

The walkers enjoy a rest and a view of Freycinet Peninsula from a smooth pink granite boulder during the ascent of Bear Hill on Schouten Island.



kangaroos and entered dense woodland where we found more remnants of Bernacchi's enterprise: a ruined brickworks and the convict-built reservoir that still supplies drinking water to the Darlington settlement. I almost trod on a copperhead snake sunning itself on the track and spotted one of the common wombats that appeared in ever greater numbers as the day started to cool.

The pace quickened as we aimed to reach Maria's famous painted sandstone cliffs before the sun disappeared and along with it a must-have photo opportunity. We found a shortcut through a cluster of attractive penitentiary buildings that once housed convicts, but today provide affordable bunkhouse accommodation for visitors. Here was a lively crowd of young families enjoying a weekend getaway at this idyllic spot.

Snapshots done, we rejoined *Lady Eugenie*, now anchored offshore from the cliffs, her two masts silhouetted sharply against a reddening sky.

CAPTAIN IAN SAUNDERS was up early the next morning to get us underway for the four-hour voyage to Schouten Island. Along the way he skilfully manoeuvred the ketch in close to a 7ha nature reserve, Ile des Phoques, home to a large and boisterous Australian fur seal colony, whose curious members slid and careered into the churning waters for a closer look at us.

A pair of sea eagles observed our departure from a 50m granite spire, while a large pod of common dolphins rode the bow as we sped away towards Schouten and our next walk. My wildlife tick list was growing longer by the minute.

Like Maria Island, Schouten has seen its share of commercial ventures – from whaling and sheep farming to coal extraction and tin mining – but it was formally added to Freycinet National Park in 1977 and is an important nesting site for little penguins and short-tailed shearwaters. The 3440ha island can be reached from Coles Bay, 30 minutes away, by boat charter.

On our visit we climbed 299m Bear Hill, the lower of three peaks. It looked a little daunting from the beach – it's a vigorous 90-minute scramble and rock-hop up a succession of large, polished, pink-granite boulders – but the trusty grip of my Vibram soles, and the advice and encouragement of our knowledgeable guides Erik Hayward and Hania Watt, saw me reach the summit.

Freycinet Peninsula stretched away to the east and north of this commanding vantage point in ever paler shades of blue-grey and Erik pointed out the distinctive outline of The Hazards to the north, which would be the next day's bushwalking goal.

Our island-hopping days were over as, on the third morning, our skipper piloted us towards Freycinet Peninsula's southern tip.

This perfect curve of quartzite beach, lapped by impossibly clear water, didn't disappoint.



▲ **Isle des Phoques** (Island of seals) once had a sealing station. Today it's a nature reserve and haven for these Australian fur seals.



► **Maria Island** is one of the best places in Australia to observe wombats. Cooks Beach (far right) at the southern end of the Freycinet Peninsula.

We landed on pretty Cooks Beach on the western shore of the peninsula, ready to tackle the biggest walking day of the trip.

At the northern end of the beach, we climbed up into the welcome shade of the heathland plateau and followed the Peninsula Track through stands of Tasmanian blue gum, coastal she-oak and *Banksia marginata*. Here the sound of lapping waves gradually faded, replaced by the rhythm of our muffled footsteps accompanied by a seemingly infinite variety of birdsong, among which the endangered swift parrot can be heard.

The track eventually delivered us onto Hazards Beach. Evidence of Aboriginal occupation is woven into the topography of the coastal landscape here; it is visible in layer upon layer of shell middens, laid down over millennia of feasting by the Tooremomairremener people on the marine bounty of appropriately named Promise Bay. The middens underpin the sand cliffs that run along the entire 2km beach. It's also a breeding site for small red-capped plovers, which busily scurried about on the sand, and we were warned to keep a sharp eye out for their vulnerable little nest scrapes as we tramped on in the direction of the Hazards, which loomed large ahead.

We turned inland once more and followed the Isthmus Track towards Wineglass Bay. From here walkers increased as we were joined by those tackling the Hazards Beach Circuit Track, one of the day walks that started at the Wineglass Bay car park, and we wistfully relinquished the relative solitude of past days. The track led past Hazards Lagoon and onto our final destination. It was late afternoon and excitement mounted as glimpses of

shimmering white quartzite sand started to appear through the vegetation and we descended towards the famous bay.

This perfect curve of quartzite beach, gently lapped by impossibly clear water, didn't disappoint. Walking boots were quickly discarded and hot, tired feet plunged into soothing water. *Lady Eugenie* was anchored in a cove at the far end of the beach. It took us about an hour to reach her as we dawdled along, posing for photos and revelling in the end of the day's exertions and the prospect of spending our final evening aboard in this iconic place.

ON THE LAST MORNING we disembarked onto the beach and headed up the track that takes us over The Hazards saddle, down to the car park and finally on to Hobart and home. After three days of brisk walking, we made light work of the steep path. It was a short detour to the busy Wineglass Bay Lookout from where I spied the graceful form of *Lady Eugenie* heading south, dwarfed by distance and a series of high cliffs.

This classic view of the horseshoe of pure white sand usually provides the first encounter with Wineglass Bay. For me it was my last look, and as I jostled for position at the steel barrier, brandishing my camera, I knew I was privileged to have enjoyed a deeper connection with this special place that my happy snap couldn't possibly hope to capture.

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COMMON WOMBAT: *Vombatus ursinus*; AUSTRALIAN FUR SEALS: *Arctocephalus pusillus*