



Boyd's Tower was intended as a lighthouse but was instead used as a lookout for whaling operations.

LIGHT THE WAY

One of the most magical ways to experience the NSW far south coast is on a three-day walk through Ben Boyd National Park

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BREAK IT UP

You can do shorter sections as stand-alone walks if you can't commit to a three-day hike. Light2Light will do day transfers on request, such as drop-off at Saltwater Creek and pick-up at Bittangabee Bay (9km walk), or drop-off at Bittangabee and pick-up at Green Cape (8km). Ben Boyd National Park also offers transfers, as does the caretaker at Green Cape Lightstation if you're staying independently at the keepers' cottages. For short paved walks, visit Boyd Tower and Green Cape Lightstation; or head to Saltwater Creek Campground for a pristine beach picnic. Bittangabee Bay offers historic ruins and Pulpit Rock is the spot for headland views.

IT'S LIBERATING to join a guided walk. Not worrying about logistics allows you to absorb the finer details of your immediate surroundings and the overall beauty of the landscape. It's such a pleasure to not fret about whether you're on the right track or will reach your destination in time. This is especially true for multi-day walks, which also involve organising transport, finding accommodation and planning meals.

And so it is with the three-day 'Light to Light' coastal walk in the southern section of Ben Boyd National Park, south of Twofold Bay at Eden in NSW. Unfamiliar with the park, which is inaccessible by public transport, we take the guided option with eco-certified Light2Light Coastal Walks. New owners, Cam Read and Tess Miller, organise everything, meaning you only need to carry a day pack.

We catch a flight from Sydney to Merimbula a day early to go kayaking on the Towamba River with Jenny Robb of Kiah Wilderness Tours. Jen knows the waterway intimately, as her farm has a kilometre of river frontage where she offers two 'Youcamp' sites (camping spots on private property providing farmers extra revenue).

Bellbirds, honeyeaters and wonga pigeons are the only sources of sounds as we paddle past grazing sheep and sections of Merimbula mudstone. There are white-bellied sea eagle nests in the trees and we scan the riverbanks for tiny azure kingfishers, before picnicking on a sheltered sandbank. As we glide mere millimetres above stones in the shallows, Jen recalls how in a recent flood a neighbour used his powerboat to rescue a caravan washed into the river.

My accommodation for the night is the Seahorse Inn Hotel, built in 1843 by Scottish entrepreneur Benjamin Boyd (whose name pops up everywhere in this region). This stately, renovated colonial building fronts the beach at Boydtown on the bush-fringed southern reaches of Twofold Bay.

Scudding clouds add a moody feel to a pre-dinner beach stroll, where a sign tells of the indigenous Thaua people's relationship with orcas long before European whaling commenced here. The region is renowned for seafood, so at the in-house restaurant I choose mussels in a wine and tomato broth, which the chef says have come straight from Twofold Bay.

In pursuit of larger marine creatures next morning, we step aboard the Cat Balou whale-watching cruise in Eden. Twofold Bay is named for its twin bights and is one of the deepest

harbours in the world. With no bar or channel, our skipper says you can be watching whales within five minutes, though not today, apparently.

Despite the wind and drizzle, kids squeal in delight as dolphins duck and dive at the bow and huge flocks of mutton birds skim the surface. Suddenly, a white belly arcs out of the leaden swell about 50 metres away - a humpback at last. Unfortunately, it disappears after a few more spouts, though the crew regale us with stories of a super pod of 30 whales breaching and tail

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The 'Light to Light' walk should be a relatively easy hike for those of average fitness and you'll certainly never get tired of the diverse range of landscapes on offer.



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slapping earlier in the season. As the boat shelters in the lee of Red Point for morning tea, we get a waterfront perspective of Boyds Tower at the start of our intended walk.

It's still drizzling when Cam, an outdoor educator and guide, meets our group at lunchtime. On the drive over, he explains regular tours begin around 8.30am and include a visit to a working oyster farm, something our group has forsaken for whale-watching. With limited access points, the 30km walk is divided into three sections of 13km, 9km and 8km. We start with the longest section from Boyds Tower to Saltwater Creek.

Boyds Tower, it turns out, is not actually a lighthouse. Built in 1847 of expensive Pyrmont sandstone from Sydney, the 23-metre private tower never received government approval. Nicknamed Boyd's Folly, it was used instead as a lookout for his whaling operation before he went bankrupt and scarpered, bound for the Californian goldfields.

After taking in the lookouts at Red Point, we set off through tea tree and old man banksia with the ocean on our left. The track undulates and regularly veers away from the shore, before swinging back to it, meaning the vegetation and vistas are constantly changing.

