

TASMANIA IS NOT A PLACE you'd readily associate with picture-postcard, white sandy beaches, but on Maria Island off the east coast of Tassie they are everywhere! My visit coincides with a hot summer and although two days of my four-day visit are overcast, the two that count are incredible and perfect for hiking and a refreshing dip.

Pronounced 'Ma-rye-a', the island is a National Park and pretty much uninhabited apart from a few rangers and an influx of summer campers. Originally inhabited by Aborigines, the island has a rich history of human habitation particularly in Darlington in the island's north.

Darlington's short-lived stint as a penal settlement in 1825 to 1832 was the first of many of the islands changing faces.

In the 1880s, Italian entrepreneur Diego Bernacchi launched a number of projects including wine and silk production, fruit growing and even a cement works. Unfortunately all were unsuccessful and after the cement works closed down during

ISLAND ESCAPE

HEAD TO **TASMANIA'S MARIA ISLAND** AND YOU'LL DISCOVER PRISTINE BEACHES WITH TURQUOISE WATERS, MAKING IT THE PERFECT WALKING ESCAPE FOR HISTORY BUFFS AND OUTDOOR ADVENTURERS ALIKE.

the Depression, only a few families remained on the island. Remnants of the island's past can be seen throughout the ruins and the remaining buildings scattered around Darlington.

There are a couple of public campgrounds and the old penitentiary has several basic rooms with bunk beds. The National Park rangers rent out bicycles if you prefer two wheels rather than walking.

For my visit I have joined the award winning 'Maria Island Walk'. The four-day trip leaves from Hobart and caters for up to eight guests with two

guides. Today I am one of seven guests and we are lucky to have an extra guide who is in training, so we get a little more attention. Over the trip, we walk about 40km but it's possible to do more if you choose to add extra side trips.

It's hiking and camping with a little luxury thrown in. You carry your own gear (minus food) as it's all prepared and served to you at camp. Accommodation is at two eco-friendly wilderness camps en-route that are for sole use by the company, and are similar in set up with twin-share tent/cabins and the best compostable



toilet I have ever come across. I'm so impressed that rather than making a quick getaway as usually the case, I marvel at the ingenious tap for washing hands and the innovative use of rice husks.

Foodies will definitely be impressed, as most of what we eat and drink is sourced locally from Tasmania. Both of these camps have a communal dining / kitchen where guests gather for scrumptious breakfasts and delicious gourmet three course dinners served with wine and beer. On day three we stay in Darlington at the elegantly restored house of Diego Bernacchi, enjoying a well-deserved hot shower.

Maria Island has remarkable wildlife, including the world's second rarest goose – the Cape Barron goose. We stop for morning tea at French's Farm and spot a tiger snake slithering into the bushes. There are also kangaroos, wallabies and pademelons and we even startle a wombat, who takes off as we approach. Twitchers will be kept busy searching for many bird species endemic to Tasmania, such as the forty-spotted pardalote and the Tasmanian native hen.

On day two, we walk along five beaches and each sweeping bay we encounter is better than the one before. There are steep rugged cliffs that plunge into wild oceans, and the spectacular sandstone painted cliffs formed over millions of years of weathering and stained from iron oxides, is a must-see.

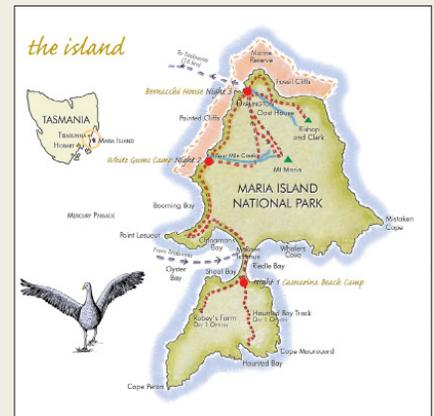
While the rest of the group take the low road and tackle a slightly lower peak called Bishop and Clerk, Frank from Melbourne, me and a couple of



guides opt to hike up 711m high Mt Maria. It's steady going until the scree takes over from shrubby plants and forests, and that's when the boulder-hopping begins. We scramble across the dolerite rocks as they become bigger and steeper just before we reach the top. The almost 360-degree view is definitely worth the effort, especially in glorious weather. To the south, we follow our tracks across the narrow isthmus where we stayed a couple of nights ago, to the west is a view of the mainland, while to the north, the Freycinet peninsula can be seen.

We celebrate our final lunch together with a local Tasmanian sparkling wine, while sitting on the steps of the ruins of the religious instructor's house. The group toasts to an amazing few days of good company, food and wine.

When it comes time to leave I hesitantly board the boat for our 30-minute journey back to Triabunna on the mainland. I could do with a few more days to absorb more of the Maria Island splendour. The beauty of the island speaks for itself, but it's 'The Maria Island Walk' that truly captures the essence of a visit to the island.



Prices are \$2,250 and includes transport to the island, two guides, three nights twin-share accommodation on the island, all food and wine, National Park passes and loan of equipment. Trips depart from October to April. The writer visited courtesy of The Maria Island Walk and Hike Centre.

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