

Day 40 – At Sea – Tasmania and Prisoners – Black Tie - 5 Nov. 09: The day started with clear sky and temperature in the mid 50s F. The Amsterdam was sailing through the Bass Strait and then south along the East Coast of Tasmania on the way to Hobart. We spent the day finishing up the blog entry for yesterday in Melbourne and attending an Exploration Speaker presentation.

At 11am we went to the Queen's Lounge to listen to what Chris Mullane had to say about Tasmania and its Convicts. The following is a loose translation of Mullane's presentation based on a collection of scribbled notes.

Tasmania was discovered by Europeans in the mid 1700s and for a while they did not realize Tasmania was an island. By 1773 it was recognized as an island and known as Van Diemen's Land when Captain Cook visited the place in 1773. From 1717 to American declaration of independence in 1776 English criminals were sent to Virginia plantations to work as servants. The cotton plantation owners paid the cost of transporting the criminals to America in order to get the cheap labor. With the declaration of American independence England had to find some other place to send the criminals. They decided to send the criminals to Australia so starting in 1788 English criminals started to arrive in Australia. First they went to Botany Bay, but Sydney harbor area was just a few miles north and a much better settlement location so the criminal colony was moved there. Five years later (1793), in order to spread the presence of the English in Australia and stop incursions by the French it was decided to start sending prisoners to Van Diemen's Land. Later the Van Diemen's Land name was changed to Tasmania. In 1793 there were 4000 to 6000 Aboriginal natives living in Tasmania. Within 30 years, European disease and armed conflict reduced the Aboriginal population to about 300 people and a few years after that the last full blooded Aboriginal died.

The prisons in Tasmania were always dreadful places with little food and harsh treatment. Conditions were so bad that prisoners would devise ways to cause their own death. One technique was to kill a fellow prisoner so that the murderer would be executed and achieve his goal of death. The Catholic religion played a small role in this procedure in that a person could not get to heaven if he committed suicide. However, if he murdered someone and was subsequently executed he could be forgiven the murder and proceed to heaven. Another gruesome story that Chris Mullane related today was that prisoners would try to escape even though survival in the wilds of Tasmania was not possible. Some prisoners would escape to the bush and have to resort to killing and eating their companions when inevitable starvation set in. In the late 1700s the number of free settlers was increasing in Australia and political pressure increased to stop sending prisoners to the mainland English colony. By 1800 England stopped sending prisoners to mainland Australia and sent them only to Tasmania.

Finally in 1851 England abandoned the policy of sending new prisoners to Tasmania. The prisons in Tasmania gradually fell into disuse and the ones we plan to visit tomorrow in Port Arthur are maintained as tourist attractions.

Tonight in the Queen's Lounge we were entertained by the Australian cabaret act called Black Tie. The act consists of two brothers, Constantine (Con) and Yuri Mavridis and their respective wives, Susie and Valerie. Con and Yuri provide the humor and singing that moves the act along. For us the most artistic talent is displayed by Valerie on the piano and Susie on the cello. We enjoyed the whole show which was almost a word for word copy of their show that we saw during an Amsterdam cruise to Australia in 2008. It was good enough to be enjoyable the second time through.

Tomorrow we arrive in Hobart, Tasmania about 7am. Hobart is the capital of the Australian state of Tasmania. A community called Port Arthur is nearby and that is where the prisons were built in the late 1700s and early 1800s. We have an all day HAL tour scheduled to the prisons at Port Arthur while the Amsterdam is docked in Hobart.