

Saturday 16/10/2021

TO COLDLY GO

Take the plunge on a winter hike in Tasmania's southeast

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PICTURES: CHRIS CRERAR

There are many moments that will take your breath away on Tasmania's Three Capes Lodge Walk, and stepping barefoot into the clear and icy waters of Denman's Cove as you leave the private launch to begin your journey is the first. This aquatic arrival on the shores of the Tasman Peninsula follows a brief journey from civilisation to wilderness by way of a eucalypt-lined ridge and a rocky shoreline. Once on the beach, most walkers pull on their hiking shoes, adjust their packs and make their way to the start of the four-day trek. However, our group is taking part in a Wild Wellness experience in conjunction with the Tasmanian Walking Company and so we strip to our swimming costumes, perform a brief breathing exercise and then immerse ourselves (some gingerly, others with gusto) in the 10C water with a gasp of shock.

At this point, some readers may ask "why?" The benefits of cold-water swimming are well-documented and include stress reduction, increased calorie burning, a boost to the immune system and delivery of a natural high. As a regular winter swimmer living in

Tasmania, I can attest to feeling fabulous following a cold water swim. My fellow walkers experience a similar mood boost from our short plunge. With skin tingling and our senses alive, we don our packs and make our way to the trailhead, ready for the 6km walk to the first lodge.

The 48km Three Capes Track is a "dry-boot" path through bushland and along the Southern Hemisphere's tallest sea cliffs to Cape Pillar and Cape Hauy, with views of Cape Raoul. The Tasmanian Walking Company's two luxury eco-lodges opened in 2018 and are tucked discreetly into the landscape, accessible by semi-hidden tracks that would be easily missed if not pointed out by our guides. As our group of 14 arrives at Crescent Lodge, we're immediately drawn to the viewing platform, which delivers a sweeping outlook to the south, taking in Cape Raoul as well as the white sands of Crescent Bay.

Once inside, we're greeted by the host and a plate of freshly baked muffins. All meals and drinks are provided, with pantry stores brought in by helicopter at the start of each season, and fresh produce carried in on foot

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by the lodges' hosts. The glass pavilion containing the dining area, lounge room and kitchen is seemingly suspended among the treetops and in summer, the floor-to-ceiling windows are retracted to create a tranquil eyrie.

Our rooms are elegantly simple, with a wall of glass, a comfortable king-size bed (or king singles) and the shared bathroom facilities feature warm mist showers. We need to carry only our personal belongings, so my pack weighs about 9kg. However, my legs still need to cover the distance and a weekly spin

from Bondi to Bronte or around Melbourne's Tan Track would be insufficient training. Many in our group, including the guides, are using walking poles and given the large number of stairs, they're highly recommended.

There's a focus on Tasmanian produce in the meals taken together at the long table. Over the course of our trip, we enjoy ethically farmed salmon, Tasmanian lamb and smoked wallaby as well as cheeses from Ashgrove and the Bruny Island Cheese Company. Breads and cakes are baked on-site and lunches are

prepped for us to collect each morning. Our Wild Wellness walk is alcohol-free, with a variety of mocktails served, but regular walks include a selection of Tasmanian wines with dinner.

Our destination on day two is the lodge near Cape Pillar, 11km down the track. As we journey through a landscape shaped by wind and fire, we are met by views that stretch from Bruny Island in the south to Freycinet in the north. The geology in this part of Tasmania is related to the rocks of the Grand Canyon and the sense of time and interconnection is tangible. We walk through cloud forests, where the cliffs funnel cold air from the ocean and then, in quick contrast, areas of impenetrable, waist-high scrub that provides cover for the many (invisible, apart from their distinctive cubed droppings) wombats.

On arrival at the lodge, we regroup for 45 minutes of breathing exercises, led by Wim Hof instructor Piet Bocker. "Hold your breath, there's no need to breathe," he says as he guides us through the session, designed to release energy into our systems. A sense of stillness – and anticipation – fills the room. We move to the outdoor plunge pool and take it in turns to lower ourselves into the freezing water, control our breathing and then emerge, exhilarated.

Each evening, Wild Wellness Method founder Alice Hansen, takes us through some simple journalling exercises and we take time to reflect on what we are grateful for and have

experienced during the day's walk. Hansen prompts us to write about connection, care and commitment, a powerful exercise that some guests choose to share.

Cape Pillar and return is the goal of day three and much of the 14km route is right along the coastline where we're treated to vertiginous views of dolerite columns and delicately balanced blocks of stone. Tasman Island and its spectacular lighthouse, occupied until the 1970s, rise from the ocean at the end of Cape Pillar.

The group splits into two to climb rock-cut steps to The Blade, a jutting promontory that gloriously exposes us to all the elements. Later that afternoon, another breathwork and immersion session loosens stiff muscles and centres racing minds.

The final day is 18km if we decide to bag Cape Hauy on the way to the finish. The weather forecast isn't looking good and, as we head off, there's a light drizzle and low cloud. None of that detracts from the beauty of the walk and we are soon ascending Mt Fortescue (590m above sea level) before making our way through an ancient rainforest. By the time we reach our lunch spot, and decision time for the Cape Hauy side trip, the weather has cleared and it's an opportunity I can't miss. With 1000 stairs each way, it's tough on the knees but absolutely worth it. The famous Totem Pole lies below us and the views seem to stretch forever.

As we approach Fortescue Bay, the sun is dancing off the water, the curve of the protected beach is hugged by towering gum trees and my foot-sore pace quickens. I shrug off my pack and dive into the water. There's no structured breathing here, just the joy of the moment and, as the water welcomes me, I gasp again. This time in delight.

Alix Clark was a guest of Wild Wellness Method and the Tasmanian Walking Company.

IN THE KNOW

Wild Wellness Method offers a range of day walks, online courses and retreats, and will host the Three Capes Lodge Walk again in June next year; \$3845 a person, twin-share.

wildwellnessmethod.com

Tasmanian Walking Company's four-day Three Capes Lodge Walk runs regularly throughout the year; from \$3095 a person, twin-share, depending on the season; includes hotel pickup and drop-off, hiking pack, wet weather gear and all meals and drinks.

taswalkingco.com.au

THE AUSTRALIAN

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MORE TO THE STORY

Writer Alice Hansen discovered Dutch wellness guru Wim Hof and his breathing and cold-water therapy during her recovery from alcohol addiction. His methods, along with journalling, mindfulness, restorative bushwalks and surrounding herself with positive, healthy people, helped her to overcome a years-long battle. "Walking out on the trail allows me to listen in," says Hansen. "Nature delivers restoration in a silent, gentle manner when you're ready. As for Wim Hof cold-water plunging and breath work, it was the exact remedy for me. Diving into a Tassie alpine tarn at dawn or into winter ocean waves is the change of state I often previously sought through alcohol. It also taught me commitment and to connect inward. I can't think of a better place on the planet for walking and Wim Hof than Tassie – one of the last wild frontiers."



Ocean dip on the Wild Wellness walk, above; evening mocktails, top right; walkers set out on the trail, below right; limbering up in one of the lodges, below left; Tasman Island and its lighthouse, left

