

# GUIDING LIGHTS

*Tasmania's wild southern coast is home to some of Australia's most dramatic and photogenic lighthouses.*

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY  
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Thrusting up from the sea like an oceanic Uluru, Tasman Island is a monumental flat-topped hulk of rock off the Tasman Peninsula in Tasmania's southeast. Its colossal cliffs of needle-sharp, splintered dolerite columns are lashed by pounding waves and the narrow channel that separates it from Australia's highest sea cliffs at Cape Pillar churns with white water.

As our helicopter sweeps towards the island's wind-scoured plateau, a white speck emerges from the stubbled vegetation and grows in stature on approach. The solid Tasman Island Lighthouse is 29m tall, yet is dwarfed by its monolithic plinth.

Lighthouses are fascinating, beguiling structures.

Quartz-white spires backdropped by cerulean sea and sky, picturesque by day, they are guiding lights by night, and lifesaving beacons in bad weather, especially before electronic ship navigation. The more than 350 lighthouses around Australia's coastline are now all automated, but

it's possible to visit many, including three of the country's southernmost lighthouses that are easily accessible from Hobart.

## TASMAN ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE

"Seeing Tasman Island for the first time is a daunting experience," says Armand Schepis, who arrived here as a keeper in 1962. "It was the bleakest and loneliest of all lighthouses off the south-eastern coast of Tasmania."

Like an infinitesimally small dragonfly, our Rotor-Lift Aviation helicopter hovers over the windswept island before alighting beside the heritage-listed lighthouse for a picnic tour. But there is a pang of guilt in our luxurious transport, knowing how treacherous arrival by boat was for the lighthouse staff. When a lighthouse was first proposed for Tasman Island in 1891, a Hobart Marine Board warden commented, "The person who had suggested the construction of a light on the top was not altogether compos mentis."

From 1929, keepers, animals and supplies had to transfer from a steamer to a small open boat, from which they climbed into a wicker basket lowered from a flying fox strung between the island and an offshore rock. After being winched across the water they transferred to a trolley and were hauled up the precipitous slope on tram lines, then transported by horse-drawn tramway to the lighthouse. Standing at the top of the haulage way looking down, it's so steep I can't see over the shrubs to the base of the cliff.

No wonder it induced tears of anxiety in some new arrivals.

**Opposite page:**  
The Tasman Island Lighthouse is the highest operating lighthouse in Australia.

**This page, clockwise from top left:** Climb the 72 cast iron steps at Cape Bruny Lighthouse; Iron Pot Lighthouse is the second-oldest ever built in Australia.



Built of curved cast iron pieces in 1906, Tasman is the highest operating lighthouse in Australia at 276m above sea level. It was converted to wind power in 1975, automated in 1976, and the station demanned in 1977. It is not open to climb, but we're free to photograph it and view memorabilia displayed in keepers' cottages.

Even on this fine day, wind whips hair into my face, but it's difficult to imagine gales that forced keepers to crawl to the lighthouse and blew sheep off the cliffs, even a pigsty with pig inside. Keeping children away from cliff edges and island sinkholes must have been a nightmare. Even the lighthouse itself vibrated in severe storms, breaking lantern mantles and spilling mercury. John Cook, author of *The Last Lighthouse Keeper*, wrote of Tasman Island: "It is the most majestic of the Tasmanian light stations and the most dangerous."

## CAPE BRUNY LIGHTHOUSE

Cape Bruny is the only southern Tasmanian lighthouse offering tours inside, run by Craig Parsey, who lived

### WHERE TO STAY

Stay at The Henry Jones Art Hotel on the Hobart waterfront for its nautical ambience and proximity to the Maritime Museum.

### WHERE TO EAT

Dine in dark and moody Landscape Restaurant & Grill, surrounded by artworks from John Glover and winners of the annual Glover Prize.

### WHERE TO CHILL

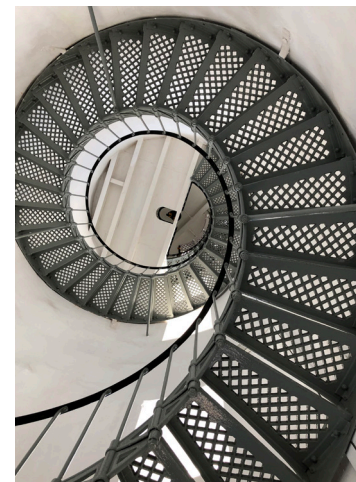
Slip onto a red barstool at IXL Long Bar, sip on specialty cocktail Rose of Mary, and relax to the jazz tunes.

## "VIEWS FROM THE TOP BALCONY OF CAPE BRUNY LIGHTHOUSE ARE BREATHTAKING."

here as a child in the 1970s with his lighthouse keeper family. On the southwest tip of Bruny Island, it was commissioned following three shipwrecks in the area, including the convict transport ship *George III* resulting in the loss of 134 lives.

Built by convict labour from locally quarried rock in 1838, Cape Bruny was Tasmania's third lighthouse and is now Australia's second oldest.

It was decommissioned in 1996, replaced by an automated solar light station on an adjacent headland, but was Australia's longest continually manned lighthouse.



You can drive here and daily tours start at the base of the 13m conical tower before climbing the 72 cast iron spiral steps built in 1903 to replace the original wooden zigzag staircase. Views from the outside top balcony are breathtaking, literally.

Like other early lights, it originally burnt expensive sperm whale oil before being converted to kerosene, then electrified in 1959. Details of the Fresnel lenses and how they work is fascinating. There's a museum and tiny graveyard for two lighthouse family children who died here.

Plentiful land for timber, stock grazing and vegetable gardens made life slightly easier for keepers. Bruny boasts the longest serving head lighthouse keeper, Captain William Hawkins, serving for nearly 38 years between 1877 and 1914.

John Cook, the last and second-longest keeper at Bruny, said, "I didn't want to leave, when the time came I was very sad."

## IRON POT LIGHTHOUSE

Lighthouses are not always monumental. Squat and square, crisp and white, with a ribbon of carmine-red, Iron Pot Lighthouse perches like a present atop a slither of sandstone at the entrance to Hobart's River Derwent. It probably feels like a gift to sailors on the gruelling Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race, signalling the final leg and relative safety of the Derwent River.

On an Iron Pot Cruise with Pennicott Wilderness Journeys we get a water's-eye view of the diminutive light. At 11m tall, what it lacks in stature, it makes up for in status, being Tasmania's first lighthouse, built in 1832, the second built in Australia, and now Australia's oldest original light tower (as Macquarie Lighthouse was rebuilt in 1883).

The lighthouse is all that remains on the rocky islet, yet up to 18 people lived here. Historic photos shared by the skipper shows several buildings, one a grand two-storey gothic home with dormer windows and lacework veranda. The house was built in 1884 for a keeper with seven children who were home-schooled until they were old enough to row to South Arm and walk 3km to school. A storm in 1895 saw waves breaking over the house and left kelp dangling from the top of the lighthouse. Sadly, the dwellings were removed in 1921 after the light was automated. 