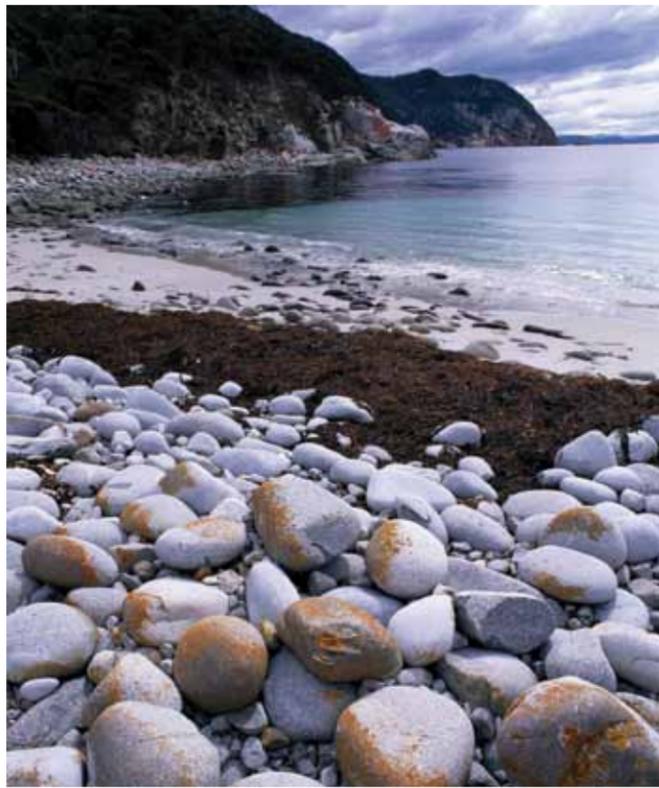


## The Quiet Peninsula

### Nicholas Shakespeare on Tasmania



Bluestone Bay, Tasmania. © Paul Sinclair / The Freycinet Experience

Joan Masterman's matchless four-day walk, the Freycinet Experience, turns 20 this year. For her traditional end-of-season party, she has invited the guides, lodge co-ordinators and office staff, plus Gil the bus driver and Shep the skipper, to fit into clothes they might have worn back in 1992. But unknown to Joan, her guests are hatching a surprise counter plan – one that may involve less of a tight squeeze: to come dressed as Joan or George, her husband of 50 years.

Speaking for myself, the idea is hugely enticing of a planet inhabited by a dozen Joans (wool princess turned town-planner and committed environmentalist, regally elegant in silk scarf and hat), not to mention a dozen extra Georges (impossibly black hair, gravelly voice of a distinguished QC and friend at university of a left-wing Rupert Murdoch).

No matter how many times I go on the walk they have created, it never grows any less special. This year it was made acutely more so by the presence of three generations. The Sydney contingent was represented by Anne Schofield, daughter Emma, and grandsons Hunter (10) and Frank (8); the Poms, by my father (81), my wife Gillian, and our sons

Max (10) and Ben (8). A little apprehensive, after the biggest downpour in 50 years (3 inches of rain fell the previous day), we assembled in Coles Bay on board Shep's boat *Le Naturaliste*.

The Freycinet Peninsula on Tasmania's south-east tip is a peninsula like Mount Athos, 'the mountain of quietness'. You venerate its treasures in order to be renewed in soul and body. Its icons are fossils, middens, Indigenous tools, but also a gum tree with a sea eagle's nest the size of a double bed; a quarry that supplied the stone for Melbourne's Post Office; and the remnants of a whale station where, for a brief flicker in the 1820s, oil was harvested to light the streets and studies of London. It comes as a relief to learn from our two guides, Kate and Mikey, that "whales are back big-time".

Joan's choice of guides, like her exemplary choice of 'lodgees', is an important reason why the Freycinet Experience is memorable, and why it has endured. Kate, who appears to know the Linnaean name of every lichen and orchid, is a graduate of the Friends' School in Hobart and a medical student specialising in parasitic diseases. Mikey recently won the ABC's *New Inventors* award, after designing a low-cost surgical lamp for developing nations. Together, they field better than any recent Australian cricket team the rapid-fire questions of two curious eight year olds. "Who was the first man to do this walk?" "Why is it called Mount Graham?" "Why is the mountain so far away?"

