



Story • FIONA CARRUTHERS

MOTHER NATURE

Forget David Walsh: it's Joan Masterman who gave birth to Tasmania's tourism boom - and that was three decades ago. A wool princess from the storied Ashton polo dynasty, the unlikely environmental warrior recalls the trials and tribulations of getting eco-tourism off the ground, Aussie style.

Nicholas Shakespeare does not use words lightly. So when the British author explains that staying at Joan Masterman's Friendly Beaches Lodge in Tasmania's windswept Freycinet National Park in 2002 was a life-changing experience, you tend not to dismiss it as hyperbole. "Seeing Freycinet Peninsula changed my life," says the author of 13 books including a biography on travel writer Bruce Chatwin, speaking from his home in Oxford. "The silence, the seclusion, the beauty of the beach. It's heart-stopping."

So impressed was Shakespeare that he not only returned to Masterman's lodge virtually every year afterwards, he bought a house in Swansea, 40 minutes drive away. Shakespeare is not the only big name bewitched by the charms of this eco-friendly wood and glass, water tanked, solar powered paradise that "touches the earth lightly" – as yet another past visitor, architect Glenn Murcutt, likes to say.

Those who've signed the guest book include writers Murray Bail and Drusilla Modjeska; Paul Thomas, the partner of Greens Party founder and former politician Bob Brown; former Labor prime minister Kevin Rudd and his entrepreneur wife Thérèse Rein; former NSW Premier Bob Carr; and Melbourne University's vice-chancellor, Glyn Davis.

Britain's indomitable food critic and travel writer A.A. Gill visited in 2014, confessing to staff that it was the first time he'd had to rely solely on a compost toilet. "We were so nervous," Masterman says, laughing with her trademark throaty roar. "I told my team even if he writes something bad, it doesn't matter: we still had A.A. Gill at Friendly Beaches Lodge."



Left: Clouds roll in over Friendly Beach. *Above:* Friendly Beaches Lodge.

Tasmania has always had appeal but its reputation as a tourism magnet, particularly in the categories of luxury and effortless cool, jumped several notches after the opening of David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart in 2011. Visitors can now choose from a range of top-end offerings, from MONA's guest pavilions, the Henry Jones Art Hotel, Salamanca Wharf Hotel and the Islington, through to the \$1950-a-night Saffire Freycinet, the recently opened Pumphouse Point on Lake St Clair and the Alstergren family's remarkable salmon farm on Satellite Island.

Its real claim to tourism fame, however, is as the hotbed of Australia's walking and nature offerings; more than 40 per cent of Tasmania is protected wilderness areas. In 2015, almost half of Tasmania's 1.15 million visitors took a bushwalk during their stay, making this the state's most popular tourist activity, ahead of visiting markets and historic sites. In Tourism Australia's Great Walks of Australia program, guided Tasmanian bushwalks account for four of the eight best bushwalks featured. "You could say it's become the power state of eco-tourism," says Masterman's 53-year-old son, Michael Masterman, a director of Freycinet Experience, which operates Friendly Beaches Lodge and its associated Freycinet Experience Walk. "Tasmania swept all the recent [Qantas] Australian Tourism Awards."

In 2015, Tasmania was the only destination in Australasia to make Lonely Planet's coveted list of the Top 10 regions in the world to visit, while Condé Nast Traveller anointed it a "go now" destination in December that year. *The New York Times* travel writers have long pushed its 20 national parks and forest reserves as world class.

But Tasmania's high-end eco-tourism journey began long before the current buzz around headline properties with their wallet-piercing prices, extensive wine lists, PhD sommeliers and flashy Instagram feeds. It started back in 1987 with Cradle Mountain Huts, the first overnight commercial



From above: One of many walking tracks in Freycinet National Park; Joan Masterman's parents, Jim and Irene Ashton, on their property Millamolong; scenes from Friendly Beaches Lodge.



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Joan Masterman

trekking operation in an Australian national park, followed not long after by Friendly Beaches Lodge, which opened at Freycinet to the south east of Cradle, in 1992.

Founded by Masterman and her then business partner, architect Ken Latona, these ground-breaking destinations celebrate their 30th and 25th birthdays respectively next year.

"Unlike in New Zealand, there's been huge opposition to putting huts and commercial ventures in parks here," points out businessman Dick Smith, who was among the first to stay in Cradle Huts. "Joan and Ken proved you can have a commercial operation in a national park without ruining it."

Latona has long since sold out and retired to the wilds of Tasmania, while the Sydney-based Masterman, who has travelled to Tasmania up to four times a year for the past three decades, intends to keep running Friendly Beaches as she approaches 80.

