



Let's Go Exploring

› The Freycinet Experience Walk **120**

› Penguin Waterfront Escape **124**

Photo: Freycinet Experience Walk



The Freycinet Experience Walk

Words: Susanne Kennedy

Images: Freycinet Experience Walk

Tasmania has long benefited from the efforts of a special brand of ambassador – offshore-born, they spruik the merits of their second home with the zeal of adoptive parents and the insight of the outsider/insider. Joan Masterman, owner and co-founder of the Freycinet Experience Walk, is a prime example. Over the past two decades, the Sydneysider has built up this Tasmanian institution and high-end tourism niche, all the while making some of Tasmania's wildest places accessible to young and old.

"I have probably promoted Tasmania more effectively as a Sydney person over the years," says Joan, "because I saw more clearly what people from elsewhere wanted."

Prior to becoming a commercial operator, Joan worked as a town planner on complex and political studies that included Port Arthur, the Snowy River Shire, Lord Howe Island and the Broken

Hill Heritage Study with then business partner Ken Latona.

When Joan and Ken moved into tourism in the late 1980s, the Tasmanian State Government was keen for its beautiful places to be opened up to different age groups and levels of fitness. So the pair crafted a unique package, first tested in their award winning Cradle Mountain/Overland Track endeavour, which offered a spectacular and substantial guided walk with comfortable mattresses over tent floors and fresh fine food instead of dehydrated fare. (The business pair parted ways in 1996.)

"Walking is very regenerative and very calming, and personally I like to have a hot shower at the end of the day and don't like to carry too heavy a pack," Joan says. "It is wonderful to see 60, 70 and 80-year-olds alongside young people, taking the opportunity to do the walk."

After 21 years in operation, the Freycinet Experience (FE) has seen and responded to much change. However, the one constant – the starting point and crowning glory – has always been the four-day walk itself and the magnificent, rugged landscape that it showcases.

The walk involves ten guests and two guides, tracing the spine of Freycinet Peninsula from south to north; walking beside deep turquoise sea and striped granite rock face, through coastal terrain, sclerophyll forest, and little-known tracks perched high on ridges at the peninsula's northern tip.

The wonderful guides, Nick and Vanessa, share their impressive knowledge of the region's Aboriginal, botanical and animal history, frequently evoking curiosity and wonder as our senses open to the sweet pungency of eucalypt, to the crunching underfoot, and the sound of breeze, sea and bird.



On this walk, we became alert to near invisible tracks (lizard, snake, bird and Tasmanian devil), native plants which smell like honey (*Kunzea ambigua*) and the dusted-on blue of gum tree nuts.

There were in situ lessons on the orchid's intimate relationship to fungi, on spotting Aboriginal middens and why wombat scats are more square than round.

The endless bird parade took our collective breath away, and included grey shrike and fairy terns, parrots, black swans, herons, pelicans, cockatoos, pied oystercatchers, white-bellied sea eagles and soaring peregrine falcons – said to be the fastest creatures on earth.

Between the beauty of the physical landscape and its challenges, city stresses seemed to leave the body via the feet, fingertips and the senses. A handwritten quote found in a lodge visitors' book captured the awakening effect of the walk:

"... for delicious moments our whiskers are wider than our minds away out over everything" (from a William Stafford poem).

Each night guests are returned to the instantly welcoming Friendly Beaches Lodge, which is nestled amongst casuarina, tea tree and banksia, only 100 metres from its namesake beach. The Lodge is comprised of three streamlined Tasmanian oak buildings, one a common dining and lounging area, the other two guest accommodation wings with good-sized private bedrooms and quality bedding and linen. All three buildings

are decorated with the work of some of Tasmania's best artists.

The common building was deliberately left uninsulated so that sounds from the natural world would permeate its walls and tin roof. The resulting gentle, yet omnipresent soundscape – the rumble and churn of the sea, the patter of rain or of breeze tussling with trees – adds to the sense of peace and scene change. And a well-stocked, plump-chaired library makes you wish you could cocoon yourself there for a week.

The Lodge is not on the power grid, but is fuelled by gas and wood that is collected from the property. Water, which is not required for the remarkably odourless, composting toilets, is also collected in tanks for showers and dishwashing.

