

Tasmanian tracks

HUNDREDS OF KILOMETRES OF TRAILS WIND THEIR WAY AROUND THE LUSH RAINFOREST, PRISTINE MOUNTAINS AND RUGGED COASTLINE OF TASMANIA. MATCH THESE WITH LUXURY ACCOMMODATION AND FINE FOOD AND WINE AND YOU HAVE THE IDEAL WALKING HOLIDAY. THREE *Luxury Travel* WRITERS PULLED ON THEIR HIKING BOOTS.





Arriving at Shoal Bay in the Maria Island National Park, aboard The Maria Island Walk's private boat, you have to walk the plank: actually, you jump from a ramp onto a white sand beach. It's just a short crossing from the Tasmanian mainland, and the sea is clear and turquoise-blue, the landscape is unspoilt. I enjoy imagining I am an early explorer, like Abel Tasman, who named the island in 1642 after the wife of his boss, Anthony van Diemen.

Maria Island's recorded history includes surprising facts: the unusual burial rites of the original inhabitants, the Tyreddeme people, the excursions of French scientists/explorers, the depredations of whalers and

THE MARIA ISLAND WALK

BY KEREN LAVELLE

sealers, not one but two failed convict settlements, and the eclectic development schemes of the charismatic 19th century entrepreneur Diego Bernacchi.

All these, plus equally fascinating details of the island's natural history, will be gradually revealed by our energetic and enthusiastic guides; but first we have a short trek across the narrow isthmus to an eastern beach for a picnic lunch, admiring the view of a cloud-wreathed Mount Maria.

Our environmentally low-impact campsite is a few minutes away. After ditching our packs, there's a choice: one of two

walks, perhaps a beach sojourn, or a nap on your camp bed? No doubt some of the success of this award-winning walk is due to the flexibility it offers.

Walking through tall forests to Haunted Cove is a good choice. We scramble down dramatically coloured cliffs dotted with the homes of agile fairy penguins. Maria Island is abundant with endemic wildlife and it also acts as an ark for other endangered species, such as Tasmanian devils, introduced here in 2012.

We see devil burrows, but by the time these marsupials are active we are fast asleep.

The eight-kilometre walk has helped our slumbers, as has our candlelit dinner. The feast begins early, with a choice of cold Tasmanian beers, soft drinks or fine wines, accompanied by local cheeses. A three-course dinner follows, including a sumptuous main of soba noodles with Tasmanian scallops, followed by a summer pudding of raspberries with King Island cream.

As well as being super-fit and disarmingly knowledgeable, our guides Sarah and Jess are accomplished cooks of the seasonal menu, which draws on fresh and locally manufactured food. My favourite dish, featuring barbecued lamb cutlets, quail, and duck and kangaroo sausages, is served on day two. This is our

reward after we discovered living fossil shells in the morning, and walked a leisurely 13 kilometres along five beaches, with lots of stops at points of interest. We hardly see anyone else, and arrive at our next campsite in time for a late-afternoon dip at a pristine and deserted beach.

Next day we have a gentle re-entry into civilisation at the World Heritage-listed former settlement of Darlington, where we stay in the renovated 1880s Bernacchi House. On our journey we encounter plenty of wombats, delighting one guest from WA whose main holiday goal is to photograph one.

That afternoon, the fitter half of our group of eight choose to climb with Jess up one of the dolomite-columned peaks of



PHOTOGRAPH BY KEREN LAVELLE



Mount Bishop and Clerk, but the rest of us are happy to rediscover the luxuries of hot water and freshly-made beds.

The combination of beautiful surroundings, moderate exercise, good company and freedom from everyday concerns is very relaxing. Tomorrow, our final day, we will

explore the ruins, the resurrected buildings and fossil-studded cliffs of the northern part of the island, before lunching en plein air, all the while admiring spectacular views; but our last evening meal in Bernacchi House's grand dining room is a suitably mellow and memorable occasion.

THE DETAILS
The walk is priced from A\$2,300 per person twin share including return transfers from Hobart, private boat transfer to the island, three nights accommodation, all meals and drinks, and two qualified guides.
mariaislandwalk.com.au

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Newly acquainted Cradle Huts guests sight their first breathtaking tableau – the spectacularly chiseled Mt Rufus – en route to the Overland Track, the renowned trek through Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park in the central highlands of Tasmania. The scene is an appetiser for the landscape degustation that will unfold before us over the next six days, complete with well-matched local wines!

Following introductions, gear checks and a brief history of Gustav Weindorfer, early lodge-keeper and promoter of the park, the adventure properly begins at Ronny Creek in the north and will end at Narcissus Hut at the head of Lake St Clair. Our group of eight guests and two guides begins the steady ascension up the

CRADLE MOUNTAIN HUTS WALK

BY SUSANNE KENNEDY

impossibly vivid Cradle Mountain, which plateaus at 1,500 metres above sea level.

