

Cape Hauy walking track, Tasmania

# Perfect Peninsula

There's more to see on the Tasman Peninsula than just Port Arthur, write **Anabel Dean and Harriet Cunningham**

PORT Arthur is radiant in sunshine. Honey-coloured stone ruins of the 19th century penitentiary lie in green pastures. There are waves lapping along the shoreline and songbirds in the spring blossoms. It's peaceful. Temperate. A place for a picnic.

"Was nobody happy to be here?" asks a day-tripper surveying this pretty scene. "Are you seriously asking that?" reproaches the tour guide, spinning on his heels to face his questioner. He has just spent the better part of an hour outlining the ingenious attempts of desperate men who tried to flee the living hell of the penal colony on the southern tip of Tasmania.

Port Arthur has been a place of unimaginable atrocity. Robert Hughes describes it in *The Fatal Shore* as "a pit within the antipodean darkness, a small hole in the world about the size of Ireland, which would, in due time, swallow more than 65,000 men and women convicts ... transported to Australia".

Today, it's a crime not to visit Port Arthur.

The World Heritage-listed museum located an hour and a half southeast of Hobart is the state's biggest attraction, drawing 396,000 visitors last year, with links to a network of sites where British rejects were tossed away to live as slaves (including the Cascades Female Factory in Hobart and the Coal Mines at Saltwater River). There is, however, more to the Tasman Peninsula than dark history.

It still has vestiges of little Britain – handwoven knits, hawthorn hedges, Cornish pasties – but people talk more about the unique attributes of clean air, abundant wildlife, uncluttered views, wild coast, changeable weather. And sure enough, the wind is gusting at over 90kph on the day we take a Tasman Island Cruise with Pennicott Wilderness Journeys around jagged coastline to scrutinise the highest vertical sea cliffs in the Southern Hemisphere.

Marine life flicks across the bow of our purpose-built 12.5-metre yellow inflatable as it scuds from Stewarts Bay Lodge past the Isle of The Dead, round

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FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Tasman ebike Adventures, Bangor; Tasman monument; the view from McHenry's Distillery, Bothy.



◀ southern tip of the Peninsula to Tasman Island, Cape Pillar and Cape Hauy, and finally back to Pirates Bay on the east coast near Eaglehawk Neck.

It's a wildly exhilarating three-hour joyride with the wind blasting salty spray into faces and dragging tears from eyes. We can almost touch the rocks riddled with spires, clefts, pillars and sea stacks, arches and blowholes. A vast ocean swells forwards, and upwards, then backwards, spluttering waterfalls like a foaming soda fountain.

Look up at the towering Jurassic dolerite cliffs that soar 300 metres from the sea floor and there are people as tiny as specks scattered along the rim. This is the Three Capes Track, a new multi-day walk intended to complement the Overland Track, which links forests and heathlands from Denmans Cove, Cape

Pillar and Cape Hauy to Fortescue Bay.

An upgrade of the third of The Three Capes is underway at Cape Raoul (on the western side of Crescent Bay), but there's a lesser known 'fourth cape' that promises to take us where few have gone.

To get there, we need Ben Rea, an ex-Tasmania Parks and Wildlife officer, who now runs customised adventure tours using pedal-assisted electric mountain bikes to access some of the most isolated coast on southeast Tasmania.

Our expedition begins outside the wine shed at Bangor, a heritage farming property, just off the highway immediately south of Dunalley on the Forestier Peninsula. A winding dirt road leads past Blackman's Bay to the obligatory gourmet picnic of the finest Tasmanian produce laid across a fallen forest giant.

There is smoked eel, labna, crusty bread and more.

Afterwards, on two silent but super-powered wheels, we make an unobtrusive incursion across lambing paddocks and ancient blue gum forests to a secluded beach. Rea celebrates our arrival with another lunchbox treat. It's the best homemade buckwheat ginger slice ever tasted, but the significance of this spot is greater still.

The 17th-century Dutch explorer Abel Tasman spent two weeks exploring these pristine shores, and on 3 December, 1642, made for the bay on which we stand. The sea was too rough for a landing, so the ship's carpenter, Pieter Jacobsz, swam ashore with a flagpole and planted it on the shore. Tasman had seen the campfires of the first Australians but that was all. He took possession of Tasmania for the

Dutch (the first European landing in Tasmania) at what is now called Monument Bay, but it was another 150 years before French explorer Marion du Fresne made first contact.

"This is pretty much as it would have been when Tasman claimed it," says Ben. His words send a chill down the spine. A big cement monument was plonked in the bush back from the beach in 1923.

"As a memorial to posterity and to the inhabitants of this country," it reads imperiously. We shake ourselves from silent reverie by taking to the bitumen again and heading about 20 minutes down the road to a monument of another kind.

The founder of one of Tasmania's most respected and awarded distilleries is Bill McHenry, a Sydney marketing executive who came to the Peninsula on holiday and returned in 2010 for the term of his natural life. He had endured years of corporate incarceration until, one night, after a fierce boardroom battle, he drove through a red traffic light, missed the flight home and failed to make a significant family event.

