

WALKING ON *WUKALINA* COUNTRY

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Images by Rob Burnett for The Wukalina Walk

Tasmanian Aboriginals have been catching mutton birds since way before colonisation,' palawa man and guide Djuker Willis-Hart tells me. We're chatting about the cherished cultural tradition of mutton birding around the fire pit. Beyond the darkened sand dunes, the sounds of the Tasman Sea rushing ashore can be heard over the crackle of flames.

Djuker says that Bass Strait Islanders grew up 'going birdin' since they were young kids. 'It's a tough job,' he says, describing how a birdin' day starts at sunrise and doesn't finish until well after dark. 'On a good day, I'll try to get around 300 birds.' Mutton birds, otherwise known as short-tailed shearwaters, are highly prized for their oil, feathers and flesh and are exported commercially. 'I really like the taste of them,' grins Djuker.

We're a few hours into the four day-long wukalina Walk when we first taste this bird that has deep cultural connections. Stuckup Bird, where the flesh is pierced on a wire frame and grilled over coals, is a traditional way of serving the rich, gamey meat. It's the first of many opportunities to delve deep into the cultural traditions of Tasmania's palawa people.





On the north east coast in Tasmania's Bay of Fires region, *krakani lumi* (which loosely translates as resting place) is our base camp for two nights. Architecturally designed sleeping pods blend seamlessly into the landscape with their charred Tasmanian Oak cladding and gorgeous domed timber ceilings. Simply furnished with twin mattresses draped with kangaroo skins, hinged shutters provide ventilation and zip up screens keep the wildlife at bay. Each evening I fall asleep lulled by the soothing sounds of the sea just over the dunes, cooled by breezes scented with saltbush and lemon myrtle.

With communal bathrooms, a dining room, kitchen and a large three-sided dome forming the central hub of camp, we gather in front of the fire pit as Djuker performs a welcome to country ceremony. Smoke tendrils waft on the breeze as he talks about the 'cleansing spirit,' explaining how this ritual helps to rid himself of anguish, banishes negativity and removes any lingering bad spirits.

A thoughtful man who eloquently shares his knowledge of cultural traditions and practices, Djuker proves to also be an excellent cook. Wielding tongs in one hand, fire resistant glove in the other, he produces tasty morsels like scallops drizzled with garlic butter, lemon pepper and saltbush leaves he's plucked along the trail on the way into camp. Other times, he and fellow guide Carleeta Thomas serve up *Saltbird* - traditionally salted mutton bird, just as their ancestors used to do - wallaby shanks, oysters garnished with wallaby salami and damper cooked in the coals, deliciously crunchy on the outside, soft and chewy on the inside. Meals are a convivial time, shared over a communal table where it feels like dining with long-time friends, such is the intimate nature of this small group experience.

Elder Aunty Sharon Holbrook is in charge of keeping hikers adequately nourished, starting with the home-baked scones, jam and cream we devoured back in Launceston before departing for the trail head at the base of Mount William, from which the *wukalina Walk* takes its name. But it's the landscape that commands most of our attention. A short walk from our beachside camp,



Carleeta and Djuker lead us over the sand dunes of Cod Bay and down into a valley. This is a sacred midden site where palawa people once feasted, hunted and raised families. They point out random artefacts, like chiselled stones used for cutting and fish bones sharpened into barbed hooks. Where the wind has eroded the dunes, we see layer upon layer of discarded shells, evidence of tens of thousands of years of occupation. Fossilised grass trees link to a time when this place was once a forest.

Pointing out saltbush, pigface and cuttlefish carcasses, Djuker opens his arms wide and laughs, saying, 'this place was pretty much Woollies, Bunnings and the pharmacy all rolled into one.' Carleeta is a proud pakana woman who grew up on Cape Barren Island, known as truwana in her native language. 'I loved growing up there,' she says of the island laying low on the horizon behind her shoulder. 'There was only 10 or 15 kids in school.'

On the walk back to camp she talks about her strong connection to the islands. 'The things that happened to the women that sealers took to Cape Barren Island weren't very nice,' she says, gazing forlornly across a sparkling aquamarine ocean. She's referring to a traumatic post-colonial legacy that's been passed down through generations of Tasmanians. During this dark period in Australia's history, European settlers moved into north east Tasmania, hunting fur seals for a developing industry. Sealers bartered with Aboriginal communities, trading flour, kangaroo and mutton bird for women for the duration of the seal hunting season. Later, when seal numbers declined and camps were established in Bass Strait islands like Cape Barren, women were abducted for economic and sexual purposes, forcefully taken to the islands as 'wives' by the sealers. Archival documents tell the story of one such woman named Bullrer from Cape Portland, who told conciliator George Robinson in 1830 that she was abducted by sealer James Munro 'when she could only crawl'.





By the 1820's, island communities were placing increasing emphasis on harvesting mutton bird (known as yola in palawa kani language) in favour of fur seals, a practice that Aboriginal people had used to sustain themselves for eons. Birdin' continues today and each year at the end of summer Carleeta returns to help with annual mutton bird harvest. After two nights at krakani lumi, our longest hiking day looms with a 17km walk following the magnificent coastline. We're bound for larapuna where the pink-hued granite tower of Eddystone Lighthouse marks our destination. Every so often we leave the beach, ducking inland onto a shaded trail that winds through stunted forest. Crossing Deep Creek we remove our shoes and wade barefoot through crystal clear water, keeping an eye out for Forester kangaroos which are endemic and were once in danger of becoming extinct.

We don't see kangaroos until early on our last morning, but it matters not. The landscape is a striking diversion, particularly when viewed from the top of Eddystone Point lighthouse. The headland where the lighthouse and adjacent keepers' cottages dominate, conceals an historic midden now covered by coastal scrub. It's a culturally significant site and was used regularly by large numbers of palawa over eons who migrated seasonally to the coast to hunt fur seal and mutton bird. Local granite was quarried to build the lighthouse which has guided ships navigating Bass Strait since 1889. The keepers' cottage has been beautifully restored and is our accommodation for the final night. Artworks and artefacts adorn the bedrooms, which are all polished timber floors, high ceilings and solid walls that keep the Roaring Forties at bay. As darkness falls upon the Tasman Sea outside, we tuck into wallaby lasagne, savouring the opportunity to explore this country with those whose ancestors may well have feasted on the same ground beneath our feet.

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