The jagged Jurassic dolerite peaks of Cradle Mountain and Barn's Bluff characterise the landscape in our first couple of days' walking. These are the most physically challenging, as we adjust to long walking days with packs.

Over the course of the walk, the landscape will morph into grass plains, alpine heathlands, gorges, waterfalls, spongy rainforests and eucalypt forest. Along the way, we will discover original huts and stories of remarkably rugged historical characters.

We learn that this rich and complex landscape has taken two million years and three ice ages to evolve; that the nutrient stores of different rock underlays determine what grows above them. Nutrient poor schist supports robust button grass, whereas dolerite can yield lush rainforest.

As fitness improves and the memory of daily obligations fades, one is better able to take in and delight in the detail – a snow of Leatherwood petals on the track, the texture of the trees and mountains – and not all the detail is from the natural world. The calf tattoo of our lead guide Nick,

a rendering of a woman by Art Nouveau architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, becomes a constant reassuring presence, like the clear sky and the orange plastic triangles that keep us on track.

I am quickly taken with the landscape's changing palette: rufous, gunmetal grey, pineapple, forest and lime green, and the endless blue above us. We learn that the, soon familiar, toffee-coloured Richea scopartia flower also appears as white, red, pink, and that these can all be found side by side.

After our challenging first days, lunch on the third day on Mount Doris with its glorious views, boulders, cushion plants and delicate flora feels like a denouement (although not the last). Soon we will move along root-

mazed paths in moist rain forests, evocative of Tolkien worlds. And this will feel like a further reprieve after our (glorious) dry, open walking.

Compared with most who undertake this iconic 65 kilometre (minimum) journey, we undertake it in great comfort with the Cradle Huts operators. Our daypacks weigh less than half the average walker's, we enjoy hot showers, quality mattresses, and excellent food and local wine at the end of the day.

The more remote, the more one appreciates the simpler comforts and the more likely these might be elevated to the status of luxury. Given the choice between champagne and starting each day with dry socks and a lighter pack, I would confidently predict that most Overland walkers would chose the

Given the choice between champagne and starting each day with dry socks and a lighter pack, I would confidently predict that most Overland walkers would chose the latter.

latter without hesitation. At home, odourless toilets are unremarkable, but here a non-flushing toilet without smell is something to celebrate and marvel at!

Cradle Mountain Huts walking groups enjoy the benefits of two experienced guides who provide interpretation, meals and, not least, moral support. Nick and Kenna are a mine of patience and information about geological, botanical and human history in the park. They miraculously prepare the various and delicious meals at the end of the walking day. The menu was designed in consultation with Tasmanian celebrity chef Dan Alps to factor in limited fresh food and the absence of refrigeration. The five warm and simple timber huts sit discreetly in the landscape and are reminiscent of ski lodges.

The last leg is through cool temperate eucalypt forest. The birds that were notably absent for most of our walk are out in force around Narcissus Hut, the walk's official endpoint. The birds, lunch on the Lake St Clair jetty – complete with



a platypus sighting – and the ferry trip to the south of the park are unexpected delights. The moving botanical tapestry – of dark green myrtles, blue-green wattles and celery top pines – reminds us of the unfolding landscape we have constantly been surprised by, as we think “we did it!”

THE DETAILS

The walk is priced from A\$2,950 per person twin share including return transfers from Launceston, five nights accommodation in the Cradle Mountain Huts, all meals and non-alcoholic beverages, some Tasmanian wines, National Park and Overland Track passes, boat transfer across Lake St Clair, use of a backpack and Gortex jacket, and two qualified guides. cradlehuts.com.au

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Hiking Tasmania

WHEN TO GO

The Tasmanian walking season runs from October to May and the weather is reliably mild and dry. There are limited walking permits or accommodation options on some of the trails so it is advisable to book well in advance.

GETTING THERE

Hobart: Virgin Australia flies from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane to Hobart daily. Economy fares are priced from A\$85 one way and business class fares from A\$565 one way. Flight time is from one to 2.5 hours.

Launceston: Virgin Australia flies from Sydney and Melbourne to Launceston daily. Economy fares are priced from A\$65 one way and there is no business class available on the route. Flight time is from one to two hours. virginaustralia.com

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PHOTOGRAPH BY SUSANNE KENNEDY



The lines of a cuttlefish tell the story of its years. Every line is a day and a dark line spells a moment of immense stress. Our Bay of Fires guide concludes the fish in her hands has enjoyed a “stress free life.” I’m captivated. Further up the beach, as if opening a window to its soul, I break open another. Staring back are translucently clear lines of relaxed living. Lucky little fish. As I look up, I realise why. Before me is an intoxicating scene.

A Tasman Sea of turquoise rolls into white sands and smooth boulders are topped with a sprinkling of fiery orange. It is nature in her most decorated mood. And there’s not a human in sight; not a footprint to follow. It’s supposed to be a four-day walk and I begin by standing motionless.

