

{ DESTINATION AUSTRALIA }

Trails of the unexpected

Tasmanian devils and dancing dolphins on the Freycinet Peninsula

HELEN MCKENZIE

THE teenagers in our lives bill our long weekend away as a “couples’ retreat”. This label does not sit well with us; it refers to a pretty ordinary movie of the same name and suggests we could need therapy, just like the on-screen characters.

Jokes aside, time out in Tasmania is keenly anticipated by five city-slicker couples keen for long bushwalks and great food and wine.

The four-day Freycinet Experience Walks run from November to May, from Friday mornings to Monday afternoons. We set off in mid-March, assembling at a Hobart hotel to meet guides Jodie and Warwick, who issue rain jackets and daypacks and show us a map of the Freycinet Peninsula.

We motor in a minibus north along the coast, stopping briefly for morning tea (delicious raspberry friands) at Spiky Beach, near the convict-built Spiky Bridge, and then on to Coles Bay where a motorboat is ready for an exploratory trip about Great Oyster Bay and Schouten Island, at the southern end of the peninsula.

It is too rough for an extensive voyage so we pull into Hazards Beach for a swim and a picnic. We have this pristine part of the peninsula to ourselves and soon feel the shackles of city life loosening a little.

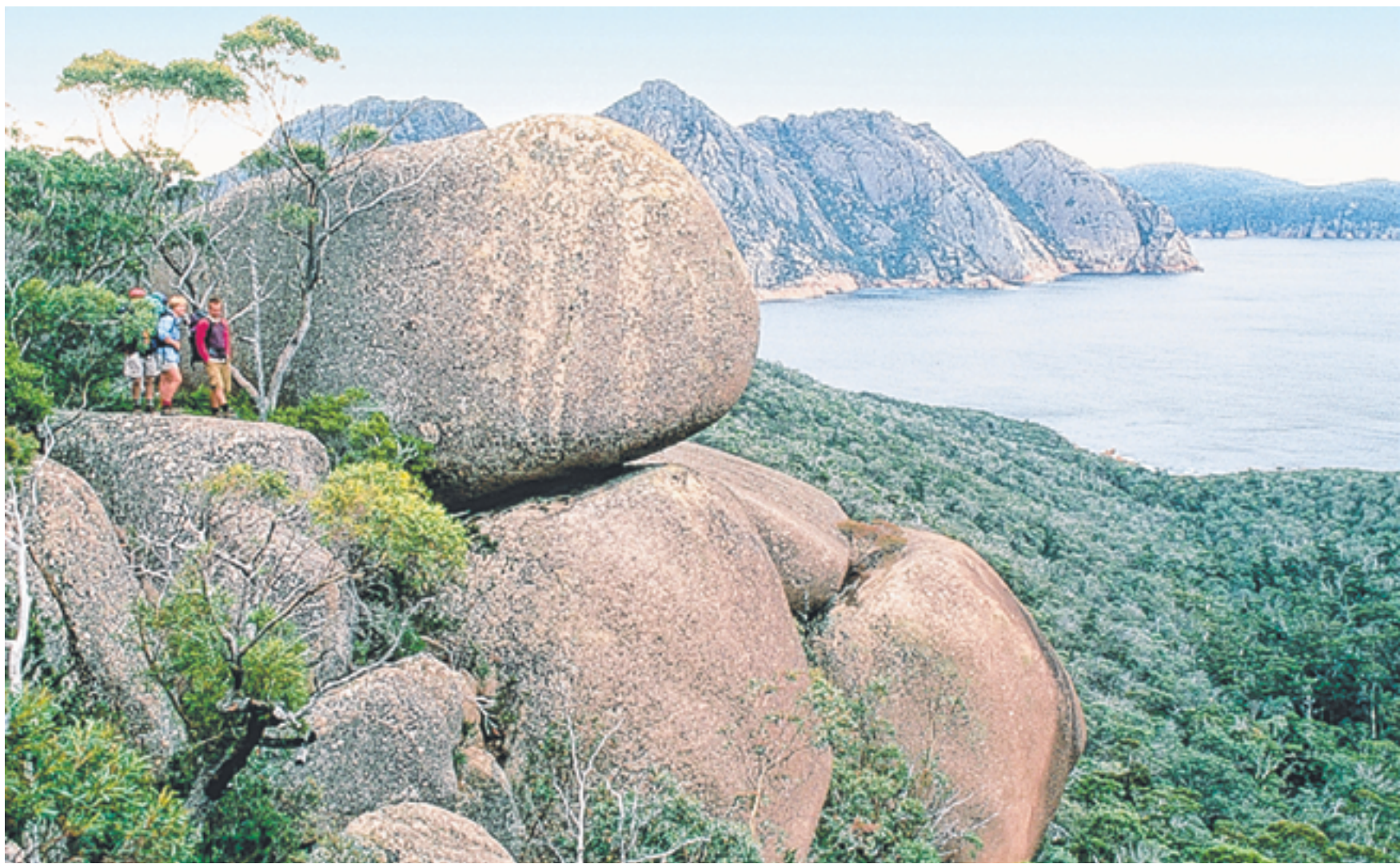
After lunch we hit the track for our first walk, which should take two hours. We set off with gusto and apparently finish in record time. Feeling quite chuffed, we conclude this bushwalking business is a piece of cake. Back on the minibus at Parsons Cove we head for Friendly Beaches Lodge.

Pulling up at a locked boom gate we are told it’s the tradition to walk along the beach to the accommodation. We follow the guides to an unmarked track largely obscured by foliage; after about 20m it opens on to the beach.

