne and ever since she stepped out of the hallowed portals she has been making necklaces, bangles, studs, brooches, rings and homeware. In her collection, the palette ranges from burgundy to aqua to sorrel, some translucent, others opaque. Some of them are moulded so beautifully that a not-so-discriminating eye could mistake them for ivory or scrimshaw.

Rebecca calls herself a solo artist. She works alone in her studio and finds the job of "designing, pouring and finishing the pieces very relaxing." Her designs often take cue from the natural beauty of Tasmania. It takes roughly three hours to create a necklace but what Rebecca loves most are the raw bangles.



JUSTIN FRY

Huon Pine. Celery-Top Pine, Blackwood, Myrtle. Tasmanian Oak. Sassafras. Nature has blessed Tasmania with precious and unusual timber and it is no surprise that Tasmania is full of wood designers. Like Justin Fry, who makes such beautiful wooden fruits that one might get tempted to bite into them. For most of his designs, Justin does not use a veneer, but look at the cherries that his mother makes—she paints them red and adds a layer of polish so deftly that they look freshly plucked off a tree.

Huon Pine was the favourite of the first European settlers who used it to make dinghies and boats. That tradition lives on in Franklin, the town that houses the only wooden boat making school in the world.



TOYS

In the modern world, this might sound like an aberration but once upon a time there were no machines to make toys. They were all handcrafted with readily available raw material. The aborigines had the bush toys, the carpenters chipped spare wood to make tiny toys, the seamstress stuffed wool into cloth swatches and made dolls for girls. Wood, iron, thread, wool—everything could be turned into a toy. The traditional art of making toys has been shadowed by cheap plastic toys, but not all of it has died. Thankfully.



HENRY JONES ART HOTEL

By the wharf, in Henry Jones Art Hotel, history, art and style had a tryst. Where the 5-star hotel stands, it was on this site that the town of Hobart was founded. Much later it was here that a young Henry Jones began life sticking labels on jam tins, a factory he would overtake and soon become at that time the largest employer in Tasmania and head of the largest private company in the world. Today, people who savour subtle style walk into the hotel to hold a meeting or curl up at night. The century-old sandstone building now boasts of a glass atrium, the rooms carrying the legacy of colonial industrial heritage in timber trusses and sandstone walls; artists' lofts with a view of the harbour; the IXL Long Bar spills to the streets with umbrellas for alfresco entertainment and an art installation suite with a private art gallery.

The Art Hotel sits next to an art school and a number of students and scholars have contributed to its artistic look, even delving into the minutest detail like suggesting the perfect timber veneer for the furniture. This is one hotel which is more than bed and breakfast; it is a continual art gallery. You can buy the art displayed on the walls. And when hungry, walk up to the harbour and buy fresh crayfish! 