Shakespeare reflects on the "huge debt" Tasmania owes this 78-year-old, a figure little known nationally but one recognised by industry insiders as the matriarch of eco-tourism in Tasmania. "Joan set the benchmark for the environmentally friendly tourism that Tasmania is increasingly celebrated for. That was her," he says. "She's one of those people who's totally at one with her landscape, and she acts as a conduit for it."

The environmentally aware Masterman actually began life as a member of the famed Ashton polo and woolgrowing dynasty. "Joan definitely started out as a wool princess but I think there was always more wire than wool in her makeup," says Shakespeare.

Over a mid-morning coffee at Sonoma in Sydney's eastern suburbs, just around the corner from her 1960s heritage-listed Woollahra home, Masterman agrees that the environment was not a household concept where she grew up, on her father's 7000-acre sheep property, Millamolong,

about 50 kilometres from Cowra in the central west of NSW. Her grandfather, James Ashton Snr, held the state seat of Goulburn and was appointed NSW secretary for lands in 1904. Masterman's father and his brothers won nationwide fame in the early 1930s as the first Australians to ship their homebred polo ponies overseas and beat the English and the Americans at the sport.

Growing up on Millamolong with her sister and two brothers, Masterman had a childhood straight out of Mary Grant Bruce's *Norah of Billabong*. Think long days spent in the saddle, the busyness of shearing time and upwards of 60 working dogs on the property, plus a stint at posh Frensham boarding school. After the war, the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester came to visit. It was a golden era in many ways, albeit one with a completely different mindset.

"During the regular rabbit plagues we experienced in the country in the 1940s and '50s, I used to love hunting rabbits, digging them out of their burrows and wringing their necks," says Masterman. "I thought that was great fun."

The then Joan Ashton married lawyer George Masterman in 1961 and moved to Sydney, where the couple had two children, Julia and Michael. George was appointed a QC in 1972, becoming NSW's first Ombudsman in 1981.

Masterman obtained her masters in town planning from the University of Sydney then cut her teeth working as a town planner at the Sydney City Council, from 1976 to 1978. Many of the leading lights of politics and architecture were fighting to preserve Sydney's heritage buildings and the old finger wharves around suburbs like Woolloomooloo and Walsh Bay.

"All the green armbands were on," Masterman recalls. "It was a time when Gough Whitlam and his private secretary John Mant, Jill and Neville Wran – along with architects like Harry Seidler and Michael Dysart – were at the forefront of planning in Sydney."

She moved on to consult at the National Trust, where Latona was already working. After a few years, Latona



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convinced Masterman to form a consultancy with him, enlisting her to help with a commissioned plan for Tasmania’s historic site of Port Arthur.

“As soon as I said yes, the letterhead arrived in the mail stamped: Latona Masterman & Associates,” she says. “That’s how I knew Ken was serious.”

Masterman had made her first trip to Tasmania in the late 1970s, accompanying her husband on a work-related trip. “George said ‘Oh go on – come along, it’ll be fun’ and I replied, ‘No. Tasmania is too boring’.”

At the time, Tasmania was sold as “convict tourism”, focused on Port Arthur and Richmond Bridge. “Bob Brown has done more to market tourism in Tasmania than anyone,” Masterman says. “When I first went down there it was still the Apple Isle, named after an English tree. The whole convict thing was interesting, but a bit depressing.”

By 1978, intense activism was under way to prevent the Gordon-below-Franklin dam being built, led by campaigners like Brown, author Geoff Law and photographer Peter Dombrovskis. The latter’s evocative pictures of the site’s natural beauty are credited with helping stop the dam and bringing down Malcolm Fraser’s Liberal government in 1983.

“The No Dams election opened people’s minds,” Masterman says. “It certainly opened mine. Suddenly I realised how amazing Tasmania was – not boring at all.”

As her fascination with working in Tasmania grew, George got help in the home. “He was fantastic,” she says. “He took over the kids on the weekend and got me help in the house so I could make frequent trips to Tasmania and keep working. I actually couldn’t have done any of it without George or Ken. I’m no wonder woman. But I am a team player and I’m good at getting on with people – at finding the right people and getting them on my side.”

In 1985, the Tasmanian government began the tender process for a commercial tourism operator to build the infrastructure necessary to create a week-long overland walk

at Cradle Mountain in the World Heritage-listed national park. The Tasmanians had eyed their neighbours across the pond, seen the popularity of New Zealand’s Milford Track, which had had huts since 1966, and struck out to establish a similar concept here.

Winning the tender was only half the battle – possibly less. “I was at uni studying finance by the time they won Cradle Huts,” says Michael Masterman. “Looking back, it was such a pioneering step for the Tasmanian government to take, as it hadn’t been done there before. Suddenly Ken and Joan had won the tender to construct four private huts for walkers – and neither of them had any experience in tourism.”

