

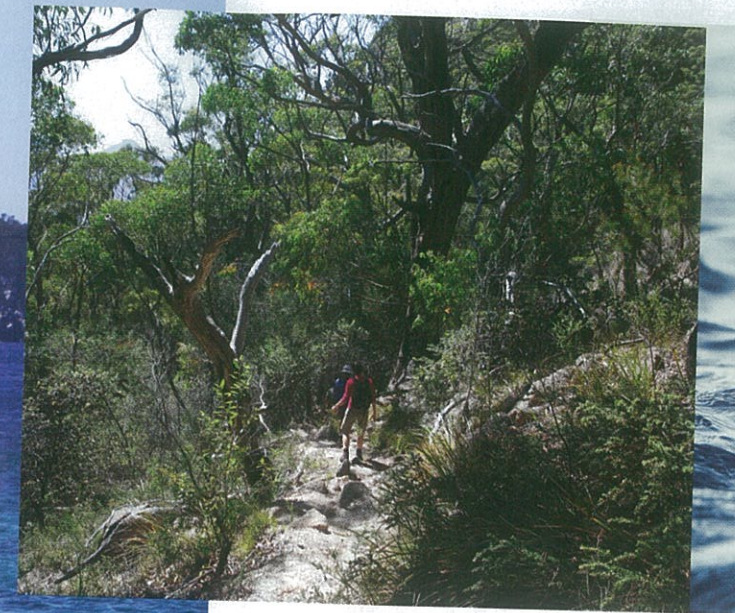
The Wind Walkers

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE MADGWICK

TWO FEET, ONE YACHT, and the infinite wild beauty
of Tasmania's *EAST COAST*; a unique journey of SAILING
AND BUSHWALKING offers the *BEST OF BOTH* worlds.

WORDS STEVE MADGWICK

Pencil diving off the side of a sailboat into the vivacious Tasman is unsurpassed as a wake-up ritual.



BAFFLINGLY, THEY VANISH, one by one. Inevitably, I will be next. Only two hours into the journey, I lay prone inside the *Lady's* womb-like quarterdeck. Energy levels at nada, it takes me, too. Fade to black...

Dazed, dishevelled, I paw away a pool of drool from a random jacket that I've requisitioned as a pillow. My fellow passengers rematerialise on deck, one by one, with newborn eyes, in the same order they left.

We all become Miss Marples and Hercule Poirots to solve this perplexing whodunnit: 'The Mysterious Case of the Synchronised Powernap'.

Ah-ha, mon ami! It was the ginger (anti-seasickness tablets), we deduce. And he would have got away with it, too.

Ginger had some accomplices, though: stir in a pinch of jetlag, a dash of sedating sea air, and a (few) bubbly toasts to *Lady Eugenie*, our 23-metre luxury floating home for the next four days' 'sail walking'.

Turns out we won't need the tablets anyway. Not where we're going.

THE DECISION

"It's certainly possible," says captain Jamie Mitchell. He screws up his face into an ironic prune, barks a solitary laugh, like a hyena hiccup.

It's not a watertight 'no' from the man who will navigate the yacht around Maria Island's sometimes surly shores – more like a captain's call frocked up as an option. Us landlubbers take the hint. The cruel sou'wester currently thrashing the north of Maria Island could murder our mirth.

Plan B? Head directly south from Triabunna and around Maria's feet instead of her head, and up the open-ocean side of the island.

This detour, however, comes at a cost: there's no time to anchor near historic Darlington Probation Station (given we only have four days to get back to Hobart); our chance to trek the 630-metre-high dolerite towers Bishop and Clerk flutters away with the tempest.

Mercury Passage's giving swell, which rocks *Eugenie* like a first-time mother, gradually dissipates my barely concealed displeasure at missing the sail walk's hiking highlight – its moon landing, if you will. The sails render the engine's grind redundant; a sporadic mainsail flap and occasional metallic wire ping the soothingly sparse soundtrack.

Leaside, a black-faced cormorant repeatedly dive-bombs for brunch. Does she shut her eyes tightly, I wonder, as she crashes through the surface of the water? She must. →

THIS IMAGE:
Fortescue Bay, part of
the six-day itinerary.
TOP RIGHT:
Descending from
Mount Grabam
into Wineglass Bay.



