



## The cleanest place on earth - and the dirtiest

The air quality at Cape Grim in Tasmania is officially the best on the planet - a world away from the grime and filth of Linfen in China. Photographer Angela Palmer set out to capture the essence of both places

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In March, I dreamed that I went to the most polluted place in the world and then to the cleanest. In the dream, I wore identical white outfits, which were then exhibited side by side in a stark white gallery. When I awoke, I resolved to enact my dream. It seemed like madness: I was preparing for my final show at the Royal College of Art in London and was intending to show work based on CT scans of an ancient Egyptian mummy. But the sense of "mission" was overwhelming. I jettisoned my original plans: this was to be it.

Research into the world's most polluted place pointed to Linfen, a city 485 miles (780km) south-west of Beijing, lying in a bowl in Shanxi province's coal-mining region. Linfen was named by the World Bank last year as having the worst air quality on earth. It features alongside Chernobyl in the Blacksmith Institute's list of the 10 most polluted places in the world and tops the list of most polluted cities compiled by China's own state environmental protection authority.

In contrast, Cape Grim, at the north-western tip of **Tasmania**, lays claim to both the cleanest air and water in the planet, largely due to the Roaring Forties, the winds that sweep in over the Southern Ocean. It is home to the Australian government's baseline air pollution station, whose unique "Air Library" collects samples as a "pure air" yardstick for scientists worldwide. I wanted to bring back this clean air - as well as the filthy air - and quickly these plans began to preoccupy me.

Fresh air must surely be the most precious commodity of the future. Unlike the world's land and water, air cannot be owned - there are no borders to confine it. Yet we knowingly infect it and in doing so infect our neighbours across continents. To try to gauge the difference between the two places, I left on my adventure with two pre-evacuated glass flasks donated by the Australian government to collect the air, a personal air pump to amass particulates on filters, and canisters to bring back water samples. In addition, there were two white linen shirts, white jeans and white cotton shoes, from Zara and Marks & Spencer, outfits which would act as blank manuscripts on which the air of each place would inscribe itself.

I reached Linfen to find the sun shining - darkness hadn't descended at noon as was claimed in some reports. No one was even wearing a mask. Were they oblivious to the poisons they were ingesting? Despite the many citizens suffering from respiratory diseases, lead poisoning and disorders caused by high levels of arsenic in more than half of the city's well water, there was no discernible sign of crisis or discontent. When I asked about pollution, people simply shrugged their shoulders, as if the question were pointless.

In the streets, men were playing Go at makeshift tables, young and old shop staff were throwing themselves into a highly skilled game of shuttlecock football, children were skipping and men and women were busily kneading great wads of dough.

The place throbbed with life. The streets, the walls and the oil drum "cookers" were caked in layers of filth and grime, and from time to time, great wafts of odour, like rotten eggs, would roll over everything. At night I left my hotel window propped open in order to run my air pump filter to collect the particulates. As I lay in bed, I thought of the chemicals, the unseen enemy, filling my room.

After four days in Linfen, I set off for Cape Grim in Tasmania. Here the rubble and diggers and filth were replaced with Constable-style landscapes. The trees were the height of Linfen's tower blocks. Great stretches of beach lay empty, with only the occasional footprint in the sand to suggest any trace of human life. An hour's driving was only finally interrupted by a sign advertising bottled water: "Cape Grim, Home of the Purest Air and Water on Earth, Jim's Plains."

After I had captured the air from Cape Grim in my flask, I tried to talk to the locals in Smithton, the nearest town, a 20-minute drive away. I had hoped to document the parallel lives of people living in such different atmospheric conditions, but while my pristine clothes and air filters remained unblemished, so did the pages of my notebook. The Tasmanian reserve was daunting. Barely a soul was in the street. People were tucked away in their houses behind net curtains. Picket fences surrounded properties. Perfectly manicured gardens were adorned with plastic swans. I began to feel lonely, and, as the days passed, to yearn for the sense of community that had been so electrifying in the streets of Linfen.