It was a baptism of fire in more ways than one. “We had four months to build the huts in a virtually inaccessible national park and learn how to become tourism operators overnight,” says Joan Masterman. Then nudging her early 50s, Masterman describes being of an age where, although

Above: Joan Masterman in her home office in Woollahra, Sydney.

Below: Protestors at the Franklin River “No Dams” demonstration in Tasmania in December 1982.



she was robust, a bed was a welcome addition to wilderness. “I didn’t need full-on luxury,” she qualifies. “Just a mattress, a toilet and a door to shut on our bedroom at night. I was of an age group wanting exciting adventures but also a bit of comfort and privacy.”

The deal was that Latona and Masterman would lease the land, build the huts, establish a tourism venture – and pay Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park a percentage of turnover. Latona designed four eco-sensitive huts to sleep a maximum of 10 people each. The building materials were flown in by helicopter to minimise environmental damage.

Masterman worked on the planning protocols, interiors, and marketing side of things. There was plenty of opposition. The most emotive issue was the location of the huts. Latona relocated them on paper a number of times to ensure minimal impact, even to the button grass.

“To have a commercial operator in a national park was a big deal,” says Masterman. “A lot of the environmentalists, including Bob, were very much against it at first.”

Jane Hutchinson, chief executive of the Tasmanian Land Conservancy, looks back on the events of 30 years ago as a “game changer”. The opposition subsided when onlookers realised the limited impact of four well-located dwellings, plus the fact the huts would open the park to a new type of tourist perhaps not as independent or fit as an experienced hiker.

“It was one of those tourism products that had a level of difference and sophistication that Tasmania hadn’t seen at that time,” Hutchinson says. “Today, wilderness is clearly our point of difference and Tasmania’s slogan is now The Natural State. But they were really ahead of the curve.”

Masterman credits the sensitivity of Latona’s architecture and the long hours of public consultation he put in as turning the mood. “It also helped when people realised that just because you want to preserve forests, doesn’t mean they can’t be seen. And that parks can aid regional employment. Hikers don’t just hike: they buy things, too.”

In 1987, their first year of operation, they had a mere 86 walkers. There were not many more in subsequent years; hardly a sustainable business model. Then entrepreneur and environmentalist Dick Smith got wind of it and arrived with a team of journalists and photographers from his publication, *Australian Geographic*. In the magazine’s January 1993 issue, a 23-page story and photo essay titled “From the Cradle to Narcissus” was published. Bookings went through the roof.

Speaking from his home in Terrey Hills on the outskirts of Sydney, Smith remembers the moment well. “At the time we had 210,000 subscribers. After the article went out, they couldn’t cope with the bookings. I still rate Cradle Mountain as the top walk in the world. I’ve done Milford Track; the walks in Scotland, Switzerland, a lot of Europe – and I still would say for me, Cradle Mountain-St Clair is the best.”

Not one to sit still, Latona was already eyeing his next project: a lodge at Friendly Beaches in Freycinet, and huts on the Bay of Fires. In the 1980s, Latona had managed to buy 100 acres adjacent to Freycinet National Park. He set about designing a lodge comprising five buildings located about 100 metres from the beach, behind a natural fence of casurina, tea tree and banksia. “It was a miracle Friendly Beaches was ever built,” says Masterman. “We had so much opposition, including from the Wilderness Society. It was more intense than Cradle Mountain.”

Back then, the only other tourism venture in the area was the Freycinet Vineyard. The local council and Freycinet National Park finally agreed that Friendly Beaches Lodge could be built as long as it was sited on already disturbed earth, and couldn’t be seen from the beach. This earned it the enduring nickname the “Invisible Lodge”.

The pair took the same approach, with Latona designing the buildings and Masterman focusing on planning issues,

design and interiors, as well as marketing the final product. In 1993 Friendly Beaches won the Royal Australian Institute of Architects Commercial Award.

Even Brown was placated – eventually. When asked to comment, he shoots off an email.

“Joan Masterman’s lodge, hidden in the sand dunes behind Friendly Beaches, is a set piece in private investment in eco-tourism,” Brown writes. “It combined the purchase of private land almost surrounded by the Freycinet National Park with the aim of retaining nature’s predominance over the human-built intrusion. Joan aimed at matching the self-sufficiency of the modest lodge with informed and friendly staff delivering Tasmanian-grown or made fare.

“A night in this delightful piece of private enterprise, matched by a day walk along the publicly-owned and protected Friendly Beaches, gives the average visitor rest, recreation and a complete break from the hassle of city life.”

Modelled on the Cradle Huts idea of no more than about 10 people at the lodge at any one time, Masterman set about marketing a four-day walk that took in Wineglass Bay and the pristine beach. Latona was keen to involve her on his third project, at Wilsons Promontory in Victoria, but she resisted. “I had to tell Ken ‘I can’t do another walking project again,’” she says.