BEAR HILL
WALKING
TRACK

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: *Ile des Phoques translates as 'island of seals', and here's why: Bear (free) Hill; Approaching Ile des Phoques; Hitting the sand for the first time in Riedle Bay.*

CAPTAIN (ONLY) KIDDING

"I've never sailed this way," says Jamie, sporting a faux lost-at-sea expression. His seafaring-dad-joke persona cunningly camouflages high-seas credentials. He was, quite literally, born for this.

"My parents were on a big sailing trip when they stopped off in Durban [South Africa], and made baby me," he says. "They put a few books aside, made a net for me, and just kept sailing to the Caribbean."

This young old salt learnt sea craft the audaciously hard way; he lived on the open ocean for months at a time, sailing from Africa to the Caribbean and then across the Pacific to Australia. Jamie has faced 10-metre waves (aboard an eight-metre boat), and been robbed by pirates at shotgun-point off Venezuela. I think we'll be okay.

We shelter briefly under the grand columns of Haunted Bay on Maria's south-east corner, where the unsympathetic ocean surges onto smooth tangerine-lichen-coated boulders: this coast's informal tartan.

LAND AHOY

The *Lady* edges towards Riedle Bay, its isthmus so waifish that it seems a set of rogue waves would dissect Maria north to south. The concave beach radiates an intense light that the English word 'white' fails to express; perhaps the Inuits could lend an apt adjective.

Eugenie's rubber ducky flops effortlessly over Riedle's impish swell, resting her nose on the beach's crust of obliterated seashells. There's not a plastic bottle in sight, just seaweed and curious gulls posing curious questions.

We boot up, a sun-bleached driftwood tree our bench. We brush off the impeccably fine sand from our bare feet, lest it be our mortal nemesis after a few hours' wander, and start along the sand past plentiful puffed-out puffer fish, scattered like big beach bindy-eyes. Each wears a peculiar post-mortem surprise on their face.

Up onto Maria's torso, along the coastal wetlands, frogs pop like bubble gum. Umpteen ravenwood wetland wombats graze wild grass into a sprawling village green.

The diminutive lawnmowers swivel their heads rakishly on approach, throw a 'blue steel' for the camera then trot off, plump little butts waving a marsupial ta-ta.

Guide Ange Cunningham spots an anomaly among the wombat 'marbles' we maze through; it's Tassie devil scat. Maria is a re-release area for the endangered marsupials. Eyes remain peeled; devilishly, regrettably.

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Sherpa-like Ange carries an Inspector-Gadget-spec backpack, twice the weight of mine. A Tupperware container of fresh carrot cake miraculously materialises; each treat looks just plucked from a patisserie shelf.

This consummate outdoorswoman has twigs, rocks and leaves in her DNA. "I loved going out on big adventures in the wild with my dad," she says. "But mum never really came along; she just couldn't stand camping."

We ghost past the relics of failed attempts to tame Maria: convict ruins and French's Farm, agriculturally abandoned in the 1970s.

Back on *Eugenie's* handsome teak deck, a saucy salted caramel chocolate brownie and a warming Tasmanian red make for a balanced sugar high.

I tuck myself into the cosy bottom bunk. The sheltered bay only occasionally reminds me I'm sleeping on a yacht, with a sploosh noise through the brass-rimmed porthole.

IT'S FINE... ONCE YOU'RE IN

Pencil diving off the side of a sailboat into the vivacious Tasman is unsurpassed as a wake-up ritual (involuntary squeal on entry mandatory). Three brisk minutes' swim outshines the finest single-origin cuppa.

Fortuitously, for non-swimmers, 'Dave' is onboard; the shiny Rocket espresso machine pumps eye- and tastebud-opening fresh brews, piloted by the Tasmanian Walking Company's precocious young crew: can make a macchiato, can cook, can guide, can sail, can perform CPR, if needs be. Bloody show-offs.

Yet Dave only surfaces sparingly, because life on a sailboat inevitably requires a degree or two of compromise.

After all, espresso machines like Dave guzzle precious energy needed elsewhere. Fresh water is another example; so while a hot shower aboard "doesn't need to be one minute, they can't be an hour, either".

Fear not, you're not set adrift on a sea of compromise; just don't expect super-yacht-moored-in-Monaco superfluity. This is luxury Australian-style: pragmatic, nomadic yet with plenty of bells, whistles and locally sourced meal options.

