

MAIN IMAGE: Caption to come.
OPPOSITE: Caption to come.

Witnessing change

YD BAR-NESS

In the far southern forests of Tasmania, the Arve Road to the Hartz Mountains and the Tahune Airwalk winds inland through some of the world's ultimate *Eucalyptus* forests. During a tense few weeks in January 2019, large expanses of these remarkable forest were scorched in a wide-ranging bushfire, starting a new chapter in a long story of rebirth.

You can easily and safely see some these striking landscape changes from the safety of your car now that the Arve Road is open up to the Hartz Mountains. You can travel into the Huon Valley (making sure to stop in at Geeveston to say hello) and head out along the Arve Road, following signs for the Hartz Mountains National Park. The farm fields appear untouched, with little sign of the determined struggle to protect the properties. But a few kilometres along, you'll enter the forest to discover the strong fragrance of peppermint and ash. The road curves its way to the valleys behind the mountain range, offering an intimate view of the burnt forest.

What was once thickly clad with our distinctive Southern Hemisphere rainforest trees has now opened up to the tall standing *Eucalyptus* trees above. Many of them –

especially the older and rotten ones – have died, but have already begun resprouting along their stems. Along with the new fronds of the tree ferns, these intense splashes of green stand out in the charred scenery.

However, the ancient beech trees and thickets of horizontal, massive tumbled logs melting into moss, have now been replaced by small fallen trees, charred chunks of wood and drier, crisper sticks jumbled in all directions.

Just past the Arve Picnic Area you'll come to the Hartz Road, heading steeply up into the mountains. You'll start gaining altitude and soon exit the burnt zone into the higher subalpine forests. Here, the *Eucalyptus* trees are smaller but, like the giants below, have been waiting for a fire to clear the rainforest beneath so they can to grow. Unfortunately for these upland *Eucalyptus*, they've missed out on this fire event, with the rare montane rainforest plants surviving another year. This includes the celery-top pines, Antarctic beeches, waratah and more, which you can discover at the mountain walking trails within the National Park.

So, things have indeed changed. The forest, as an ecosystem, is not totally



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destroyed, and the surviving *Eucalyptus* of today may be the exceptional giants of a future century. The rainforest plants will, much more slowly, begin to sprout in the shadows of the *Eucalyptus*, and if there is no fire for a few hundred years, they may return to becoming emerald mossy forests.

When I was a first year forestry student in Seattle, we learnt about the world's ‘sclerophyll’ (leather-leaved) forest zones. These fire-adapted forests are found in the temperate regions of western North and South America, the Mediterranean, Southern Africa, and Australia. I asked a professor if *Eucalyptus* was a sclerophyll plant, and he chuckled ‘*Eucalyptus* is the

ultimate sclerophyll’. These forests growing along the Arve are arguably prime examples of this ultimate fire tree.

It's been 20 years since that conversation, and 50 years since the extensive southern Tasmanian bushfires of 1967. Much has happened for us humans since then. However, those years have passed quickly for the centuries-old *Eucalyptus* trees, which have been waiting patiently for a burn like this one.

As we go year by year into the future, we'll be able to see the changes as the forest grows, and compare it to our photographs and memories of an earlier time.

Let's see what develops.