





# WALK ABOUT

Lara Brunt goes off-grid on **Maria Island** in Australia and discovers an unspoilt isle teeming with unique wildlife



As we walk along the bush track, the air thick with the honey-like scent of eucalyptus trees in bloom, a brown ball covered in spines waddles across our path. Sensing danger, the echidna goes to ground, burying his long snout in the leaves, reckoning that if he can't see us, we definitely can't see him. Despite growing up in Australia, I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen one of these shy creatures in the wild.

Encounters like this are commonplace on Maria Island (oddly pronounced 'Mariah', as in Carey), a pristine island off the east coast of Tasmania that was thankfully unaffected by Australia's recent bushfire crisis. Declared a national park in 1972 and accessible only by ferry, the island's carefully managed conservation programme has seen booming numbers of weird and wonderful Aussie wildlife, including wombats, wallabies, kangaroos, pademelons, echidnas and possums.

Maria Island has also become something of a latter-day Noah's Ark, with vulnerable species such as Cape Barren geese and Forester kangaroos shipped here for insurance. Meanwhile,

## ‘IT FEELS LIKE THE PERFECT OFF-GRID ESCAPE FOR THESE TURBULENT TIMES’

the Tasmanian devil, a meat-eating marsupial famous for its spine-chilling screeches, has been saved from extinction after being decimated by a rare facial cancer. Over the past eight years, 34 disease-free devils have been introduced to Maria Island, which now boasts a healthy population of more than 100.

With its white-sand beaches, ancient eucalypt forests and soaring dolerite columns, animals are not the island's only draw. I'd come to do the Maria Island Walk, an active but pampered four-day adventure led by guides Dan and Gemma. Fuelled by gourmet Tassie

food and staying in glamping cabins, the 40km walk from south to north is not terribly demanding, even for a novice hiker like myself. It feels like the perfect off-grid escape for these turbulent times; in four days, we stumble upon only one other walker (who looked pretty surprised to see us too).

Originally inhabited by the Tyreddeme Aboriginal people, Dutch navigator Abel Tasman sailed past in 1642 and named the island after the wife of his patron. The British established a penal colony on mainland Australia nearly 150 years later, before setting up a convict settlement at Darlington at the northern end of Maria Island, our ultimate destination, in 1825. Abandoned seven years' later, the island was then leased for whaling, farming and various ill-fated ventures, including a vineyard and cement works, dreamt up by a charismatic Italian merchant named Diego Bernacchi, before it became protected land.

