



On the morning of the fourth day's walk on The Freycinet Experience on Tasmania's east coast, April Kiffin-Petersen and Tony Gibson were surprised to hear that their walking guide wanted to wash their souls. At least that's what they thought they heard her say.

"She beckoned us down to the shores of Bluestone Bay and asked us to sit on a wave-polished boulder near the water's edge – we wondered what kind of strange Tasmanian ritual was about to follow," recalls April. "Then she took out a stiff bristled brush and proceeded to scrub the soles of our boots."

The sole washing was to ensure that soil on their walking boots did not carry the spores of the root rot fungus *Phytophthora cinnamomi* from the southern part of the Freycinet National Park into an area that is free from the devastating plant disease, which causes dieback in vulnerable coastal heath plant communities.

"It's a good example of the environmental care that The Freycinet Experience people take to protect the fragile ecology of the region," says Tony.

Although they'd never walked in Tasmania before, the Mosman Park couple are no strangers to the outdoor life. Now retired, both have lived and worked in remote rural areas – April in the Kimberley and Tony at Port Keats in the Northern Territory.

Natural selection

"We'd heard about The Freycinet Experience and we're both interested in the environment," says Tony. "We've done quite a bit of walking in WA and we're aware of the impact that people can have on sensitive natural areas. We were expecting this Tasmanian ecotourism operation to be environmentally sensitive – but we didn't realise they'd go as far as scrubbing our boots!"

For April and Tony, this ecofriendly approach, coupled with simplicity and comfort, was a major part of the Freycinet appeal.

"We were keen to enjoy the walks, the wildlife and the natural environment," says April, "but we were also looking forward to the comforts of the Friendly Beaches Lodge, home base for the four day trip. We loved its stylish, simple and imaginative design, and the way it fitted so seamlessly into the coastal setting."

Joan Masterman, who established The Freycinet Experience 15 years ago with business partner and architect Ken

WITH A COMBINATION OF COMFORT, SIMPLICITY AND SUSTAINABILITY, ECOFRIENDLY HOLIDAYS PROVIDE THE PERFECT OPPORTUNITY TO ENJOY NATURE AT ITS BEST, WRITES CHRIS VINEY.



Latona, says that the ecologically sustainable principles on which the Friendly Beaches Lodge was established haven't changed.

"The lodge uses solar powered lighting, composting toilets and rainwater tanks," says Masterman. "All the design characteristics that won a 1993 National Architecture Award are a critical aspect of the presence of the place."

Back then, the judges praised the timber clad lodge's sensitivity to its site, noting that it "breathed the serenity and beauty of a coastal bushland setting".

April and Tony agree. "It's such a private and isolated location," says April. "We wandered on the beach and hardly saw anyone else's footprints, except, of course, for the crisscrossing tracks of wallabies, wombats, quolls, oystercatchers, swans and pelicans on the firm sand around Saltwater Lagoon."

April and Tony discovered that the simplicity behind an ecologically sustainable tourism operation doesn't mean that guests have to 'rough it'. "Far from it," says April. "It's true that on the first day, Tony and some of the others were sent out

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Far left: The Freycinet Experience is both environmentally sensitive and visually stunning. Left: Walking boots are a must when staying at Friendly Beaches Lodge. Above: The Lodge's coastal setting was a major drawcard for Tony Gibson and April Kiffin-Petersen.

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TRAVEL

to catch dinner – fresh flathead, hooked from our cruise boat in the Schouten Passage – but that night, thanks to the hunter gatherers, we all enjoyed the fish dressed with homemade tartare sauce and a mango, coriander and lime salsa.”

Superb catering is a feature of quality ecotourism operations and The Freycinet Experience is no exception.

“The meals were excellent, matched with Tasmanian wines from the East Coast region,” says Tony.

Outstanding interpretation of the natural and cultural heritage is another key ecotourism factor.

“Our young guides were very knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the flora, fauna and human history of the Freycinet region,” says April.

“They opened our eyes to things we would surely have missed – things like the Aboriginal marker tree at the start of one of their ancient trade routes and the sea eagle’s nest high in an old eucalypt.”

The Freycinet Experience was one of Tasmania’s first ecotourism operations. According to Kristie Gray, Business Development Manager with Ecotourism



Guests are attracted to the Friendly Beaches Lodge for its seamless connection to the natural environment.

“Discerning travellers are looking for experiences with a genuine connection to the outside world.”

Australia, the boom in environmentally sensitive tourism continues to grow.

“Consumers are becoming more informed and are seeking more natural experiences,” explains Kristie. “This has driven the increase in the number of ecotourism operators.

“Discerning travellers are looking for experiences that are authentic and engaging, with a genuine connection to the natural world. At the same time,

people want to go back to everyday life with a sense of renewal.”

That was certainly April and Tony’s experience – and they still smile over the sole washing incident at Bluestone Bay.

“Although it was only our boots that were washed that day, the odd thing is that after four days experiencing the beauty and serenity of the place, we really did feel as if our souls had also been refreshed,” says April. 🕒

AT ONE WITH NATURE

ECO RESORTS, ECO RETREATS, ECO LODGES – CALL THEM WHAT YOU WILL, THEIR POPULARITY IS SOARING AND THEY’RE POPPING UP ALL OVER THE LAND. HERE ARE SOME OF AUSTRALIA’S BEST.



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In the cool mountains of Eungella National Park, the resort is a retreat from tropical heat, a base for walking and canoeing, and an ideal place to see platypuses in the wild.



CAPE CASSINI WILDERNESS RETREAT KANGAROO ISLAND, SA

Surrounded by a massive 400 hectares of coastal wilderness, the retreat offers an abundance of wildlife, scenic walks, healthy food, cosy fires and peace and quiet.



AQUILA MOUNT ABRUPT ECO LODGES DUNKELD, VIC

Adjacent to the rugged Grampians National Park, in bushland that is protected by a Trust For Nature covenant, the ecologically sensitive lodges are designed on sustainable living principles.



ANGOURIE RAINFOREST RESORT YAMBA, NSW

Situated on the NSW north coast and set among 600 hectares of subtropical rainforest teeming with native wildlife, this resort is close to the uncrowded surf beaches of the north coast.



KARIJINI ECO RETREAT PILBARA, WA

Surrounded by the breathtaking Karijini National Park, this luxurious, newly built eco-tent resort blends harmoniously into its natural environment of the tropical semi-desert.