Aesthetically, large windows frame select gum trees, which – like the simple design – keep the environment in focus. The design also deftly balances creature comforts with the simplicity that distinguishes wilderness getaways from the convolutions of urban life. So it is not a surprise to learn that the Lodge was recognised with the Royal Australian



Institute of Architects' (RAIA) National Commercial Architecture Award in 1993, along with RAIA's inaugural environmental citation.

Originally the FE guest accommodation was provided by two campsites with very comfortable, custom-made tents, but over time it became clear that people wanted to spend more than one night at the Lodge, so the trip was redesigned to bring guests back to Friendly Beaches each night. With this change in focus came greater emphasis on food and meals, and guests are now indulged each evening with outstanding wine and excellently prepared produce, sourced from local butchers, winemakers and other providores, at the Lodge's long, blackwood dining table.

Thanks to Joan's public relations savvy and responsiveness to the market, the FE Walk has been promoted and profiled around the world, from the *New York Times* to *Condé Nast Traveller* and the *Washington Post*, to name just a few. It continues to attract walkers from around the globe. "I prefer to call what we do 'nature tourism'," says Joan, "as the term 'eco-tourism' has been degraded over the years through overuse."

She laughs at the memory of her first promotional material. "It's difficult to imagine now, but we started operating before tourism became internet-based! My first brochure was all text, with a single map – very dry and town-planner like!

The FE agenda under Joan's stewardship has broadened over the

years to promote the Tasmanian arts as well as its wilderness: through literary themed weekends hosted by respected local authors, the likes of the late Margaret Scott; a growing Tasmanian fine art collection housed at the Lodge; and a series of exhibitions (2006 and 2008) entitled *Ephemeral Art at the Invisible Lodge*, with works both inspired by and located on the land that would ultimately erase them. Joan and her partner, George, have also produced a number of historic publications on the region and built up an impressive natural and cultural history library.

"I am pleased that there are layers of Tasmanian culture hopefully subtly presented at the Friendly Beaches Lodge," Joan says.

And it doesn't stop there. Following completion of its 21st walking season, the company has diversified yet again to offer the inaugural *Art of Nature* tour. This is the product of a partnership between the FE, MONA and sculptor Peter Adams to deliver a sumptuous – in terms of food, art and scenery – three-day journey for art and nature lovers. The tour will continue to be offered through the next walking season from October 2013.

Joan has always believed that successful business practices can coexist within a strong ethical framework. "As a commercial operator, we have had an ethic I don't feel we have ever lost sight of. This meant that we did not push the envelope just because we could."

This ethic is particularly manifest in the Lodge's light footprint, noted

by renowned architect and RAI judge Glen Murcutt, its support for local business and the consultation that has characterised the walk's evolution. Permission was sought from the Great Oyster Bay Tribe prior to incorporating their traditional walk at Bluestone Ridge into the FE route, and despite initial opposition from the Wilderness Society, the walk was ultimately supported by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service. "There is relevance here to the present Tarkine battles about jobs," says Joan, "as both the Overland and Freycinet tourism ventures have proved how you can generate employment while relying on and respecting the unique natural landscape of the area."

Joan backed and successfully promoted Tasmanian tourism before it was a lucrative, let alone a 'sexy' proposition. Her work has been recognised in the *Who's Who of Australian Women* since its second 2009 edition, with national architecture and environmental awards, and she has represented Tasmanian tourism at the Australian Tourism Commission's Oz Talk in the United States.

If the FE's enduring success is attributable to Joan's preparedness to respond to the market and test new ideas while keeping the natural world front and centre, it is equally due to the care she has taken to recruit and champion well-chosen individuals.

"If I were to say something about myself, it would be that over the years I have been good at choosing amazing guides and support staff," she says. "Finding Tasmanian guides with a passion for the environment and ensuring guests have an exceptional journey are the main reasons these walks have been so successful."

For the walk, for those well-chosen individuals, and the landscape that opens you afresh to the world, and not least for the guilt-free pampering, the Freycinet Experience Walk is a must-do for locals and future offshore ambassadors alike. 