The rain has refreshed the gullies with waterfalls and pools not seen before. Pushing up through the leaves are tangerine-hued fungi and glow-in-the-dark mushrooms. They remind Max of a joke doing the rounds of his Oxford prep-school: "Why was the mushroom invited to a party?" We groaningly don't know. "Because he was a fun guy." Perhaps to forestall further jokes, Mikey asks the boys to press on slowly for five minutes. "Why slowly?" asks Ben.

The sun is out, the air still, the light spectral as it shatters through the gum leaves onto our single file of trekkers. Even though we are supposed to be ghosts leaving behind only footprints, on this occasion two young members of the party are allowed to mimic the French sailors from Nicolas Baudin's 1802 scientific expedition, who bequeathed their names to the landscape. Max and Frank climb Five Minute Hill (official time-keeper: Mikey) at a speed that allows it to be rebaptised 'Two Minute Thirty-Eight Second Hill'.

Always the most magical day, for me, is the one on which we trek from Bluestone Bay to Freshwater Lagoon along a path once trod by the Oyster Bay tribe – and now only by

Joan's fortunate walkers. Kate scrubs our boots in a rock pool at the starting point, a 'cleansing of the soles' for these secular pilgrims, to prevent spores of root-rot from killing the native plants. A grey fantail darts after us as we climb the ridge, picking up insects that we have raised and watching, as Ben, crouching before a streak of fresh Devil poo, suddenly puts his knee in it. Here, too, the rain has brought change. The path proliferates with club moss, a plant, says Mikey, which dates back to the time of the dinosaurs – "before flowers even existed". On reaching the beach, we find the lagoon has burst its banks, exposing the wood-pegged beams of an ancient wreck. The walk to the lodge along Friendly Beaches, under a full moon, pink sky to the north, on squeaking sand as white as ice, is, murmurs Gillian, "as if scripted".

Lost in the trees (so lost that when Joan recently went up in a plane to take some photographs, she could not find it), the lodge was designed by Ken Latona, who, with Joan, created Cradle Mountain Huts. In the visitors' book you find ecstatic entries from Bob Carr, Murray Bail, even then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who wrote in his back-sloping hand: "Thank you all for making us feel so at home and for giving me the time to read Baudin's journal." His wife, Thérèse, had selected the trek so that he could relax for four days beyond mobile range (although not out of sight of security guards, who laid pressure pads on the paths). And, truly, it is a priceless place, unlike any other I know, giving you a chance to be out of touch with the world and yet in contact with yourself.

Another who stands seriously to benefit from the Freycinet Experience is George's old university chum. Before sitting down to a gourmet dinner of local oysters and rare beef, over a glass of prize-winning Radenti champagne, my father, who was at Oxford at the same time, teases out from George details of his friendship with Rupert Murdoch: the bust of Lenin on his mantelpiece; how Murdoch invited George to closed meetings of the Oxford Communist Party, one addressed by Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko; and how George's earliest trek was made with Murdoch, on an epic car journey through Greece, Turkey and Syria (where they shivered in a tent) and back through Suez. "I found him a good bloke," remembers George, who has had practically no contact with the fellow since. So if you're reading this, Rupert, you might just consider a reunion trip to Tasmania before it gets too late. As Joan says: "Never underestimate the restorative power of the Australian bush," and tells me of a woman who rang the week before, after finishing the walk. "She was actually crying, she had enjoyed it so much. She had to put the phone down. She had come with her little daughter, who had had a stroke. It was one of the ten best things she'd ever done." **M**



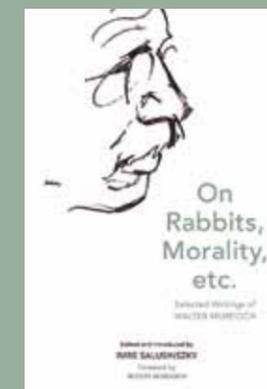
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