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# ROAD SIGNS: A BIT OF HISTORY

## YD BAR-NESS

**T**here are some things about our unique island that are so familiar they go unnoticed. One example is our road signs – describing the local conditions but with an international vocabulary.

It's easy to take them for granted – we follow them unthinkingly and their message is law. But when and where did these shapes come from? Why do we have octagons and circles, and when did they first appear?

## FROM THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

The first formal lobbying for standardised road signs – familiar to the traveller as well as the local – was by the Italian Touring Club in 1895. Over the decades to come, ad-hoc road signs were put up either by private clubs or by automobile service companies; the French tyre company Michelin placed thousands of signs across France as both public service and savvy advertisement.

In 1900, a consortium of motoring clubs proposed a set of four standard signs for travellers in Europe: train crossing, dangerous junction, bumpy roads and sharp corners. By contrast, a competing Scandinavian system had started in Sweden that used only a single design – a red triangle to warn of upcoming dangers without specifying what that danger actually was.

In the 1920s, the standardisation of road signs took on a formal international aspect with the establishment of the post-World War I League of Nations Committee for Communications and Transit. In addition to maritime signals and electric transmission, they tried to create a symbolic design vocabulary for road signage. With the growth of automobile usage, their work began to spread throughout Europe.

In 1927, a Swiss delegation added several urban designs to the conversation: one-way streets, parking zones and no entry signs. These were designed for those running errands in the city rather than travelling intercity.

During the same period, the League of Nations committee established round signs for speed limits, and triangular signs as danger warnings. They also proposed rectangular white-on-blue city limits signage, making a distinct boundary between townships and open roads.



Tourism Tasmania and Adriani Cook

LEFT: On tour in Stanley.  
 BELOW: Mt Roland with the road sign to Paradise.



Tourism Tasmania and Chris Creer

Some elements came from the United States: the octagonal stop sign from a 1920s Mississippi scheme that used circular signs to mark the most hazardous points. Octagons marked the next most dangerous, then diamonds and rectangles. The scheme spread worldwide, and today in Tasmania we have octagonal stop signs, diamond warning signs and rectangular information signs.

## ACROSS AUSTRALIA

Australia has had a similar progression from auto club-driven advocacy. In the early 1810s, the first road specifications for wheeled vehicles were established under Governor Lachlan Macquarie.

Local Australian motoring clubs formed with the intent of improving the motoring experience and road signage was a major component. The Royal Auto Club of Victoria formed in 1903, Western Australia's launched in 1905, and the RACT in 1923. By 1927, the Australian mainland adopted a standardised set of road signs and Tasmania followed soon after. Today, Australia has more than 500 official road signs across 800,000km of roads, all readily interpretable to anyone fluent in English.

Tasmania's road network is now completely linked up to that of interstate, through the rather imaginative concept of the Australian east coast highway continuing right across Bass Strait on the deck of the Spirit of Tasmania ferry.

However, Tasmania's 24,000km of roads have a few oddities all of their own.

A personal favourite of mine is the motorcycle warning sign, showing the tyre skid marks of a bike that has just performed some impossible manoeuvre. Near the coastline, keep your eyes open for a penguin warning sign – these animals come ashore to burrow on land and you'll need to travel slowly.

The most famous Tasmanian sign alerts drivers to Tasmanian devils in the region. Despite devils having been present interstate long ago, you won't find these signs anywhere but here.

Another much-appreciated local sign is the black and white wildlife warning sign, showing a jauntily tilted car colliding with a wallaby. However, the proportions are all wrong, and the wallaby appears to be almost larger than the sedan that's knocking it over.

But of all the millions of road signs across our amazing country, I think perhaps the one you'll like best is the 'Prepare to stop' sign at Cockle Creek, 120km south of Hobart. This is the very southern end of Australia's road, and a good reminder of just how well humans can organise a system that stretches clear across the continents.

WHAT OTHER UNUSUAL SIGNS HAVE YOU NOTICED IN TASMANIA? SHARE YOUR PHOTOS ON OUR MEMBER HUB, [HUB.RACT.COM.AU](http://HUB.RACT.COM.AU) OR TAG US ON INSTAGRAM @RACTOFFICIAL