

ROAD TRIP

AMAZING JOURNEYS, SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES

The Hazards mountain range
meets Great Oyster Bay at
Freycinet Lodge.

TOP-SHELF TASMANIA

Take a lazy loop of the Apple Isle's farmlands, forests, mountains and beaches while staying in NRMA-owned luxury accommodation all the way

WORDS & PHOTOS BRIAR JENSEN



From far left to right: waterfront accommodation at Strahan Village; ruins from the brutal penal settlement at Sarah Island that operated from 1822 to 1833; the Miners Siding art installation pays homage to Queenstown’s grim mining history, which has scarred the surrounding hilly landscape.



“**THE LYELL HIGHWAY** is fantastic,” says Ross Elliot, referring to the 300km route from Hobart to Strahan on Tasmania’s west coast. A skipper with Gordon River Cruises in Strahan, Elliot commutes from Hobart every second week, riding his Ducati Monster 1200 S. “The road is well made, challenging, but perfect for motorcycles with the best mix of twisties.” The scenery is also stunning, as the Lyell meanders beside rivers, across farmland, alongside lakes, then winds through eucalypt woodlands, pine plantations and national park.

The Lyell Highway is the first section of our week-long drive to Strahan, Cradle Mountain and Freycinet Peninsula, starting at the Hobart waterfront in the old IXL Jam Factory that’s now The Henry Jones Art Hotel. On the in-house art tour (free for guests), several works portray the terrain we’ll cover, such as Sebastian Galloway’s 2021 Glover Prize winning *View of Mt Lyell through an Acid Raindrop*, an oil-on-copper depicting the desolate mining moonscape around Queenstown.

Our first stop on the Lyell is another awe-inspiring artwork, The Wall in the Wilderness, near Derwent Bridge (which is a short drive from the NRMA’s spectacular Pumphouse Point property - see cover image). In a purpose-designed building, the 50-metre double-sided wall is sculptured in honey-toned Huon pine by artist Greg Duncan. Historical scenes of the area’s Indigenous life and work in mining, farming, pining (logging) and hydro are so realistically detailed - think bulging veins on hands and creased folds of fabric - it’s hard to believe they’re carved until you see panels in progress.

The temperature plummets from 18°C to 13°C as the Lyell crosses through Franklin-Gordon Wild Rivers National Park. A signboard declares ‘You’re venturing deeper into the wet,

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wild, west coast wilderness, which receives an astonishing 2.5 to 3 metres of rainfall a year.’ On cue, mist and drizzle roll in. We layer on jackets and beanies for several short walks. On the Franklin River Nature Trail the tangle of ancient temperate rainforest appears spray-foamed with velvety malachite moss and emits an earthy humus scent. Ferns glint with raindrops along the track to Nelson Falls, a 30-metre wedding cake-tiered wall of water, and on the swing bridge along Frenchmans Cap track we have a swaying good time.

After the verdant forest of Victoria Pass, the dystopian hills of Queenstown seem scoured by steel wool, leaving them brown, barren and bleeding. The brutal result of copper mining and subsequent sulphurous rain, it’s disconcertingly compelling. The township doesn’t shy from its mining history or the tragic loss of 42 miners in 1912. Miners Siding, an art installation in the main street, pays homage to the events and you can learn more at the Gallery Museum in the 1897 Imperial Hotel.

At Strahan, on the northern end of Macquarie Harbour, we catch *The Ship That Never Was*, Australia’s longest continuously running show (29 years). Produced by Round Earth Theatre Company, it’s a resourceful and humorous production chronicling the capture of the last convict-built ship on Sarah Island. (Hint: arrive early, dress warmly and watch out for seniors wielding water pistols.)

Main Image: Courtesy of RACT Destinations. Credit: Alamy Stock Photo; James Charles Hill

Strahan Village accommodation ranges from historic waterfront cottages to hilltop hotel rooms. Our spacious second-storey room is in a cute row of harbourside terraces, with a fabulous view of the town’s wharf. Post-show we dine at View 42° Restaurant & Bar, where the seafood buffet is as expansive as the vista.

