

OUTDOORS

AUTUMN BY THE BEECH

Experiencing the Overland Track, Tas, through an autumnal lens with the Tasmanian Walking Company.

STORY BRIAR JENSEN



*Walkers enjoy an enchanting moss-covered myrtle beech forest.
Photo by Tasmanian Walking Company.*

“The fact it still exists today blows my mind,” says botanist Danah Leary, referring to Tasmania’s *Nothofagus gunnii*, Australia’s only native winter-deciduous tree, affectionately known as fagus. “From fossilised evidence found in Antarctica, the species really hasn’t changed in 35 million years, which is astounding if you think how much climate has shifted within that time.”

As guest botanist on Tasmanian Walking Company’s annual autumnal-themed trek along the 65km Overland Track, Tassie-born Danah has walked this path about 40 times, but still exudes wonder at the wild, untamed landscape. “It’s an incredibly special place,” she says.

Danah explains that nearly 60% of Tassie’s alpine plants are found nowhere else in the world.

Fagus, a living relic of the ancient supercontinent Gondwana, was once much more widespread, but is now restricted to alpine regions in Tassie’s Central Highlands, at Mount Field National Park, and here in Cradle Mountain–Lake St Clair National Park. When their tiny, pleated leaves morph from green to gold, rust to ruby, they cast a brilliant botanical sunset across mountainsides.

Known as the ‘turning of the fagus’ the autumn spectacle attracts Taswegians in a pagan-like pilgrimage.

The Overland Track is regarded as Australia’s premier alpine hike, running south from Cradle Mountain Valley to Lake St Clair through rugged country chiselled by successive ice ages. Officially graded moderate, it’s no walk in the park, with challenging, often exposed terrain, copious climbs and notoriously changeable weather – the previous week’s guests experienced heavy snow. Joining Tasmanian Walking Co takes the stress out of planning and their private huts await at the end of each day with luxuries such as afternoon teas (lemon myrtle scones anyone?), hot showers, drying rooms, book-filled lounges and hearty dinners accompanied by Tassie wines. You only need to carry clothes, wet weather

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ANTHONY ROBERTSON



TASMANIAN WALKING COMPANY



BRIAR JENSEN



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Traversing Cradle Mountain plateau; Danah Leary shares information on ridged candle heath; Waldheim Chalet, originally built by Gustav and Kate Weindorfer; *Nothofagus gunnii* up close. OPPOSITE: Cradle Mountain's iconic shape.



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Barn Bluff Hut; historic Kitchen Hut, now an emergency shelter; hearty dinner; descending Mount Ossa; fungi.

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Wet, misty morning departure from Pine Forest Moor standing camp.

gear, water and lunch – around 10kg maximum. And you can choose to do this nature-focused version of the six-day Cradle Mountain Signature Walk.

Appropriately, the trek starts at Waldheim, the replica King Billy pine chalet built by Gustav and Kate Weindorfer in 1912 to accommodate guests – not only because Tasmanian-born Kate and Austrian immigrant Gustav campaigned to protect this wilderness (Gustav declaring in 1910, “This must be a national park for the people for all time”), but also because they were passionate amateur botanists, even collecting herbarium specimens on their five-week honeymoon spent in a tent atop Mt Roland.

From Waldheim a boardwalk traverses buttongrass moorland – boggy, nutrient-poor peat plains. “Buttongrass moorland is a human-created vegetation type,” says Danah, explaining the local Indigenous practice of firestick farming to attract animals for hunting. “Without burning, other species would take over, like eucalypts, then rainforest.” Pin-cushion mounds of bronze-needed buttongrass dominate with their long bobbleheaded seed wands, but Danah says the moorlands support 272 species of vascular plants.

Guide Fraser Labine, on his 64th track traverse, leads guests up through tea-tree, eucalypts and temperate rainforest. Snow-dusted peaks reflected in Crater Lake backdrop the first fagus, still predominantly green. Even without its autumnal wardrobe it cuts an elegant, sculptural silhouette, with dainty, origami folded leaves poised on twisted branches, like an expertly tended bonsai.

It’s growing next to its mammoth cousin, myrtle beech,

which also has tiny leaves. Although it isn’t deciduous, its dried, spent leaves litter the forests with yellow confetti.