Our cosy group of eight are trekking some 30 kilometres on the Bay of Fires Lodge Walk, along the fringe of Mount William National Park in remote northeast Tasmania. Hailed regularly as one of the hottest destinations on earth, one could anticipate a



BAY OF FIRES LODGE WALK

BY ALICE HANSEN

walk here might be special. But it’s not until I abandon my boots and hit the sand that I feel the magic myself. Punctuated by happy chatter among new friends, we cover nine kilometres on day one to reach Forester Beach Camp, nestled in a dune swale. I watch on as guides Kia and Bella are first to disappear into the clear waves. For a moment I disregard thoughts of

chilly Tassie waters, popping up beside them like a surprised seal, feeling invigorated.

We rise early to wander over the softest marsupial lawns. Here the guides talk about our environment with the type of innate love normally reserved for your mother. It’s a contagious passion that sees more than one of us duck off the path to collect

a castaway beer can. Somehow this walk instils the responsibility without words.

After we round the most eastern tip of Tassie, home to stately Eddystone Lighthouse (looking out to sea since 1889), the Bay of Fires really turns up the heat. Stretches of pure white seem endless, secret coves are trumped by the next, and I’m forced to surrender the camera to see this spectacle through both my eyes. Reaching Aboriginal middens, we are reminded of the region’s past. “We’ve been here just eight generations or so,” begins Kia, “while the Aborigines foraged for shellfish, dived for seals and hunted mutton birds for some 1,500 generations before us, right here.” I look down at the darkish sand where campfires lit the eyes of early European explorers, giving rise to the region’s name. As I imagine the hub of activity in this isolated corner of Tasmania; it’s a silent reminder of those who walked before us.

Further along, when we catch a glimpse of the lodge blending

A Tasman Sea of turquoise rolls into white sands and smooth boulders are topped with a sprinkling of fiery orange. It is nature in her most decorated mood.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALICE HANSEN



THREE MORE TASMANIAN WALKS

Freycinet Experience Walk

A four-day walk across eastern Tasmania’s Freycinet Peninsula taking in the iconic Wineglass Bay. Groups are limited to a maximum of 10 people and the distances are relatively short, with just under 40 kilometres covered in total. The walk is lodge based and the group returns each night to Friendly Beaches Lodge, an eco friendly property with two sleeping lodges and shared living spaces tucked into native bushland. Rates start from A\$2,275 per person. freycinet.com.au

The Bruny Island Long Weekend

A three-day walk that incorporates indulgence into the itinerary. Walkers harvest fresh oysters, sample wines from local vineyards, cruise the waters in search of dolphins and whales, and return to Hobart by seaplane. Walking is limited to five or six hours a day and walkers are not required to carry their own packs. Accommodation is in luxury safari-style tents on raised wooden platforms. Rates start from A\$1,480 per person twin share. brunyislandlongweekend.com.au

The Tarkine Rainforest Walk

This is the only multi-day rainforest walk in Tasmania and explores the remote Tarkine Rainforest in the northwest of the state. The four-day walk is based at a private camp in the rainforest and is a more comfortable option than the traditional tent-based Tarkine Trail. Rates start from A\$1,699 per person twin share. tarkinerainforestwalk.com.au

quietly into the landscape, our pace quickens. It promises a footbath, three courses of chef-designed Tasmanian goodness and a hot shower. The architecturally elegant lodge with its commanding deck 40 metres above the sea touches so lightly one almost feels suspended above the landscape. Inside, cheery guides work like fairies, fluttering about topping glasses with local wine, so intent on making your stay special you just want to tuck them to bed after their 16-hour days.

Commitment to sustainability is somehow balanced effortlessly with five-star dining and luxuries. Yes they’re composting toilets and there’s no pointed tip on your toilet paper, but where can you laze back in a pink-hazed bathtub of rosella goodness, breathing in salty views? Or in my case, enjoy a head massage where Celia’s hands elevate you to a new world of calmness. This is five stars with a thousand stars above.

On day three we set off amongst tall Peppermint gums, to arrive at Ansons River. We slip into double kayaks and a gentle rhythm as we paddle toward Ansons Bay. In fact, so leisurely I barely notice when Bella and I run aground on a weed bed. We are gently eased back into civilisation with a private visit to Apogee Vineyard. It’s like wandering into the tool shed of renowned winemaker Andrew Pirie, glimpsing the disgorging process and hand-crafted care afforded to each bottle. Apogee means “highest point”, a fitting end to a walk that moves you to a pinnacle of relaxation usually reserved for local cuttlefish.

THE DETAILS

The walk is priced from A\$2,100 per person twin share including return transfers from Launceston, three nights accommodation, all meals and non-alcoholic beverages, some Tasmanian wines, National Park pass, use of a backpack and Gortex jacket, and two qualified guides. bayoffires.com.au >>



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