



Surrounded by the clear temperate waters off Maria Island, charter operator Jim Ransley ferries walkers ashore for a guided three-day walk. The island, a national park off Tasmania's east coast, draws wildlife lovers, history buffs and solitude seekers.



# Steeped in history

Human endeavour  
and geology have left  
a fascinating imprint  
on Maria Island

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**N**EVILLE RANSLEY slowed his boat, MV Crescent, about 500 m from Shoal Bay's shore, on Maria Island's western side. A thin strip of glaring white, seaweed-littered beach lay ahead and I asked if we'd slowed down to avoid a sandbar or some other hidden danger. "There's no problem," Neville said, gesturing over the side. "In sunny weather the water here's so clear you can't tell how deep it is." As Neville cut the engines, his son, Jim, began loading the boat's tinny with rucksacks for the walking group we were dropping off at McRaes Isthmus, which forms Maria's narrow waist. Maria's spine of steep mountains, crowned with clouds, filled the sky to the north-east.

To the south-west lay Maria's rounded hills. It was a warm day and the white sand, blue sky, cloud-shrouded mountains and crystal-clear water seemed more like tropical Queensland than temperate Tasmania. Much of the State is renowned for being cool and wet, but most of its rain – blown from the west on the roaring forties – is scraped from the sky by central ranges before reaching the east coast and Maria. As a result, the island's often warmer and drier than much of Tasmania – a big attraction.

The tinny growled towards the shore with rucksacks, Jim, walker Stuart Spenceley and me. The water in the shallows was almost transparent and, but for our wake, we could have been gliding on wind-riffled glass.

"Bewdy, you can jump into the shallows when we get to shore," Jim said with delight as he noticed my bare feet before warning: "It's clear, but it isn't warm."

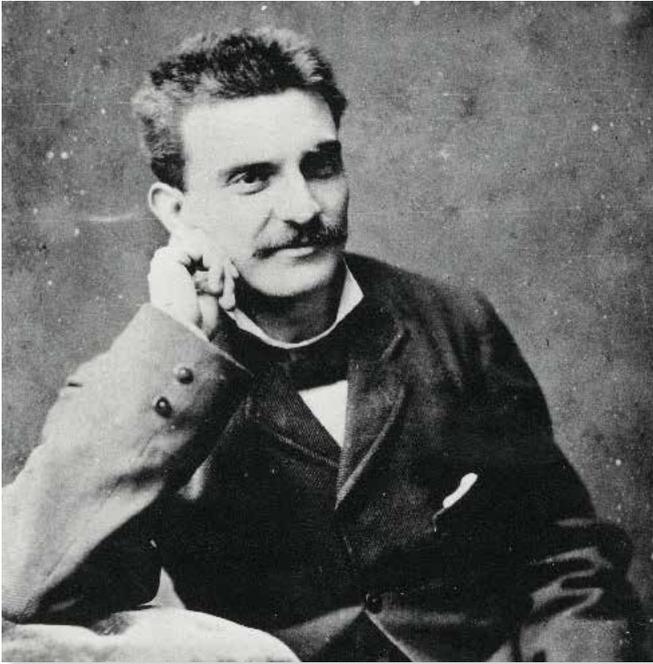
## Island life

**S**OLATION AND OPPORTUNITIES for solitude are big drawcards for Maria. Even on the busiest evenings at the main camping ground, near the historic settlement of Darlington, there's room to pitch a tent among grazing wallabies. In fact, the island – all of which is national park – is one of the best places anywhere to get close to hopping marsupials, including pademelons, red-necked wallabies and eastern grey, or forester, kangaroos.

There are no shops on Maria and, other than a few Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) vehicles, no traffic. Walking and mountain biking are the only ways to get around. Led by guides John Counsell and Johanna 'Hanny' Allston from the commercial operation The Maria Island Walk, I spent three days ambling north from southern Maria to Darlington. We stopped at night in fixed bush camps and one of historic Darlington's cottages as John and Hanny cooked lavish meals while firing off snippets of information about the island's ►







Darlington (bottom), Maria's only settlement, is mostly the work of Italian-born entrepreneur Diego Bernacchi (left). Beginning in 1884, he reshaped Darlington from a convict station into the headquarters of his Maria Island Company. Bernacchi cleared land for vineyards (opposite) and began silk, fishing and tourism industries before the 1890s Depression scuttled his efforts. Bernacchi's restored Coffee Palace in Darlington now features historical displays. Other remnants of Maria's early days (below) are stored in the 1847 convict day-room and chapel.