Danah points out King Billy and pencil pines, some of the longest-living trees on earth. They only grow 1–2mm a year, making many specimens here over 1,000 years old.

Moss transforms myrtle groves into magical enchanted forests and Danah explains mosses have been around for 450 million years and fungi for 1.5 billion years. Fraser points out an evolutionary newbie, the rare summit cedar *Athrotaxis x laxifolia*, the sterile love child of King Billy and pencil pines, of which there are only 180 naturally occurring specimens documented in Tassie.

From Crater Lake it’s a steep, exposed, StairMaster climb and final chain-assisted rock haul to Marions

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Lookout, where you feel on top of the world. With the steepest section of the Overland now behind you on day one, it's time to revel in the views over Dove Lake and the dolerite columns of Cradle Mountain.

There's a chill in the air crossing Cradle Plateau. Sun glints off snow-covered sections of track and the muted tapestries of ground-hugging cushion plants. Each cushion looks like a single specimen, but Danah says they are thousands of tiny plants huddled together creating their own warmer microclimate against the bitter conditions. Gin-clear snowmelt encases some like aquariums. As cushion plants are incredibly slow growing and easily damaged, it's important to stick to the tracks, which can be boardwalks, gravel, boulders, schist shards, mud puddles or sinewy, tangled tree roots.

Over the following days you step over quartzite, schist, sandstone and dolerite, cross glacial cirques and moraines, and walk through grasslands, moorlands, heathlands, woodlands and rainforest. "You're never looking at the same ecosystem for more than about 45 minutes," Fraser says.

Highlights include crossing tarn-studded moors to Lake Will, strolling through the so-called Japanese Gardens on Mount Doris, and picnicking in a fairyland beneath Hartnett Falls. Some of the group tackle Mount Ossa, Tassie's tallest peak at 1,617m, which rewards scrambling up a boulder field with views of the surrounding peaks.

Gardeners in the group chat about scoparia, waratah and mountain rocket, and Northern Tablelands' regenerative farmers, Jacqui and Bill Perrottet, who have planted thousands of trees on their property, take an interest in alpine eucalypts. At night, guests consult hut reference guides and bond over books like Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees*.

Scorched earth near Pine Forest Moor is a brutal reminder of climate-induced fire threats. The 2025 Canning Peak fire, started by dry lightning, damaged sections of the track and destroyed one of Tas Walking Co's huts. It's

been replaced with a lighter footprint standing camp that includes elevated sleeping tents, from where you can listen to the birds while cocooned inside sleeping bags.

Danah encourages periods of solo walking, preceded by quiet meditation that heightens the senses. More focused, you hear the symphony of snowmelt, sense the aroma of lemon boronia, spot pixie parasol fungi and marvel at flitting thornbills.

Danah is also a botanical artist and offers sketching sessions beside fossil-filled streams and moss-carpeted glades. Inspiration abounds: a single fagus leaf, skeletal trunks of long dead trees known as 'stags' for their bleached antler branches, spiky palm-like pandani (the world's tallest heath) and historic, weathered pioneer huts.

Du Cane Hut, the oldest on the track, is one of several built by prospector and trapper Paddy Hartnett around 1910, initially as a hunting hut, but later used for accommodation for his guided tours. Fraser recounts anecdotes of this father of eight prone to bouts of drunkenness.

Private huts in national parks like Tasmanian Walking Co's can be contentious, but they help ensure a wider variety of people can experience wild places and become their advocates. Guests on this trip valued the extra botanical information Danah shared. "The insights from Danah really added to the experience," says Launceston silversmith Sarah Farquhar-Still. Ex-RMIT lecturer of Melbourne, Robin Colls, on her third Overland trip says, "I got more out of it this time, with the botanical point of view and all the things we learned along the way."

The Overland culminates at Lake St Clair, Australia's deepest lake at over 160m. Known as Leeawuleena to the Palawa people (meaning 'sleeping water'), it reflects Mt Olympus, where botanist and politician Ronald Campbell Gunn collected and described the first fagus specimens in 1847. But this trip is about more than fagus, it's an opportunity to spend time in wilderness, to challenge oneself and to listen quietly.



*Crossing button grass plains.
Photo by Tasmanian Walking Company.*