

Tasmania - The Devil's Playground



In 2005 I made two trips to Tasmania for the sole purpose of scouting sites for a workshop that I am planning with noted American photographer Bruce Barnbaum www.barnbaum.com to be run from March 17 to 25, 2007. Neither of the trips were leisurely as I had a lot on my mind and I was intending to cover a lot of ground. This was the first time I had been back there in about 4 years.

The first trip was made in early March a week after the Melbourne Airport shut down because of the mysterious gas scare. In fact I was there the day it happened standing in the queue waiting to check in. We were asked to leave quite nicely and the usual thoughts of today in a situation like this raced through my head as a few hundred people made their way, in a very orderly fashion, out of the airport onto the grassed area. The plans I had just evaporated in front of me.

The following week I was back in Tasmania ready for what it was going to serve up. A past workshop participant, John, met me at Launceston and over the next few days we visited Cradle Mountain - Lake St Clair National Park and Freycinet National Park. Both very beautiful especially away from the areas where the tourist Armada hang out.

I made a few images on that trip that I don't mind, but what was more important was I saw the potential for many others. Time of day and weather being very influential in the success of any image.

One image I did make on that first trip was the image you see here Blue Stone Bay, Freycinet NP. The image was made with a 4 x 5 camera using a 90 mm Nikkor lens. My exposure was 2 seconds @F45. I have also used a Red 25a filter to help bring out the clouds. On first viewing the proof sheet I had a mixed reaction with regard to my feelings towards the image. I always make a proof of every roll of film / sheet negative I make because it stands not only as a record of your images, but it helps you also to determine where to begin printing should you feel it warrants going a step further. My mixed reaction was, I wasn't sure. So when I am like that I usually make an 8 x 10" print which usually helps define whether or not there is some hidden interest or beauty contained within the image that perhaps as a proof size is not immediately apparent.

Once I had made a print my feelings changed and I could see more in the image than I had first imagined. As I stood looking at the print on my viewing board it started to grow on

me and so I began to think what I would have to do to balance out the contrast over the entire print.

One thing I did notice with the larger print size was that there was what looked like a vapour trail in the sky which I would have to meticulously spot out. Actually on further inspection of the negative it isn't a vapour trail at all, but one of those mysterious marks that you seem to get on film for what ever reason. Because I had to send some images via email off to Bruce for his web site this was one I thought I would include in the package. I decided not to spot the print first, thinking I would do that task after I scanned the image on the computer. Once scanned the rest was easy. That's one thing I hate about computer imaging, spotting prints IS so easy. It shouldn't be allowed!

With the image of Blue Stone Bay I chose a grade 1 1/2 and during my initial exposure I dodged the area of land upper left just a little to maintain some kind of detail. The sky, excluding the land upper left, was given additional exposure as was the bottom right corner and the white water around the rocks.

My second visit in 2005 to the Apple Isle happened in September and this time I took my wife, Jan along. She is always good for carrying my tripod so I saw her as an asset. This time we began in Hobart and headed down to the Tasman Peninsula. Some of the places we found ranged from picturesque, downright awesome to I'm not going back there again. Such can be the find when you are scouting.

One place that took my fancy was the Remarkable Cave as you can see here in the second image I have chosen to go with this article. It is just so fantastic to see how nature delivers scenes like this for us to see and photograph. Goodness knows how long it took to carve out the hollow that created this scene. Long before Tasmania was ever known to exist.

The challenge here is to control the contrast within the image. This photograph was taken on a 4 x 5" camera with an exposure of one and a half minutes @F451/2. I have used that aperture setting to maintain as much sharpness as possible from the front of the cave to the back. Not an easy task as the front was quite close to me. With regard to exposure, as I looked into the cave, the light became progressively darker and then lighter again. The other end of the cave opened out to the ocean. As hard as I tried, no detail at all in that mid section or above it was obvious, so a decision was made that I would concentrate my exposure on the areas where I could make out detail.

When I decided on the area where adequate detail was necessary, I took a spot meter reading of that area which effectively gave me a Zone V or middle gray. I then closed my aperture by one stop, to make it a little darker than middle gray, which meant that this area now fell on Zone IV. At the other end of the scale my highlights at the end of the cave were 7 stops plus more than my intended exposure. I decided to reduce development of the negative to bring down the contrast by two stops. The long exposure of one and a half minutes actually also increases contrast in the highlights by 1/2 stop so with reduced development of 2 stops and a half stop increase because of a long exposure overall contrast is actually only reduced by 1 1/2 stops.