Macquarie Harbour is the second-largest in Australia, after Victoria’s Port Phillip, and six times the size of Sydney Harbour. We explore it aboard Gordon River Cruises’ *Spirit of the Wild*, sinking into the luxurious leather seats of the Premier Upper Deck for the six-hour trip and accompanying food and drinks.

In 1822, Macquarie Harbour became Tasmania’s first penal settlement (before Port Arthur) and sailing captains dubbed the treacherous narrow entrance ‘Hell’s Gate’. To reach it, we cruise past salmon farms and the Training Wall - a 2.8km stone wall built in the water to narrow the channel, speed up water flow and naturally dredge the sand. Started in 1898, it took 300 men three years to construct.

“We’re standing at Hell on Earth,” says guide, Kiah Davey, after disembarking on Sarah Island. Over an 11-year period, 1200 prisoners became forced labour in the timber and shipbuilding industries, completing over 100 vessels. Walking through the ruins, we encounter stories of prisoners and punishments (50 lashes for ‘getting shoes mended under false pretences’ sounds a tad harsh), corruption, murder, escapes and, surprisingly, early labour bargaining.

Our skipper switches to electric propulsion to glide up the Gordon River in whispered reverence to the rainforest reflected in the silken water. “There are not many places you can get into by boat like this,” says Ross Elliot. “It’s total wilderness.” The

Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA), encompassing almost a quarter of the state at 1.6 million hectares, is one of only two UNESCO sites worldwide that meet seven of the 10 criteria (most meet one or two), and the only WHA to include ‘wilderness’ in the official title.

Disembarking at Heritage Landing, we wander beneath lichen-licked trunks of sassafras, leatherwood, myrtle beech, and Huon pine, the latter revered for boatbuilding. Back on Strahan waterfront at Morrison’s Sawmill, we learn that the concentration of methyl eugenol oil is what renders Huon pine its prized resistance to rot and insect damage. Endemic to Tassie’s temperate rainforests, fossil records show the trees have been around for 2.6 million years. They’re infinitesimally slow-growing - about 1mm of girth a year - and can live up to a staggering 3000 years. After almost being logged out of existence, Huon pines are now protected, and only two sawmills are licensed to process salvaged logs and stumps leftover from pining days. We buy a chopping board and I score a beautiful piece of bark in the \$1 offcuts bin.

TRAVELLING IN TASMANIA

Don’t underestimate driving times. Highways in Tassie are often a single lane each way, with intermittent passing lanes. The scenery is stunning and there’s much to see and do en route, so it pays to pack a picnic (and a raincoat) and take your time. Keep a photo of your National Park Pass on your phone, as it’s required for the shuttle ticket at Cradle Mountain.



The pine boatshed on Dove Lake was built in 1940.

During dinner at intimate waterfront Risby Cove Restaurant, I'm intrigued by an eclectic mix of people filing past, some with guitars. I follow their trail after dinner and end up invited to a private viewing of the 2022 documentary *Franklin*. It follows eighth-generation Tasmanian, Oliver Cassidy, retracing his father's expedition down the Franklin River to the blockade that helped save the area from the proposed hydro-electric dam in the 1980s. Strahan was the headquarters of the Wilderness Society during the protest and many in attendance are featured in the archival footage. After the film they sing the campaign song 'Save the Franklin' and we're reminded that the fight to save this area and its 2000-year-old stand of Huon pines is ongoing.

Our Wilderness Railway journey next morning is cancelled due to 'unscheduled maintenance'. Instead, we walk the foreshore, visit Hogarth Falls, and drive to Ocean Beach, (Tasmania's longest at over 30km), which dissolves into the distant sea haze. We scramble up a mountainous sandhill at Henty Dunes, sometimes on all fours, and sand ends up coating my lip gloss like crusty donut sugar. Our reward at the top is more dunes, undulating in every direction, a hoot for tobogganing if you don't mind sand in your pants too.