They had both paid a hefty financial toll with these projects, including Masterman using her Woollahra family home as a guarantee against the bank loan she took out to fund the construction of Friendly Beaches Lodge.

In 1997 Latona and Masterman struck a deal part ways, whereby Latona took full control of Cradle Mountain Huts, and Masterman acquired Friendly Beaches. Latona went on to design the award-winning Bay of Fires Lodge on the northeast coast. In 2007, after adding a fifth hut to Cradle Mountain, Latona sold his interests in both Cradle Mountain Huts and Bay of Fires to a private equity consortium headed by Grant Hunt, a former board member of Tourism Australia. Three years ago Virgin Australia co-founders Brett Godfrey and Rob Sherrard bought the business.

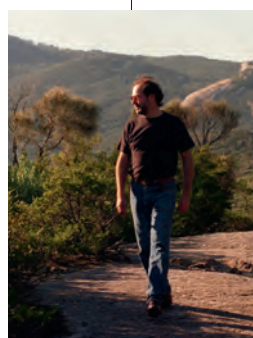
Like most of Masterman’s guests, Shakespeare arrived at the sandy doorstep of Friendly Beaches Lodge through a series of cultured Chinese whispers. “It was around 2002 and I’d been commissioned to write a piece on Tasmania for *Conde Nast Traveller*. My wife knew [Australian writer] Tom Keneally and we were staying with him in Sydney when we plotted the trip. I wanted to go to Tasmania since it was the only place where Bruce Chatwin appeared never to have been (apart from Baffin Island!); I’d just spent seven years writing Chatwin’s biography.”

Keneally made some suggestions, but it was Delia Nicholls (now at MONA) who put Shakespeare in touch with Masterman, around the time of the bicentenary of French explorer Nicolas Baudin mapping the Freycinet Peninsula.

Joan and George Masterman are passionate historians, and had devised a walk to commemorate the event, with George claiming he’d worked out from historical documents the spot where Baudin first set foot on the beach.

“I’ve sent a lot of people to Friendly Beaches, including Hylton Murray-Philipson, the environmental adviser to both the Dalai Lama and Prince Charles,” Shakespeare says. “They all come back saying the same thing: ‘It’s truly one of the greatest experiences of your life.’”

Shakespeare has written widely not only on the history of Freycinet, but more specifically a number of travel stories on Friendly Beaches. “If asked by the right person to nominate one of my favourite spots on earth, I would pause and, in my mind’s eye, take a breath of sea-air from a long, deserted beach



From above: Cradle Mountain Huts and interior; architect Ken Latona; Bay of Fires Lodge.



on Freycinet Peninsula,” he wrote on the lodge’s 20th anniversary in 2012. “I would try and describe a walk on white sand, past an inland lagoon flecked with black swans, along a wattle-shaded track impressed by the pawmarks of wombats and devils, to a lodge concealed in the trees.”

When *The Australian Financial Review Magazine* visits on a windswept autumnal day, Masterman is holding court in her sun-filled lodge, where art, maps and books line every wall, shelf and crevice. Her small team of young guides is busy cooking local produce in the open kitchen, brewing billy tea as they inform us about the area’s flora and fauna, tea towels slung over their shoulders. As Shakespeare attests, it’s impossible not to sigh that such a place exists.

The two accommodation buildings located up a path with shared compost toilets contain six cell-like sleeping chambers: all panelled wood, neutral tones and monastic style décor of bed, rug and side tables. These rooms offer the ultimate luxury of feeling weightless and burden-free. A student of Glenn Murcutt, Latona has described all the structures he’s built over the years in Tasmania as ideally “subservient”.

“I really believe people go to these places to see the places,” he told *The New York Times* in 2001. “They don’t go there to see fancy buildings. The architecture can be quite humble.”

Masterman doesn’t see these places as often as she used to. While she doesn’t get down to Tasmania nearly so much these days, there are no plans to sell.

“I have to rely more and more on my wonderful office manager Claire Richardson, my incredible guides, and now I have Michael home in Sydney to help,” she says. “But the plan is definitely to keep going.” That includes throwing a 1916-themed party for guides later this year to celebrate not only Friendly Beaches’ looming 25th, but also Freycinet National Park’s centenary.

After more than 30 years of pioneering work in eco-tourism, Masterman concedes to a lingering sense of unease. She’s proud of helping open up Tasmania’s parks to a new type of tourist but worries about how development might spiral.

“I feel the entrances to a lot of parks are being devalued these days with more carparks, more toilet blocks, centres of learning and the like,” she says. “I know the parks are under pressure – but it’s important to maintain the values of these places; to put nature first.” ●