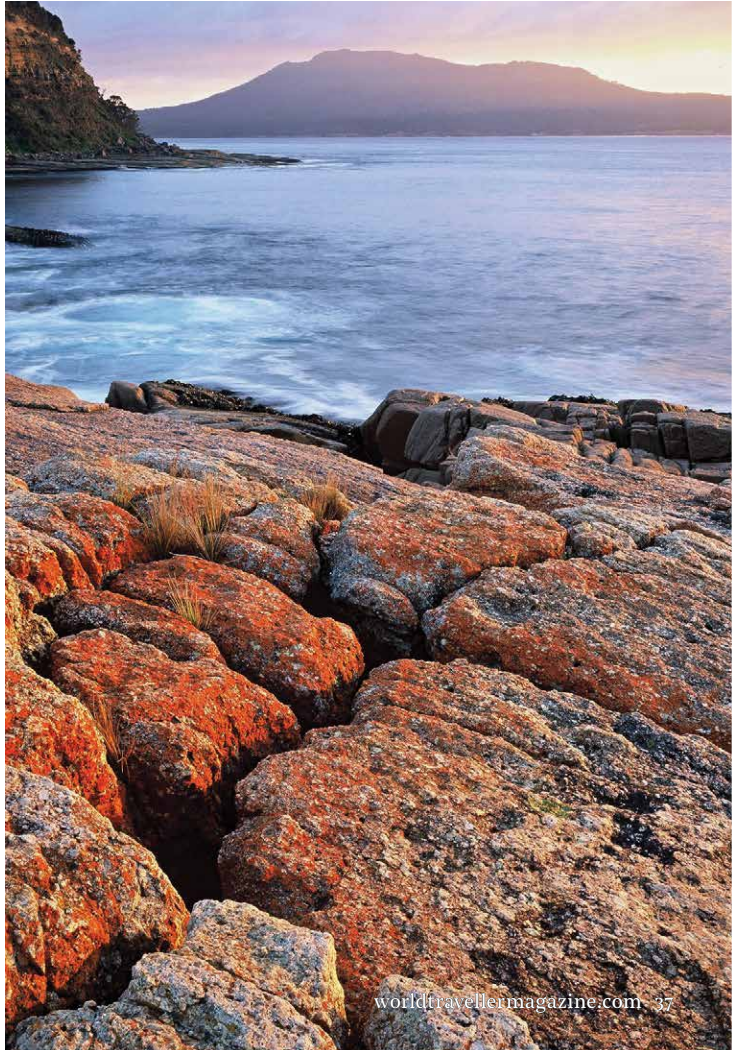
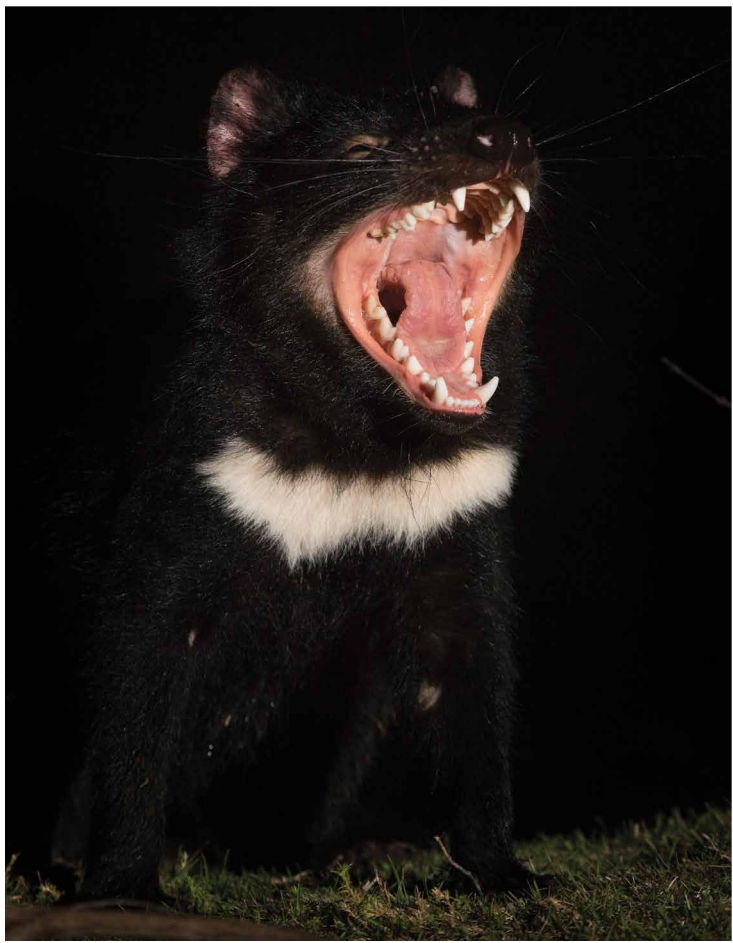
Departing by boat from Triabunna, a tiny town on the east coast of Tasmania, we arrive 30 minutes later at Shoal Bay. Small rays glide in slow motion







**Clockwise from opposite:** Darlington convict settlement; candlelit dining at camp; Tasmanian devil; the sun sets on the rocks © Rob Blahers; a wombat comes to say hello









A close-up photograph of two kangaroos in a natural, grassy environment. The kangaroo on the left is larger and is grooming the smaller kangaroo on the right. The background is blurred, showing green foliage and a bright light source. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

**“MARIA ISLAND  
HAS ALSO BECOME  
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NOAH’S ARK”**



through the turquoise shallows as we wade ashore and set off down the deserted beach, boots in hands and sand between our toes. The island is 20km long and 13km across at its widest point, but we cross the narrow isthmus that connects the north and south parts, giving Maria Island an hourglass shape.