Our group spreads out as we amble along; the sea is wild and the stretch of white quartz sand seemingly endless.

The stragglers at the end of the group are engrossed as guide Warwick pulls apart scat (droppings, for the uninitiated) found on the track. He tells us it could belong to a carnivore — “note the bone and fur fragments; it also has a lip shape at one end” — and (imagine a drum roll) it could be from a large Tasmanian devil. Our exclamations are interrupted by screams of delight from farther along the beach. The cause of the commotion is an echidna making tracks across the sand. It is adorably burying its nose in the sand and we are so excited we accuse our guides of deliberate native wildlife placement (DNWP).

Another almost imperceptible track takes us off the beach. We realise we are at our destination only when the sandy path through the casuarina trees gives way to a timber deck. Apparently, lodge owner Joan Masterman once



TOURISM TASMANIA/FREYCINET EXPERIENCE

It’s a tough climb to the top of Mount Graham, which at 579m is the second-highest point on the Freycinet Peninsula



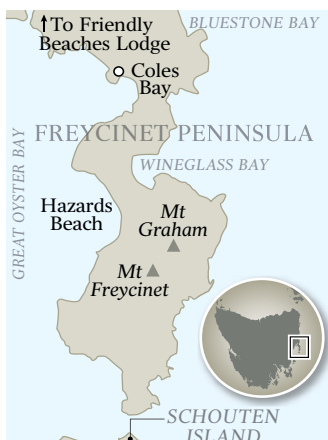
ADRIAN LANDER

Rustic bush sophistication at Friendly Beaches Lodge

engaged a photographer to take aerial pictures of the property from a light plane but they returned empty-handed, apologetically explaining that the lodge is invisible from up there.

As a consequence, Friendly Beaches Lodge is also known as the Invisible Lodge.

Cooks and caretakers Sonja and Tyler greet us with ginger cordial and brilliant chocolate brownies. The secret of the



brownies is simple, according to Sonja — you just double the amount of Lindt chocolate in the recipe. None of us is missing cooking at home.

Friendly Beaches Lodge was built 20 years ago; the main house has a kitchen, library and dining and sitting rooms, with two decks and guides’ accommodation. Up a timber-paling path, two more houses accommodate guests; each has three bedrooms and sleeps six in king-sized or single beds.

The houses also have a deck and a living area with a ready-to-ignite wood fire and bath and shower rooms with gas-powered hot water.

The lodge is eco-friendly, featuring tank water, solar power and composting loos. Buildings are all timber with generous windows and timeless good design. Sculptures and artworks have been carefully chosen for their connection to the environment, such as one of burning trees by Richard Wastell. Furniture and furnishings also hit the right note. The long wooden dining table,



NEIL REEVES

The Tasmanian devil population is dwindling due to disease

which seats 14 with mismatched chairs, gives a rustic bush sophistication that may sound a contradiction in terms but makes perfect sense at the lodge.

Dinner the first night is trevalla with tomato and mango salsa, garlic potato wedges, dill and caper mayo; a walnut, fennel and orange salad; and pannacotta with fresh berries drizzled with a macerated basil and mint sauce.

East coast Tasmanian wines — a Milton riesling and Darlington pinot noir — accompany the meal; equally delicious vegetarian options ensure general wellbeing before the business of tomorrow’s walk is introduced. Armed with a map and a feather as a pointer, Jodie asks us to decide between a 12km coastal and a 16km mountain walk. It would be funny if she weren’t serious.

Next morning, shamed by Jodie’s comment that an 80-year-old has done the mountain walk, we all sign on to conquer Mount Graham; at 579m, it’s the second highest on the Freycinet Peninsula. It is a tough, tough walk, over

granite outcrops. It is made bearable by breaks for drinks and a yummy quinoa, feta and roast vegetable salad and, of course, spectacular views. Needless to say, we would all be interested to meet that 80-year-old climber.

Arriving at the south end of Wineglass Bay, with a third of the walk still to go, we welcome the chance for a reviving dip.

Then, as we drag our weary bodies along the beach, a cry goes out: “Dolphins!”

It’s not the usual display of elegant synchronised dipping and diving. Something else is going on. They lure us along the beach with a David Attenborough-worthy display of herding a school of jumping fish. If that weren’t enough, the dolphins then break into an aquatic theme-park show as they teach their young to leap in the air and hover on their tails on the water.

Are we dreaming? All eyes divert from the dolphins to our guides. Is this another DNWP?

Sunday’s Bluestone Bay walk, in comparison, is a doddle over

12km on a track made long ago by people of the Oyster Bay tribe. We are accompanied by biologist Nick (Devilman) Mooney who tells us the Tasmanian devil population has been reduced by 80 per cent due to an aggressive transmittable facial tumor.

So far scientists have been unable to find a cure. Mooney’s concerned that if one species crashes, another less desirable one comes to the fore, such as feral cats or foxes. Captive devil breeding programs, fences and eradication of the pests, combined with work on a cure, are the ways forward, he says, for what needs to be “a long-term approach to the problem”.

Oddly, it is on day four, our last, that we find ourselves in need of therapy — the shared anxiety is that we have to leave. But there’s time for a swim in the surf and a walk behind the lodge reveals fossils, black swans and more spectacular views of the peninsula.

Sonja and Tyler turn on a brunch that includes corn fritters with roast tomato, creme fraiche and smoked trout on top. They send us up the beach for the traditional farewell walk. Then it’s back on the waiting minibus and, ultimately, a return to those teasing teenagers.

Helen McKenzie was a guest of the Freycinet Experience Walk.