We head north through Zeehan and Rosebery, then west to Cradle Mountain Hotel, within Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park. Our contemporary split-level room overlooks alpine woodland, as do cosy communal lounges warmed by wood fires. Taking in the boardwalk at dusk, we spot a wombat and wallaby before rain whips in on an arctic wind. I panic-buy a puffer jacket on the way to dinner at in-house restaurant Altitude, where a wagyu beef burger and crispy chips hit the spot.

Taking in the boardwalk at dusk, we spot a wombat and wallaby before rain whips in on an arctic wind

Rising early and layering up for the park's notoriously mercurial weather, we drive through morning mist to the national park visitor centre and catch the first shuttle bus to walk access points. At Dove Lake, where on a previous visit we couldn't stand upright in the car park due to ferocious winds, there's a sleek new all-weather viewing bunker overlooking the lake to Cradle Mountain's four peaks.

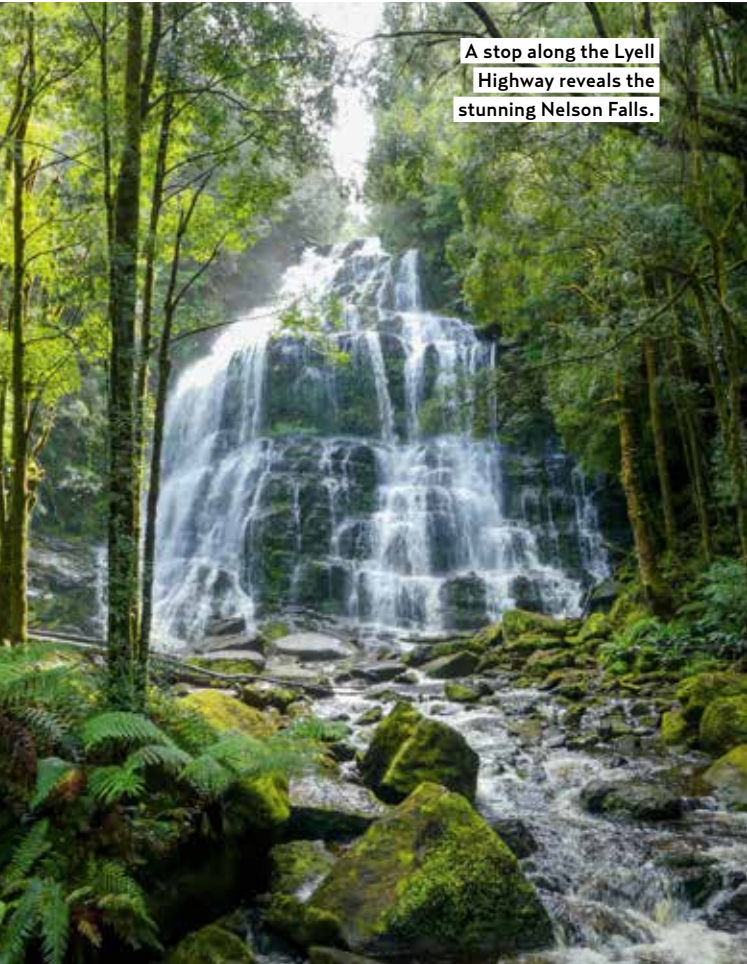
With a section of the circuit walk closed for construction of an accessible track, we hike Dove Lake's western shore via the picturesque boatshed, stripping off clothing as sunshine sizzles off the mist and Cradle's peaks play hide-and-seek behind powder-puff clouds. White tea-tree petals tumble snow-like on the track to Lake Lilla and dried cola-coloured lollipop flower heads of button grass bob in the breeze. Skinks sunbake on the boardwalk to Waldheim Chalet, where a boisterous baby wombat comically rams its nonchalant mother.

