Let’s Go Exploring
Images: XXXXXXX

Words: Alice Hansen

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."

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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 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.

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Experience Walk

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On this walk, we became alert to near invisible tracks (lizard, snake, bird and Tasmanian devil), native plants which smell like honey (Kurrajong ambiguous) and the ducked-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 tawny terms, parrots, black swans, herons, pelicans, cockatoos, pie 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” (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 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 of breeze tussling with trees – adds to the sense of peace and scene change. 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 odorless, 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 consolidations 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 providers, 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 both the Overland and Freycinet tourism ventures have proved how you can generate engagement 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 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.