It doesn't have to be the continental *or* cooked breakfast; it can be *and*, if your belly so desires. By all means, follow the fruit salad with a bean-and-sausage compote, and feta and herb muffin. Gluttony is guiltless when you have hours of wilderness walking in store. →

IS IT FOR ME?

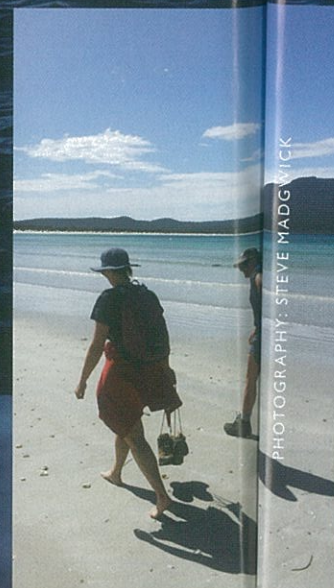
If you want to get the most out of your sail walk you should have an affinity with both sailing (sometimes on the open ocean) and bushwalking.

A moderate fitness level is required as some of the walks can be longish (three hours plus) with some steep gradients. The activities are tailored to the group's abilities and desires.

It's possible to cut out some of the walking by staying with the boat for a day, where you can swim, snorkel, or just hang out on the beach or boat, which obviously meets the walkers at the end of each day.

The *Lady Eugenie* is relatively spacious and well appointed with a largish saloon room and plenty of nooks on the deck (including in the shade) for some 'you time'.

Having said all that, six days on board without any walking could be a wasted trip; *Eugenie* ain't no cruise ship. Ask the non-walk-guiding staff about 'galley fever'.



PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE MADGWICK



The unsympathetic ocean surges onto smooth tangerine-lichen-coated boulders: this coast's informal tartan.

LATER, MARIA

The sails rise again (mechanically winched, a little unromantically) and Maria gradually retreats into the sea. We plough northwards, along whale migration paths towards Schouten Island, a discreet paradise that would be a megastar if located a little closer to 'civilisation'.

Infected by the landless horizon, the conversation frees up. We discover shared interests despite our cosmic differences in salaries and geography – obviously, we share a clinical infatuation with walking in remote spaces but, not so obviously, a veiled Abba-ballad addiction too.

English empty-nesters Roger and Janette are on the third leg of their Southern Hemisphere trekking odyssey, already lean and tanned from recent jaunts on Victoria's Great Ocean Walk and New Zealand's South Island. They giggle at each other's jokes. They walk for hours, days, but conversation never runs dry. Most importantly, they still make each other blush. Oh, Roger. Oh, Janette.

SUDDENLY, FROM THE DEEP

Fins beeline for *Eugenie's* starboard. A pod of (unfairly labelled) common dolphins shies away at the last millisecond, straight into the bow wave. They surf with the energy of red-cordial-affected children. We take turns to sit on the bowsprit, alone with the dolphins and our thoughts. Their squeaks and clicks mesmerise and heal.

An afterthought of dark rock, Ile des Phoques, pokes its head from the deep; fulsome waves burst into vapour on its crags. It's an uninhabitable deep-sea anomaly; walked on by no one, it seems alive, it moves.

Australian fur seal flippers wave clumsy hellos. They roll over, flop into the water, return on the next set, utterly oblivious of what our ancestors did to their ancestors here.

DOES A BEAR...

Like many Australian landmarks, the invaders ignored the locals when naming Schouten Island. Instead of a relevant and poetic moniker from the Oyster Bay Tribe, this island was shackled with the surname of a Dutch East Indies Company administrator (eventually hung for 'sodomy') who had no real visceral connection to Tassie at all.

Similarly, a quaint sea-blue sign on Schouten touts 'Bear Hill' walking track, but I don't come across any stray koala (even though they're not strictly bears), grizzly or polar bears on the three-hour switchbacking loop through blue gum forest to the (bare) granite-capped island.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *The Lady Eugenie; Schouten Island; The view is more than worth the climb.*



Presumably, the trail itself, which requires nimble scrambling, is the walker's burden to 'bear'. At the summit, the arresting vista across Freycinet Peninsula to Coles Bay has a pernicious history; spotters here used to signal to whalers in the coves below to 'move in'. Small scars on the land also betray another failed venture on these luminous shores: coal mining.

