

Tasmania tour: Paradise on a pedestal

Andrew Bain visits Tasmania's Freycinet Peninsula on a three-day guided walk that combines art, the outdoors and fine food.



Peter Adams' Windgrove property at Roaring Beach. *Photo: Peter Adams*

On a Tuesday afternoon, the galleries at Hobart's Museum of New and Old Art (MONA), are cavernous. Australia's most famous private art gallery is closed and only 12 people are strolling through its rooms. We each have a glass of wine in hand. It is pure, subterranean decadence.

I am on the new Art of Nature trip run by Freycinet Experience, the pioneer of guided walks on Tasmania's Freycinet Peninsula. For three days, we will indulge in a combination of the three features that all but define contemporary Tasmania - art, the outdoors and fine food and wine.

The tour begins at MONA on a Tuesday. On any other day of the week, MONA averages about 2000 visitors, but as we descend the spiral staircase this afternoon, we are alone. The gallery is closed to all but our lucky dozen. It is a rare and exclusive private viewing, since MONA does not otherwise run gallery tours. Art of Nature guests are the exception.



Artwork in the Freycinet Experience lodge. *Photo: Andrew Bain*

Deep inside the 350-million-year-old sandstone headland, we are allowed to roam as freely as owner David Walsh's thoughts.

The emptiness of the gallery is almost haunting, as the oral installations murmur through the silence, filling vacant spaces with voices, drones and hums. The gallery may be at rest but the art is never totally still.

At one point, we step into a goods lift and step out again beside a living wall of plants. We have risen into the Organ Room, with its namesake mid-19th-century organ. It is a space normally closed to the public, and another glimpse behind the MONA curtain.



MONA's Pavilions on the Derwent River. *Photo: Tourism Tasmania*

Before we leave the gallery, we visit one of MONA's most infamous works: Cloaca Professional, the "poo machine" that must be fed daily. We give it a silver-service meal of salad and chocolate cake.

With Cloaca appeased, it is our own turn to indulge. Pre-dinner drinks are in MONA's wine bar, looking over the gallery's grounds and the Derwent River, where we are guided through a tasting of wines from Moorilla, MONA's attached winery.

Like the gallery, the Source restaurant is normally closed on Tuesday nights but opens privately for Art of Nature guests. As evening shadows march across the Derwent, we dawdle through a three-course dinner of scallops, beef and a decadent chocolate and praline dessert, topped with gold leaf. Matched with a Spanish sherry aged in barrels for 27 years, the dessert alone might have constituted the day's art component.

The hum the next morning is not an art work, but the ocean. After a night in the gallery's stylish Pavilions - eight rooms on the edge of the Derwent River - we drive to Freycinet Peninsula, stepping out onto a postcard vision of white sand and cobalt sea at the long Friendly Beaches that line the peninsula's east coast.

We have been dropped at the beach for a 20-minute walk to Freycinet Experience's private lodge, creating the sensation of a natural arrival at our home for the night. As we walk, my feet sink deep into the soft sand, and the lodge is so well hidden from view that we walk straight past it, eventually backtracking through our own footprints to our lunch.

The lodge is the inverse of MONA's Pavilions. Set in bush behind the beach, the electricity-free lodge is as simple as the Pavilions are chic - push-button airconditioning one night, natural air flow the next. Art has very much turned to nature, although even in the lodge, it is clear that Freycinet Experience's connection to art is no gimmick.

Across the walls are works by prominent Tasmanian artists, while the lodge has also twice staged an event called Ephemeral Art at the Invisible Lodge, in which artists used natural local materials to create temporary artworks.

After lunch, we set out on foot for a short hike, rising into the sand hills behind the lodge, where kunzea trees cast a honey scent through the bush.

Partway up the hills, we walk through a band of 400-million-year-old marine fossils, which look like natural art imprinted into stone. The fossils were discovered in 2005, when they were exposed by a bushfire that almost razed the lodge.

From the fossils, we continue to climb, looking down over white waves and white sand, before descending to Saltwater Lagoon, which is pooled between dunes a few steps behind the beach. Black swans wander along the opposite shore, honking like clarinets, and a cloud of ducks flies across the lagoon's surface, the birds' wing tips almost touching the water.

If the lodge is MONA's polar opposite, dinner is its bush equal. We dine on eye fillet with potato and celeriac mash, oven-roasted carrots and asparagus, followed by a vanilla bean panna cotta.

It is dinner with a show as the faint ring of solar-powered light illuminates a possum carrying its joey across the wooden deck.

An hour later, I am in bed in one of the two sleeping lodges set deeper in the bush. The window of my room is open and I fall asleep to the sound of the ocean.

Our final day takes us to the Tasman Peninsula, cutting south on the little-used Wielangta Forest Drive, the bus undulating in and out of the cloud now sinking over Tasmania. It will be a day when nature intersects with art, as rain washes over Peter Adams' outdoor sculptures at his Windgrove property at Roaring Beach.

"My connection to MONA is that it's about death and sex," American-born Adams says as we wander from his hand-built home into his peace garden.

"My work is about birth. We're like a trilogy."

The garden is divided into three sections, with sculptures representing the past (an ancestral midden), present (a split rock signifying heartbreak) and future (a spiral carved from blue gum, indicating hope) surrounding a dam where banjo frogs call.

We lunch around Adams' kitchen table, and then stride out for a longer tour of the 20-hectare property, which is studded with his trademark bench-seat sculptures.

Windgrove was once bare grazing land, but is now covered with hand-planted bush. Each year, Adams plants 400 trees on the property in what he calls an "Earth tithing", and the trail cuts past hakeas, sheoaks, wattles and other native trees. Wooden benches break the journey in Adams' own secular version of the Stations of the Cross, providing glimpses over wild Roaring Beach, sea stacks and a towering dolerite cliff.

As he explains each feature of his property and its surrounds, his eyes reveal his enthusiasm for his art and, suitably, the art of nature.

"My first degree was from Harvard, in history, whereas my second degree was an apprenticeship in carpentry," he says. "Both were necessary. One taught me to work with my hands, and the other to work with my mind."

The writer travelled as a guest of Tourism Tasmania.