Because I was using a 4 x 5" camera to photograph with, making a decision on individual sheets or images is easy. Each one can be developed separately as in this case. I think over the whole trip I ended up with two sheets of film where I had to reduce the contrast by

this much. I had others which didn't require as much, but was glad that I was able to be as selective as I was on some.

If you use 120 roll film and you have the advantage of interchangeable backs then you can keep all your increased development film separate, but if you don't have that luxury or perhaps you only have 35 mm cameras then it's best just to process normally. You'll only have a little bit of a headache later on when you decide to print that negative. One word of caution here, remember that by reducing development you will bring all highlight values down by a certain percentage. The closer they are to the mid tones the less they reduce. So you must be careful that you don't "kill off" any other highlights that might be in the correct place. If this is the case, may I suggest you process normally and worry about it later or perhaps go part the way just to help a little. The size of the over bright area can also determine whether or not you should reduce development or decide to deal with it during the printing stage.

Getting back to the print of the Remarkable Cave, with those high values showing good density on the negative, still extra burning in of those high values would certainly be necessary. As you can see in the straight print at grade 2, which is where I began, most of the highlights are blown out and the rock wall to the left is a little flat, so I decided to increase my grade to 2 1/2. When it came to printing I pre exposed those dense areas to give them a head start before adding actual image to that area. During my base exposure I dodged part of the rock wall at the top and slightly to the left. The upper right corner and bottom right corner were give 25% more exposure than the rest of the print and the "hot" spots were burnt in at grade 1 beginning at the top for 25, 12 and 10 seconds respectively. Although I could have gone a tad further at the top I chose to leave it as slightly over exposed because that is how I remember it. The light at the end of the tunnel was quite intense and I was happy to be able to see it.

The final image of this trilogy of Tassie is Ice Pool, Cradle Mountain. This was made during my second visit to the area on a coolish spring day late in the afternoon with patches of soft light peering through the cloud bank. Once I had set up my camera I waited in the hope that the light would alter which it did after about 10 minutes. Prior to that I had made all my technical decisions regarding the image. I chose a 90 mm lens on my 4 x 5, tilted the lens forward slightly to bring all elements into focus, placed a Orange 21 filter on the front and set the aperture at F 32. My exposure time ended up being 1 second.

Once I had taken my spot meter readings, at best, I was dealing with a 3 1/2 stop difference so normal development for this negative would be fine. The proof sheet was printed using white light on a colour head enlarger which is the equivalent to about a grade 2. Usually I will not proof this on a grade this high, but because I was printing onto a semi matte paper I have found for my liking that it requires more contrast than a gloss paper certainly for proofing.

The final print was printed on to my dwindling stocks of Polymax Fine Art Fibre base paper at grade 2 1/4. I pre-exposed the sky area to bring the paper up to threshold so as to put some detail in the clouds when the entire print was given its base exposure. As best I could I dodged the craggy mountain peaks a little as I knew that I would later be burning the sky in a bit more and trying to get into the valleys would prove difficult. I decided that if my dodging was inadequate or my burning a tad too heavy then I would lightly bleach back that area. I also bleached back some of the alpine heather around the ice pool.

Although I have told you what I have done with the photographs shown here all have required decisions that really only I could make. So often the tough thing is how much do you decide to dodge or burn. How much pre-exposure do you give and if you bleach a print where do you start and stop. When asked the question “how do you know when you’ve gone too far?” My answer is always the same, “When you have gone too far”.

It is these decisions that can make or break a print. Capture of an image is only one step in the journey to the final print. As always knowing what is possible and what you can do with your knowledge and tools can make the rest of the journey much more pleasurable. When you work with the materials you know and love, it will bring out the best work in you. Do not doubt it!

Cheers till next time.

Richard White lives in the North East of Victoria. His main subject matter is the Landscape and people in their environment. He is a Master Photographer with the AIPP and in 2003 won the Landscape section of the Victorian Professional Photography Awards and was awarded a Victorian Art Council Grant for overseas study. He conducts photographic workshops around the state and interstate and also overseas. For more information or a current illustrated brochure on these workshops write to Richard at P.O. Box 425, Mansfield, Vic 3722, phone / fax 03 5776 9533 or Email: ragwhite@mcmmedia.com.au Alternatively fill out the reader information card and circle the appropriate number. Richard’s web site is www.richardwhite.com.au