Back on the beach, as the *Lady* bobs far out in the bay, a glass of single-origin Andrew Pirie Apogee sparkling preambles a candlelit beach dinner 'surprise' that we all knew was coming.

Mako crayfish pâté, dolma, and fresh Bruny Island oysters grace the trestle table as walkers slump into Hampton-esque canvas foldaway chairs.

If a few overs of (tipsy) post-feast beach cricket with two Canadian lawyers is surreal for me, it must be positively otherworldly for them. On this day, with no other walkers around, Schouten is our island playground alone.

THE BIG PUSH

Over breakfast, a totally deadpan captain Jamie recites his own bush ballad, *Ode to a Wombat*.

Janette and Roger surreptitiously shrug, look quizzically at each other, then at me, as if I know what the hell's going on. We spontaneously and boisterously cheer in overcompensation.

Freycinet exhales ferociously, as if to remind us she's not to be taken lightly, as we tender up to Bryans Beach for the Big One: around seven hours (our choice) on the Freycinet Peninsula Circuit, destination Wineglass Bay.

Initially, the track barely interrupts the dense eucalypt forest and chamois-like ferns; as if no-one's been here for a while. The canopy surrenders to the sky as we scale Mount Graham's flanks (579 metres), where hands come in handy to navigate the rocky-river-course-cum-trail.

A cup of herbal tea brews on a camp cooker, lugged up by trainee guide Talbot, who tries to convince us that the banksia here smells like buttered corn. Three or four snorts each later, some agree, some just get head spins.

Bureaucratic insurance nonsense forbids us from heading to the highest point, Mount Freycinet (620 metres), but as a second-choice vantage point, Graham is sublime.

From above, Wineglass Bay somehow outshines its reputation; it feels like you could roll down to the bay, like we used to roll down the grass hills of childhood. But the hike continues.

OPENING THE WINE

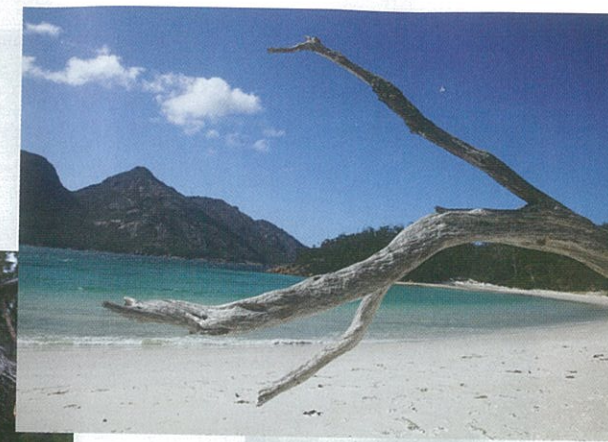
We respectfully walk around ancient Indigenous middens (shell deposits from camping and eating areas). They feel ignored, forgotten, unspoken, even though we speak about them, like an ancient myth you read about in school.

Wineglass is at once immense, blustery, beautiful and confoundingly deserted, save for a pied oystercatcher and a hooded plover or two, plus a swinishly vexatious pocket of midges.

Some say that Wineglass is so named because it resembles one; others that the ice-blue water here used to run red as Chablis with whale innards. As if to underline this, an alabaster whalebone sits atop a tourist sign.

Many have been lured by the exquisiteness and possibilities of this (now protected) landscape; jailers, miners, whalers, a cement-plant proprietor and even an Italian winemaker, but ultimately no one wins an argument against this graceful, inscrutable and immovable face.

But unlike those who came before, Freycinet does not spit us out. We floated in on the wind (mostly), walked, watched, and borrowed its bounty, and only for four splendid days. **AT**



FROM TOP: *The famous beauty of Wineglass Bay; Flora on the Freycinet Peninsula Circuit; A wombat lawnmower.*

DETAILS

Wineglass Bay Sail Walk

The Tasmanian Walking Company offers two guided sail walk itineraries departing from Hobart: the six-day journey including Fortescue Bay (from \$3850); and the four-day trip including Orford (from \$2850).

Prices include locally sourced meals (three-course dinners and drinks), accommodation and transfers. Accommodation is twin share: double room or bunks. First booked, first served.

Steve took the four-day north to south itinerary (direction of travel alternates each week). Backpacks and rain gear are provided, but you will need a good pair of (worn-in) hiking boots. taswalkingco.com.au

