

MERCURIAL MARIA

A four-day guided walk in Maria Island National Park dishes up rich history, enigmatic mystery, incredible wildlife and stunning scenery, no matter the weather.

WORDS BY BRIAR JENSEN

There’s something adorable about a wet wombat,” enthuses guide Jorgia as she hands out heavy-duty raincoats. Stuffing one into my supplied backpack at Wild Bush Luxury HQ in Hobart, along with my belongings, I’m more concerned about pack weight than precipitation. But I love Jorgia’s positive spin on the foreboding forecast – something of a prophesy, as it turns out.

We’re embarking on the award-winning four-day, three-night Maria Island Walk, part of the Great Walks of Australia portfolio. Our guides, Jorgia and Nomes are locals, instilled with typical Tassie passion for nature and conservation. They both

Shoal Bay to wave-pummelled Riedle Bay, strewn with desiccated seaweed and stranded blue bottles.

Casuarina Beach Camp is secreted among the she-oaks, and the two-person safari-style eco-tents blend in with the bracken. They include mattresses and sleeping bags, as we’ve only had to carry sheet and pillowcase.

We swap to day packs for the optional 10km walk to Haunted Bay. While Nomes preps dinner, Jorgia leads us further south, pausing to observe an echidna up close and red-tailed black cockatoos shredding tree bark above.

Honey-scented native kunzea sweetens the steep descent to Haunted Bay where waves rumble onto the rocks below. We join skinks warming

“OUR GUIDES WHIP UP THREE-COURSE MEALS FEATURING SCALLOPS, TROUT, QUAIL, LAMB AND TREVALLY.”

holidayed on Maria as kids, and their enthusiasm for the island national park is infectious.

It’s a two-hour transfer by minibus and private boat to Maria (pronounced ma-rye-ah), two steps removed from mainland civilisation, as an island off an island off an island. As we splash ashore on a deserted beach it feels like we’ve left the weight of the world behind. The air is salty and fresh, crystal-clear water laps chalky white sand and gum trees whisper a welcome from beyond the tide line.

Our group of seven joins bright-beaked pied oyster catchers strutting the sand of Shoal Bay, following in the footsteps of the Puthikwilayti people to whom the island is known as wukaluwikiwayna. They feasted here on abundant shellfish, evidenced by the midden.

Maria is an island of two halves, cinched at the waist into sandy McRaes Isthmus and we switch from sheltered

themselves on granite boulders tinged with ochre lichen as Jorgia explains this was once a whaling spot, but the name is a mystery, possibly originating from the forlorn call of fairy penguins echoing off the rocks.

Back at camp, we chat over a cheese platter and chilled Bream Creek Riesling before a shower with bush views and candlelit dinner. Jorgia and Nomes have brought fresh produce and during our trip, whip up three-course meals featuring scallops, trout, quail, lamb and trevally, with vegetarian options.

POTOROOS & POSSUMS

I’m thrilled to spot a potoroo by the loo but trumped by the guest with a pygmy possum under her mattress.

The weather closes in for our 14-km, mostly coastal walk to White Gums Camp. Low clouds render the beaches moody monochrome, our little group a rainbow of brightly coloured

raincoats and backpack covers. We step between sea stars and shells – scallops, turbos and rare frilled-edge trigonias, whose predecessors we’ll see later at the Fossil Cliffs.

Nicolas Baudin circumnavigated the island in 1802, hence the many French place names, like Point Lesueur, site of a convict probation station in the 1840s, the cells now crumbling on the windswept point.

Wombats are oblivious to our cameras and we learn about their square poos through a hilarious poem about their oblong anuses. Yes, it’s true. Bloodstone Point is all about geology, the red laterite rocks laid down 10-20 million years ago when Maria had a tropical climate.

SUSTAINABLE STAYS

An EcoStar Accredited business Wild Bush Luxury’s Maria Island Camps are 100% solar powered, all water is collected on site, and all organic waste composted. They have planted over 800 trees at Four Mile Beach to counter erosion.

WADING WOMBAT

A wombat scouts a swollen creek, desperate to cross. It eventually wades in, water rising until it’s suddenly washed off its feet. Desperately dog paddling, it drifts downstream. We hold our breath until it finds ground again, waddles out waterlogged, shakes like a dog, then darts off.

At White Gums Camp behind Four Mile Beach, we cool off from clammy raincoats. It’s only drizzled so far, but the storm unleashes its fury overnight while we’re snug in our tents. We wake to a bright blue sky; trees are rinsed and refreshed and streams are surging. “It’s rare and very special to see it this wet,” says Jorgia.

Clockwise, from far left: Waterfall on Maria Island; Walking McRaes Isthmus; The views from Bishop and Clerk are worth the climb; A local enjoying cliff-edge dining; En route to the former convict settlement of Darlington.