After settling into Casuarina Beach Camp, a permanent eco-camp hidden among the trees with six green canvas and wood cabins and a swanky communal dining area, our group of ten – Belgians, Canadians, Aussies and a Brit – set off for an 8km round-trip under towering blue gums to Haunted Bay (spotting our spiky echidna friend along the way).

With boulders covered in blood-red lichen and a resident penguin colony, the bay is incredibly photogenic, despite its mournful moniker. “The name is said to come from the tortured souls of whalers once stationed here, or the cries of baby penguins as they wait for mum to bring food home,” Dan tells us.

By the time we stroll back into camp, canapés are ready and dinner is well under way. We may be on an uninhabited island with no mobile phone signal, but Dan and Gemma rustle up a top-notch meal of bruschetta with vine-ripened tomatoes and goats’ cheese, followed by a saffron risotto with Spring Bay scallops, and a summer berry pudding with King Island cream. Time to loosen those trousers.

We wake to the sound of twittering wattlebirds, ready for the longest stretch of the walk, covering some 14km over flat bush tracks and five sandy beaches. Heading north, we stop for morning tea at an old farmhouse at French’s Farm, with the nearby shearing shed hinting at Maria Island’s previous life as a sheep-farming outpost for more than 150 years.

We follow kangaroo tracks along the beach, as the clearest waters I’ve ever seen lap the shore and dramatic storm clouds gather overhead. From the crest of the hill at Point Lesueur we spy the red-brick ruins of a convict probation station that operated from 1842 and 1850, and marvel at the orange and red cliffs that were an important source of ochre for the Tyreddeme Aborigines.

After stopping for lunch, we come across a grassy headland dotted with dozens of bare-nosed wombats and

## ‘WILD AND WINDSWEPT, THE PRISTINE COASTLINE OF THE FREYCINET PENINSULA STRETCHES OUT BEFORE US’



carpeted with their distinctive cube-shaped dung. Normally nocturnal, the tank-like marsupials are happy to graze all day long on Maria. And while they look dozy, the average wombat could out-sprint a human in a 100-metre dash. We even catch sight of a “two-headed” wombat, with a baby joey sticking out of mum’s pouch at the rear.

Arriving at another impeccably organised camp, I enjoy a wonderfully hot bush shower, before sitting down to miso soup with wakame seaweed and shitake mushrooms, followed by a gourmet Aussie barbeque of duck-and-wallaby sausages, quail and lamb chops with spiced cous cous. After the day’s exertion, I feel like I’ve earned every bite of the flourless chocolate cake smothered in cream.

Day three takes us past the Painted Cliffs, swirling sandstone rock formations created by iron oxide-stained ground water, tides and wind, before arriving at the UNESCO World Heritage-listed convict settlement of Darlington. We dump our packs at Bernacchi House, an elegant 19th-century cottage where we’ll spend our last night, before the

more adventurous of us head out to scale the twin peaks of Bishop and Clerk.

Following the cliff edge, the track begins to narrow and climb as we make our way into the bush. We slowly zigzag up a steep field of fallen rocks, before scrambling up to the summit. Wild and windswept, the pristine coastline of the Freycinet Peninsula stretches out before us to the north, while massive dolerite columns plunge into the Tasman Sea as we look east.

On our final day, we explore the well-preserved buildings of the old convict settlement that was once home to 627 convicts, ever-watchful for a Tassie devil that has been known to sun itself around these parts. It doesn’t make an appearance, but as we sit on the verandah of a rustic cottage enjoying one last meal of freshly shucked oysters, it hardly seems to matter. *The four-day Maria Island Walk operates from October to April, while a three-day walk operates in the winter months from June to August.*

**To book a future trip, call 800 DNATA or visit [dnatatravel.com](http://dnatatravel.com)**





Previous pages, left to right: On top of Bishop and Clerk; kangaroos at play  
These pages, left to right: Painted cliffs; a couple enjoy the views at Skipping Ridge