Over the three days we traverse woodlands and wet sclerophyll forest, feathery-soft fern gullies, groves of grass trees, estuarine wetlands and rocky shorelines. One minute

we're walking in knee-high coastal heath with views for miles, the next we're cocooned inside eerie monochrome melaleuca thickets whose bleached-grey, shredding trunks evoke haunted forests.

The soundtrack oscillates between percussive waves pounding the craggy shore, to whisper quiet bush punctuated with bird chatter. We watch a lyrebird 'shake a tail feather' and a flock of yellow-tailed black cockatoos wailing overhead. There are goanna and snake sightings, and after investigating a rustling beside the path, I find an echidna snuffling through the undergrowth.

Ben Boyd National Park has the largest area of Devonian rocks in south-east Australia. Aged around 350 million years, the folded and twisted layers, some dark oxblood red, have weathered into jagged promontories, boulder-strewn bays and vast rock platforms, which contrast strikingly with green vegetation, white beaches and blue ocean.

We've taken the camping option (though you can stay at Green Cape Lightstation) and spend both nights at Saltwater Creek. Bush conceals the campground as we approach from the beach and we discover our tents are already set up with stretchers and bedding. Tess welcomes us with chilled Rusty Fig Verdelho, Point Break beers and platters of local produce, including Broadwater oysters and Tilba brie drizzled with Moruya honey.

From a well-equipped camp kitchen, Tess produces seafood pasta and rocket salad one night and slow-cooked lamb with crisp vegetables the next. She bakes, too, including a divine coconut slice packed with dark choc-chips. Forgoing a campfire due to the total fire ban, we sit around the table to discuss the world's problems over hot drinks, while a possum pays us a nocturnal visit.

On day two I'm initially disconcerted when we don't continue our hike south-bound, instead driving south to Bittangabee Bay and walking northward back to Saltwater Creek. With the ocean now on our right it feels like the centre section of our three-piece linear puzzle has been inverted. But I soon get used to it and walking back into camp certainly feels good at the end of the day.

Sheltered Bittangabee Bay was used for unloading goods bound for Green Cape Lightstation and there are ruins of an old jetty and storehouse, along with foundations of a house built by the Imlay brothers, who established the first permanent whaling station in Eden.

We constantly have to don shower jackets and shrug them off again, but the pace is leisurely, with time to admire lollipops of purple native iris, bell-shaped red and yellow correa, and spidery red grevillea flowers. Waves whipped up by the unusual east-southeast wind are mesmerising, smashing into the rocks in explosions of spray.



Back at Saltwater Creek, we sit on the beach and watch the waves roll in as hooded plovers scurry and squawk protectively around their eggs, while a pair of pied oystercatchers struts through the reeds. Melaleucas reflect in the creek's still waters; swallows and fantails flit across it in a frenzy of insect feeding; frogs warm up for their evening chorus and kangaroos and wallabies come out to feed. It's easy to understand why this location was important to the Thaua people.

Day three sees us drive back to Bittangabee Bay, this time walking south in big-sky sunshine. It's a day of savouring the vast coastal panorama that includes whales also heading south. We marvel at how far we've walked and linger over morning tea

at Pulpit Rock, a colourful geological mosaic of fractured rock shelves that are popular with fishermen.

I get a fleeting glimpse of the elusive and vulnerable eastern ground parrot as we head through flowering heath to Green Cape Lightstation, now beckoning in the distance. Whipbirds whistle and crack and wafts of fragrant lomandra sweeten the salty air as flies make an unwelcome appearance. The approach to Green Cape takes us past a cemetery for those lost when the passenger steamer *Ly-ee-Moon* hit rocks in 1886. Despite heroic rescue attempts from the light-keepers, only 15 of the 86 passengers survived the treacherous seas.

Today, the lightstation is an oasis of tranquillity. First lit in 1883, the white tower is perched on a headland of manicured lawns. It's a popular spot for a picnic and to sight whales passing close to the promontory. The lighthouse is now solar powered, says caretaker Scott during a guided tour, and the outlook from the top of the 29-metre structure is epic. We're envious of guests staying in the tastefully renovated keepers' cottages.

On the drive out of the park we visit Disaster Bay Lookout where Cam and Tess usually pop champagne. It's a suitably picturesque spot to toast the completion of our coastal walk, but sadly we're rushing to catch a flight home.  

MORE INFORMATION

Light2Light Coastal Walks | light2light.com.au

Seahorse Inn Hotel | seahorseinnhotel.com.au

Kiah Wilderness Tours | kiahwildernesstours.com.au

Youcamp | youcamp.com

Cat Balou Cruises | catbalou.com.au

Ben Boyd National Park | nationalparks.nsw.gov.au