


# Beauty and bounty on Tasmania's east coast

Caroline Berdon  Published: Thursday, 15 August 2019 3:23 pm



Maria Island, off Tasmania, has been a prison and an industrial site but is now a National Park. Credit: AAP

It's a typical winter's day on Tasmania's east coast - clear, beautiful and cold - and I'm thigh-deep in a freezing river, tasting oysters at a table of white linen.

Our guide Chella Armstrong from luxury lodge Saffire Freycinet is plucking the shelled creatures from their beds, shucking them and laying them out alongside dipping sauces. Geared up in waders, we help wash the oysters in the Apsley River, which flows from Great Oyster Bay. They're dripping, briny and salty-sweet.

There's an umbilical link in Tasmania between decadence and nature, between beauty and produce. The Apple Isle's rich green pastures provide some of Australia's best meat, wine and cheese, and its clean, cold waters some of our best seafood. I've certainly never tasted oysters so fat and creamy.

The turquoise sheen of our bay, about two and half hours north of Hobart by car, is surrounded by a visual feast: the white beaches of Freycinet National Park, thick green bush and the pink granite peaks of the Hazards mountain range.

Saffire, named Oceania's leading boutique hotel at this year's World Travel Awards, captures the view perfectly, from both the communal dining and lounge spaces and its 20 secluded suites.

It also encourages guests getting out to savour the area's abundant wildlife, bird life and marine life through 18 immersive experiences (including Freycinet Marine Farm). Within half an hour of arriving, we're in apiary suits and heading out to Saffire's hives, which house 60,000 bees.

In winter the bees are a little dozy and we don't want to disturb them, so we delve straight into tasting. One specimen is Leatherwood honey, unique to Tasmania, said to be one of the world's best: creamy, balsamic and fruity all at once, it tastes of the island's wilderness.

I learn two important lessons about honey. First, raw honey, with its delicate, herby flavours, makes commercial honey taste like nothing more than sugar syrup. Second, I discover how good raw honey tastes when paired with fine cheese.

Our indulging has attracted the attention of some awkward-looking, hobbling, but very cute animals.

Right next to us is the lodge's free range Tasmanian Devil enclosure, one of many around the island to ensure an insurance population of devils while facial tumour disease continues to ravage the species. These devils, now in their post-breeding geriatric years, know feeding time is coming and before long they're given a freshly killed possum. They work together as a team, tugging in all directions, and devour the fellow marsupial within half an hour.

Back at the lodge the fires are raging and it's nearing dinner time for us. Saffire boasts a stunning kitchen garden and its Palate Restaurant stipulates that 80 per cent of its produce be sourced locally on the island. There's grass-fed, full flavoured game meats, local fish and seafood (including those fat oysters from the bay), fresh herbs and spices and seasonal fruit and vegetables.

Discerning foodies from the mainland now expect nothing less from this island.

They also want to get out and explore Tasmania's beauty in style. Freycinet's jagged coastline is stabbed with secluded coves, while inland trails wind up to lookouts with breathtaking views of the bird-filled lagoons and ocean.

Wineglass Bay, with its beautiful, perfectly-curved white beach, is Freycinet's highlight and up at a lookout on this fresh July day, its waters are a topaz mirror, glassy still.

One of the best ways to experience in luxury the Freycinet Peninsular, the Tasman Peninsula and - between the two - Maria Island in outdoor decadence, is on Tasmanian Walking Company's Wineglass Bay Sail Walk, which spans four or six days. Sleeping on the spectacular Lady Eugenie, a 23-metre luxury classic ketch, guests enjoy superb three-course dinners based around local produce and wines either on board or barefoot on the beach.

Maria Island, an approximate half-way point between Freycinet and Hobart, was named for Dutch East India Company official Anthony Van Diemen's wife.

Nature is once again the drawcard here; the place is dotted with cute, furry wombats chomping the grass. I've never seen so many in one place.

These rounded marsupials didn't always have the run of the island, which lies 16km off the coast. In its past, Maria has been a prison for the first convicts, an industrial site, a probation station and a farming community, but the last residents reluctantly left in the early 1970s, when the state government turned the island into a National Park.

She now belongs to the wombats, wallabies, kangaroos, fairy penguins, Tasmanian devils, the endangered Cape Barren goose and the Fairy Spotted Pardalotes, which call the island home - alongside two rangers who stay overnight in shifts.

The multiple award-winning Maria Island Walk is the perfect way to explore this special place. Ian Johnstone and his wife Bronwyn set up the company in 2002 as an active but decadent way to enjoy the island's stunning landscapes, critters and patchwork history, while spending the night in comfortable tent camps and eco-friendly cabins.

Johnstone was one of Tasmania's first tour operators to have paired activity with appetite, hiring chefs among his guides and using local produce and wines on his walks.

One of the company's 30 guides Dayna Trevaskis shows us around and we stop for a delicious gourmet picnic on the white sand beach on the northern end of the isthmus that divides the island in two.

Like in Freycinet, the island tempts us with its turquoise waters and if it was summer, I'd be straight in.

But today the sea is cold; a crab crawls slowly along the shoreline and a wombat munches happily on the grass behind the beach.

A typical winter's day in Tasmania.

## IF YOU GO

**GETTING THERE:** The Freycinet Peninsula is arguably Tasmania's most popular wilderness area, situated on the east coast around two and half hours north of Hobart. Maria Island is just over an hour north of the city, which is well serviced by air from Australia's state capitals.

**STAYING THERE:** Saffire Freycinet is a luxury lodge with stand-out views. Visit [www.saffire-freycinet.com.au/](http://www.saffire-freycinet.com.au/)

Accommodation options on Maria Island are limited unless you're on a tour. A half-hour drive from the ferry terminal outside the village of Buckland is Twamley Farm, which has been in the hands of its current owners since the 1870s. Guests can stay in The Stable, converted into a cosy space with wood-burning stove that was built circa 1847 from rough local sandstone and blue gum timber beams.

**PLAYING THERE:** For more information on the Wineglass Bay Sail Walk, visit <https://www.taswalkingco.com.au>. For more information on the Maria Island Walk, visit [www.mariaislandwalk.com.au/](http://www.mariaislandwalk.com.au/)

The writer travelled as a guest of Federal Group and Tourism Tasmania.

## **'I picked up William Tyrrell': Dying man claimed he drove toddler 300km from home**

He was so distressed following the conversation he placed his head on his carer's shoulder.

**William Tyrrell**