"I was nobody's friend," he recalls. "Next day, I was quietly chatting with my neighbour. I told him that I was miserable.

'Look, it's obvious what you should be doing,' he said. 'Your name is William McHenry. Wear a kilt, learn the bagpipes and make whisky'.

We laughed out loud, but it was like a bolt of light through clouds. I thought: 'I could have a whisky distillery, be my own boss, develop the business and leave a legacy for my children'."

The legacy is McHenry Distillery, the southernmost spirit-maker in Australia, and

## Information

- **Tasman Island Cruises** (run by Pennicott Wilderness Journeys): [www.pennicottjourneys.com.au](http://www.pennicottjourneys.com.au)
- **McHenry Distillery**: [mchenrydistillery.com.au](http://mchenrydistillery.com.au)
- **Ben Rea's Tasmanian ebike Adventures**: [tasmanianebikeadventures.com.au](http://tasmanianebikeadventures.com.au)
- **Stewarts Bay Lodge**: [stewartsbaylodge.com.au](http://stewartsbaylodge.com.au)
- **Wildwood Luxury Retreat**: [www.wildwoodluxuryretreat.com](http://www.wildwoodluxuryretreat.com)
- **Three Capes Gear and Gourmet**: [3capesgearandgourmet.com.au](http://3capesgearandgourmet.com.au)
- **Port Arthur**: [www.portarthur.org.au](http://www.portarthur.org.au)

The writers were guests of the above companies and of Tourism Tasmania

the only distiller with its own natural spring. It's a tale of redemption worth hearing over a wee dram of single malt whisky or, in our case, a platter of local oysters and smoked quail followed by a four-hour gin-making workshop in the McHenry 'gin palace' on the flanks of Mount Arthur.

Visitors are invited to craft their own gin recipe using a choice of botanicals (lemon myrtle, orange peel, saffron, star anise, cardamom, that sort of thing) and then watch, transfixed, as the concoction bubbles away in a bulbous still, then condenses as a clear liquid in a glass flask. The resulting elixir guarantees a warm glow from inside and out, with the endless view beyond Port Arthur, beyond Storm Bay, into the Great Southern Ocean.

It's sobering to reflect on the past, to know that none escaped Port Arthur and that those who tried were condemned to a fate worse than death. What must it have been to be sent to the solitary confinement cells that were meant to curtail the contagion of criminality? Prisoners were forced to wear hoods and were locked in rooms without sound or light for weeks on end. The experience that was supposed to encourage reflection only spawned insanity.

One of the longest serving prisoners, Irish convict Denis Doherty, overcame a staggering 43 years of incarceration in the Australian penal system. His words return as we gaze out towards the icy invisibility of Antarctica: "I have tried to escape, always to escape as a bird does out of a cage," he said. "Is that unnatural? Is that a crime?"

Today, it seems to be the most natural thing in the world to escape to this little pocket of beauty, at the far end of the earth. ■

## Tasmanian treats

Our four-day escape began at Stewarts Bay Lodge. It's a definite cut above the usual holiday park with 40 smart cabins (of various configurations, most very modern) scattered along the waterfront of a peaceful bay.

The little track in front of our luxurious hut provides easy walking access in about 15 minutes to the Port Arthur historic site. There's an open-plan kitchen, lounge and dining area, a comfy king-size bed and sliding glass doors onto a timber deck, with a spa bath with meditative views into bushland.

There's a nice feeling of seclusion with the opportunity of more social activity at the on-site restaurant, on the tennis courts and around the playground/BBQ area.

Down the road a bit, at Koonya, there's

another base from which to appreciate the jaw-dropping scenery bursting with wildlife. And much of it can be seen, or heard, from the huge glass lounge room windows at Wildwood Luxury Retreat.

This romantic one-bed apartment floats in treetops over two levels with views across grassy fields towards Norfolk Bay. The pantry is so well stocked that, even in the absence of the owners who live in the adjoining property, we consider ourselves the closest of cosmopolitan friends.

The owner, Janice Sutton, is one of the founders of the Koonya Garlic Festival and the creator of an acclaimed garlic cookbook, *Garlic Feast*. It's worth returning to this verdant patch for her alone.

If you're walking the Three Capes Walk, there's

a way to have your cake and eat it too. Three Capes Gear and Gourmet is a local company that provides all the gear with lighter backpacks specifically chosen for the track and food that is actually a pleasure to eat.

Possibly this is more critical if, like the owner Gail McCallum, you're "an avowed inner-city urbanite of the sort that develops sweaty palms if more than a few hundred metres from proper coffee and 24-hour convenience stores".

The pre-packed dehydrated supplies range from basic to a cornucopia of local eats and treats. The writers of this article, newly inspired by the possibilities of food from a plastic sleeve, recommend the pasta arrabiata, green curry chicken and — the best breakfast of the entire trip — pancakes with maple syrup. Just add water.