Waldheim, meaning forest home, is a replica of Gustav and Kate Weindorfer's timber guesthouse, built in 1912 amongst strappy pandani trees and towering King Billy pines. They pioneered mountain tourism here and were pivotal in the push for the national park declaration. I've just read Kate's biography *The Woman Behind the Man and the Mountain* and I'm grateful not to be walking in a long Edwardian skirt like she did. We earn our dinner at Altitude after a full day hiking

Credit: Getty Images



Declan Brown from Oyster Bay Tours explains the life cycle of oysters.



A stop along the Lyell Highway reveals the stunning Nelson Falls.

Looking down on
the spectacular
Wineglass Bay.



Opening the Coastal Pavilion door
is like stepping into the pages of a
cutting-edge architectural magazine

and I devour the venison sausages rich with Worcestershire sauce and pepperberry.

Next morning the weather app declares it's 7°C but feels like -2°C and my puffer jacket purchase is vindicated. We head north, then east through forest and farmland, where black-and-white Friesian cattle speckle the paddocks and trucks lumber under burdens of teetering hay rolls. Campbell Town makes a great pitstop, with convict history, independent shops (I love The Book Cellar beneath The Foxhunters Return), chainsaw carved sculptures in Blackburn Park, and Gallery 81, where owner Luke Harvey is painting an entry for next year's Glover Prize.

We continue east to Freycinet Lodge, on the fringe of Freycinet National Park. Opening the door to our Coastal Pavilion is like stepping into the pages of an architectural magazine. Curved glass walls front two timber-lined pods joined by a glass atrium, all overlooking a circular deck with a bush and bay backdrop. We pour a drink from the complimentary bar fridge, recline on the oversized day bed and contemplate a post-dinner soak under the stars in the outdoor bathtub.

Unfortunately, our morning Wineglass Bay Cruise is cancelled due to unusually strong winds. Instead, we walk up to Wineglass Bay Lookout. From above, Wineglass appears more azure-tinted cocktail with a sugar rim of white sand. Enticing as it looks, the spouse has a sore knee and can't manage the 1000-step track down to the beach, so we drive to Cape Tourville lighthouse for the clifftop boardwalk and picnic at Sleepy Beach, where boulders are basted with paprika and mustard lichens.

At dinner in the lodge's restaurant, The Bay, we enjoy lamb loin paired with local mussels. We learn of the molluscs' provenance the next morning as we join Declan Brown of Oyster Bay Tours. We wiggle into waders and waddle to the water where he rightly assures us they will suction onto our bodies "like a hug from the river". Up to our waists in the Swanport



Our stylish Coastal
Pavilion accommodation
at Freycinet Lodge.

Estuary, he explains Freycinet Marine Farm buys Pacific oyster spat to raise in their river nursery before fattening up in their off-shore lease, whereas their mussels are wild-seeded. We don protective gloves and shuck our fresh oysters, slurping them from the shells along with a steaming bowl of mussels and glass of Craigie Knowe Estate Riesling.

You can savour more seafood on the deck of Freycinet Marine Farm, but it's time for us to head back to Hobart. It's an easy drive, stopping at sites that take our fancy such as Devil's Corner Cellar Door and deserted sandy beaches. There's also convict-built Spiky Bridge, where jagged stones jut brutally from the parapet (though no one's sure why), and Triabunna, a departure point for Maria Island.

The Great Eastern Drive hugs the shoreline, passing farms, fishing villages, bays and beaches in a coastal contrast to the lush surrounds of our first leg on the Lyell Highway. 📍

Credit: Alamy Stock Photo



MORE INFORMATION

- Henry Jones Art Hotel
thehenryjones.com
- Strahan Village
strahanvillage.com.au
- Cradle Mountain Hotel
cradlemountainhotel.com.au
- Freycinet Lodge
freycinetlodge.com.au
- Gordon River Cruises
gordonrivercruises.com.au
- Oyster Bay Tours
oysterbaytours.com
- To book an NRMA property:
mynrma.com.au/travel/expeditions

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