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THE FOREST ISSUE TASMANIA OVERLAND TRAIL HIKING CURRAWONG

Overland Track, Tasmania | Bird's-eye view

Trekking across the Tasmanian wilderness, in the company of the not-so-friendly currawongs

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Dove Lake with Cradle Mountain in the background. Photographs: Manoj Madhavan/Mint

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As I hoisted my backpack, I heard metallic cries around me. These shrill noises erupted from large black birds that circled over the entrance to Tasmania's Cradle Mountain National Park. These birds' ringing killok-killok calls, wildly swaying gaze, and heavy black beaks were impossible to ignore or miss.

The birds were the currawongs, a species of birds found only in Tasmania, mainly in the wild mountains. The currawongs are forest dwellers, normally eating berries from flowering plants, but they had acquired a new taste for human food.

I tried to ignore the birds as I began hiking along the shores of the glacially-carved Dove Lake. I was taking my first steps across the Overland Track, one of Australia's most famous and challenging mountain walking trails. The Overland Track runs for almost 85km over some of the wildest mountain ranges on earth, across the central plateau of Australia's island state of Tasmania.

As I set off, I could see that the birds had taken note of me and were watching me. I knew that they were hoping to get a morsel from me. I had been warned that the birds were well aware that backpacks often held easy, high energy meals: chocolates, trail mixes, sandwiches, and more. I had even heard a rumour that they had learned to open the zippers of unwatched packs. I would have to make sure I stayed close to my backpack and my tent to guard my food from their prying beaks.

The Overland Track travels from north to south between two of the



Weindorfer forest

most famous natural landmarks in Tasmania: the twin peaks of Cradle Mountain and the glacial Lake Saint Clair. There are cutting grass swamps with serrated blades, buttongrass moorlands with thick mud, and thickets of tangled “horizontal” scrub.

I’m not sure I’d have set out on the Track so eagerly if it was still the unmarked wilderness path that was first explored by trapper Bert Nichols in 1931. The well-marked Track is now lined with solid wooden huts for protection from the weather, signs interpreting the natural values and scenery, and knowledgeable rangers who also enforce a track permit system.

Yet, the route is anything but easy. Often, even experienced, fit, well-equipped parties end up spending entire days clambering slowly through seemingly endless vegetation. I had packed my own food, tent, and emergency equipment—and was carrying all of this through the nearly 85-odd kilometres of jungles, muddy tracks and mountain passes.

I was also worried about the possibility of storms and heavy weather. The Overland Track’s cold, misty and snowy mountains are nothing like the red deserts of the Australian mainland. In the higher parts of this track are the largest areas of glaciated terrain in Australia—the ice here only retreated an instant ago in geological time.

On the first day of my trek, I passed over the summit of 1,185m tall Hanson’s Peak, a dome of white quartzite that was

nonetheless dwarfed by the spires of nearby Cradle Mountain, which towered almost 400m higher. Once I was on the far side of the dome, the sunshine around me quickly gave way to an icy storm. Fortunately, I was near one of the mountain huts, and hurried inside to wait out the storm.

As I unpacked crackers and cheese for an impromptu lunch, I looked out through the weathered glass window. Suddenly, a currawong swooped down out of nowhere and perched on a rail outside the window. Like a scene from a nightmare, its bright yellow eyes peered in at me and my collection of snacks. I had a sneaking suspicion that this bird had followed me from the track's start.



Currawongs are a constant, staring presence in Tasmania's mountains

Impervious to the cold snow and wind, it stood stock-still, watching me intently. While I knew, rationally, that I had nothing to fear from this bird on the other side of the glass, I found its audacious stare unsettling.

When the storm cleared, I exited the hut and the currawong flew off shrieking. I continued walking. The mountains towered above, masses of columnar crystals gouged by ice into peaks and ridges. Below the rocky peaks, the slopes were cloaked in impenetrable forests and swamps. From the safety of the Track, I was able to move quickly over the bare rock and thin soil.

