



Opposite Right



The southerly wind whips up chilled spray as we scoot across Mercury Passage to **Maria Island**. A film of salt rests on my lips, tiny droplets linger in my hair creating a halo of dampness. Ahead looms **Mt Maria**, its summit concealed behind bleak low clouds that threaten rain. The sky is as grey as the sea. As we near Shoal Bay I idly wonder what Nicholas Baudin made of this place when he anchored here in 1802. Has it changed any in the intervening 200-odd years? Skipper Ben offloads us and our backpacks on the beach before disappearing around the headland. His departure is our cue to lace up our hiking boots and start walking. It's day one of four and we don't have too far to walk to our first overnight camp.

Keen hikers and nature enthusiasts, we've lobbied onto Maria Island, midway up Tasmania's east coast for what's known as *gliking* (as in glam hiking or biking). *Gliking is Glamping's* (as in glam camping) more adventurous, dare we say it, more interesting cousin. We're expecting wilderness and wombats, wild rugged coastlines and sweeping sandy beaches. But we're also salivating in anticipation of decadent dining matched with award winning Tasmanian wines sourced from local vineyards. Expectations are high.

WOMBATS IN THE WILDERNESS

The **Maria Island Walk** promotes itself as the '*best place on earth to walk off a gourmet meal*'. To this end our guides Ned and Abigail are carrying packs weighed down with delectable goodies. While non-perishables are brought in by camp crew, Ned and Abigail carry essential fresh goods in their packs. Like creamy bries and tangy cheddars from King Island and Ashgove to accompany pre-dinner sundowners. Or smoked chicken salad for picnic lunches. Berries for sumptuous deserts or piling atop breakfast pancakes. Vine ripened tomatoes and black olive tepanade for fresh-made bruschetta. It quickly becomes apparent that food is a major component of The Maria Island Walk. In fact scallop risotto flavoured with chives, saffron, a gourmet mixed grill served with cous cous and ratatouille are good enough to appear in some of Hobart's best restaurants. The fact that Ned and Abigail whip them up each night after a day on the trail is remarkable. Each night before bed there's the tantalising prospect of hot water bottles as well as 'bed tea' at dawn.

We arrive at **Casuarina Beach Camp** after an easy beach walk, choosing one of the compact yet cosy tents clustered around a central 'lodge tent' beneath eucalypt trees. Tents comprise twin

beds kitted out with mattresses, plump sleeping bags and walls of canvas that roll away to allow fresh ocean breezes to waft through flyscreens. Both camps maintain minimal environmental impact. Narrow boardwalks protect undergrowth from hikers, rainwater is collected for drinking and washing and modern composting toilets are installed. They even smell clean! Hikers are encouraged to pick up plastic flotsam and jetsom washed ashore and all our own rubbish is carefully managed for collection, compositing or recycling.

Relieved of our packs, before we settle too comfortably into Casuarina Beach Camp, we hike southwards through kauri forest to the mysteriously named Haunted Bay. With little to soften the swell between here and Antarctica, waves pummel cliffs of granite boulders laced with bright orange and green lichen. Legend has it that sailors forced to seek shelter in the bay thought that the wind through the kauris sounded like troubled souls crying. Though the sounds could also have come from the wildlife, of which there is an abundance. Fairy penguins inhabit burrows dug into precarious plots of dirt on steep cliffs. They peer out curiously as we peer in, equally fascinated.





Day two starts with an early morning swim for the brave in the gin clear waters of **Riedle Bay**. Though I confess the cold ocean only seems inviting after a brisk run along the beach. In lieu of a freshwater shower it's an invigorating start to the day. Oyster catchers wade in the shallows poking their beaks in the sand as waves retreat. A wombat scurries into beachside scrub, his big brown butt offered as protection against my unwanted presence. Freshly scrambled eggs with smoked salmon and chives await back at camp. Snatches of blue sky offers the promise of later sunshine.

Maria Island is blessed with an abundance of natural beauty and our guided walk captures the best of it. We rest our backs on convict built ruins over lunch while gazing across the sea to mainland Tasmania Kangaroos and wallabies laze in the shade of wind-hardened trees. Wombats graze on grass leaving behind their tell-tale cubic faeces. Five fabulous beaches later we converge on the best of them all. Four Mile Beach is home to **White Gums Beach Camp**. A crescent shaped cove surrounded by gum trees, the beach is a wisp of soft white sand kissed by turquoise water. Bathed in late afternoon sunshine, Abigail and Ned bring chilled wine and a cheese platter to the beach where we enjoy convivial sundowners with cool beach sand massaging weary feet. After slipping off to sleep beneath a star filled sky, **day three** sees a return to semi civilisation with the convict-era settlement of Darlington our destination. It's also our last full day on the trail so we make the most of it. Beyond gloriously sea-sculpted Painted Cliffs, dolerite outcrops at the summit of Bishop and Clark beckon 630 metres above sea level. At this elevation a bitter wind rips through multiple layers of clothing. Unprotected ears are lashed with blustering ferocity. Hats are whipped from heads and never seen again. The views however are extraordinary and worth every skerrick of wind-chill.





Back at Darlington a fiery hearth in the formal parlour of historic **Bernacchi House** offers a warm welcome. The brick cottage is the former residence of 19th century Italian settler Diego Bernacchi who arrived on Maria Island with lofty dreams of establishing a vineyard. It was a worthy ambition which ultimately proved unsustainable. Fortunately our guides are better prepared and the wine flows freely on our last night together.

Sharing the trail with strangers, chatting idly as we hike proves to be one of the highlights of this four day adventure. With no electronic gadgets for distraction we spend our time connecting with each other, savouring our surroundings, devouring its history. Equally too we walk in silence, absorbing the tranquillity of this ancient island. The serenity we encounter is priceless.

But it doesn't last forever and soon Ben appears to return us reluctantly to Tasmanian civilisation. Stepping into the plush foyer of **Saffire Freycinet** after four days of hiking I feel a little under-dressed. Making regular red carpet appearances on 'best hotel' lists globally, Saffire is one of the most elegant boutique hotels in Australia. With a strong focus on wellbeing with a connection to the natural world it's also one of the most welcoming. Located amidst some of Tasmania's most striking landscapes, staff are accustomed to guests turning up brandishing well-worn hiking shoes. Settling into a walk on Freycinet Peninsula with guide Annie after checking out the brand new Tasmanian Devil enclosure with ranger Nicole, my attire soon appears appropriate. It's not until later, having soaked in a bubble bath while indulging in a bubble-filled glass of the pinot variety that a slinky black dress stashed in my backpack finally gets an outing. Dining in sophisticated **Palate Restaurant** overlooking striking geological peaks of **The Hazards**, it's an appropriate celebration for hiking Maria Island. Its how glamorous hiking should be, don't you think?