The track soon took me into beautiful, peaceful forests: moss-carpeted groves of evergreen celery-top pine, southern beech, and Blackwood acacia. These woods are among the few remnants of once widespread forests, and this kind of ecosystem is to be seen nowhere else in the world. These kinds of trees would have been present in Antarctica when it and Tasmania were conjoined 45 million years ago. I was getting a glimpse into the ancient geological past of the southern hemisphere.

I walked through beautiful forests, but on nearly every day of my journey, I couldn't avoid the sight of currawongs. They seemed to have followed me like an evil omen. I harboured darkly humorous, mildly-obsessive thoughts about these birds, for I could never predict when they would show up. It was true that these birds were natural creatures in one of earth's last wilderness landscapes, but their constant presence and stares, and their black ugly appearance were disconcerting me.

But my suspicion that currawongs were up to no good was confirmed at the base of Mount Ossa, the highest peak on the island at 1,617m. At the base, I found a dozen backpacks left behind by climbers who had gone up Mount Ossa. These bags were wrapped in plastic for protection from the elements—and the currawongs.

I placed my backpack in a heavy plastic bag, left it at the base, and began to climb Mount Ossa. The sun was shining and though the track was rocky, I was soon on the roof of the island. As I saw the snowfields and flowerbeds from the summit of Mount Ossa, I tried to forget the exhaustion of the days I'd spent walking—and the memories of the currawongs' glares.

After I descended, I found a small tear in my backpack and scattered bits of plastic wrapper. My backpack had been the target of at least one sharp currawong beak. I sighed in resignation. As I cleaned up the fragments, I wondered again if it had been the same bird that had been eyeing me at the hut.

I headed downhill from there, through the forest to the edge of Lake St Clair, Australia's deepest at almost 200m of depth.



Here, six days after I had set out, I arrived at the end of the Track. The currawongs were still with me. They wheeled overhead, perched on wires, and tore at titbits they had stolen from careless tourists.

I entered a small lodge, purchased a sandwich, a salad, and some chips, and went down to the lakeside beach. Under the scrutiny of the hungry, inquisitive birds, I ate every last crumb,



and stared right back at them.

I'd not only traversed the Overland Track—but I'd also learned to look a currawong in the eye.



CHILD-FRIENDLY RATING
The trails are certainly accessible to children, but extra care will be required to make it a safe and enjoyable experience.

SENIOR-FRIENDLY RATING
There are trails to suit all levels, including short wheelchair-accessible paths.

LGBT-FRIENDLY RATING
Tasmania is socially progressive; the rights and safety of LGBT travellers

Getting there:

Melbourne and Sydney are connected by air to most major cities (via Singapore; tariffs start at ₹ 80,000 for a round trip), and to Hobart in Tasmania. Tour bus services, from the cities of Hobart or Launceston (\$55, around ₹ 3,410, one way), run frequently to Cradle Mountain or Lake St Clair. Renting a car (starting at \$40 per day) is an easy way to travel through the island to the National Park.

Places to stay:

On both ends of the trail, there are lodges, hostels, and camp grounds to choose from. Six huts are available along the Overland Track for walkers to stay overnight in. These are simple, unstaffed shelters with no food or bedding; you must still carry a tent as an alternative.

Places to eat:

Absolutely no supplies of any sort are available for sale along the

are protected by both law
and custom.

Track. Though a few groceries are available at the trail ends; you'll need to pack some from Launceston or Hobart.

Things to do:

Cradle Mountain and Lake St Clair are both well set-up for visitors at all levels of outdoor capability, and provide maps, museums, and advice. Many alternative trails in the National Park are easier, shorter, and faster than the Overland Track. To walk the Overland Track, you'll first need to arrange a permit in advance from the Parks and Wildlife Service (visit the information portal at www.parks.tas.gov.au/index.aspx?base=8080). In the summer season (October-May), you'll need to pay a permit fee of AU\$ 200 (around ₹ 11,800) per person. Arrange for a guide service if you haven't done a similar walk before.

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