HINDSIGHT PHOTOS



Walking guide Hanny Allston (right) savours the view from Skipping Ridge, on the lower reaches of the track to the 599 m Bishop and Clerk peak. The Fossil Cliffs are to her left, with Cape Boullanger and Ile du Nord further on while the mainland's Cape Bougainville is in the far distance. The geographical features were all named during an 1802 French expedition led by Nicolas Baudin. The French spent several days on Maria Island, where the expedition's artist, Nicolas-Martin Petit, made sketches of Aboriginal life (below).



subject to commercial exploitation. One species, the southern rock lobster (crayfish), is the hero in Scott's current study. Beth's is the valuable black-lipped abalone. The researchers are investigating whether fished reef areas are more prone to destructive grazing by the long-spined sea urchin. This voracious seaweed eater can render barren vast areas of productive, seaweed-covered habitat. The southern rock lobster is one of the urchin's predators, and the black-lipped abalone a potential competitor.

Minutes after flopping overboard, Scott and Beth re-emerged with a lobster big enough to battle a cat, let alone seaweed-eating urchins. Measurements were recorded and the specimen returned to the sea. Preliminary evidence from

the study is encouraging. "The findings suggest that large rock lobsters may limit the abundance and grazing ability of this urchin," Scott told me. "A possible strategy to guard against urchin damage would be to ensure sufficient predator numbers are maintained on our reefs."

Managing commercial fisheries to ensure those numbers would be the tricky bit. "The abundance of large lobsters is a striking feature when you dive here," Scott told me. "But people can set lobster pots right to the reserve's edge, and the decline in large lobster numbers is reasonably abrupt right outside the boundary."

As Scott piloted Rooganah back to the Darlington jetty I noticed a cloud halo had formed around Maria's mountainous

## Timeline

Pre-1642 to 1820s Tyraddem-maa band of the Oyster Bay tribe inhabit the island they knew as Rolelepaa.  
1642 Dutch navigator Abel

Tasman names Maria Island after the wife of his patron, Anthony Van Diemen.  
1789 English Captain Cox lands on Maria, has peaceful encounter with Aboriginals; names Mercury Passage after his vessel.

1802 French expedition under Nicolas Baudin explores and charts Maria; expeditioners meet Aboriginal people, draw and paint them and write about their everyday life.

Early 1800s–1842 Whalers operate from shore bases at Haunted Bay, Ile du Nord and Whalers Cove.

1825–32 Penal settlement established at Darlington; houses up to 150 convicts. Darlington abandoned when Port Arthur is built.

1832–42 Whalers, farmers and graziers on the island.

1842–50 Maria reopened as a convict probation station; up to 600 convicts housed in cells at Darlington and Point Lesueur.

1850–early 1880s Farmers and graziers on the island.

1884–96 Italian entrepreneur Diego Bernacchi establishes agricultural and tourism industries in and around Darlington.

1890s Depression forces Bernacchi out of business.  
1896–1920 Farming and grazing leases on the island.

1920–30 Bernacchi helps create cement works at Darlington.

1925 Bernacchi dies; cement works fail after financial losses.

1930–1960s Farming and grazing leases on the island.

1969–71 Several bird and mammal species introduced.

1972 Maria declared a wildlife sanctuary.

1972 Maria Island National Park declared.

1991 Maria Island Marine Nature Reserve declared.



FROM VOYAGE DE DECOUVERTES AUX TERRES AUSTRALES. ATLAS / FRANCOIS PERON. 1807.



peaks, clinging to them in spite of a fresh nor'-easter. Near the jetty, schoolboys on an outdoor experience week paddled kayaks under an instructor's gaze. Unspoilt by cars and crowds, Darlington's buildings and ruins spread around the hillside; a few dozen visitors drifted between them. Our progress on the encircling sea was the liveliest activity for miles.

## Worth the climb

**N**EAR THE TOP of Bishop and Clerk, the 599 m peak that dominates northern Maria, Melbourne author Graham Sheil scrambled towards the high point of his journey with the Maria Island Walk.

"Put your left hand here," said Hanny Allston, patting a handhold above and to the left of Graham. "Then swing your right foot up to here, and push up so you're clear to reach the next ledge."

A few pushes of his meaty calves later, Graham was sharing a vantage point with fellow walker Jane Holliday.

The afternoon sunshine fought a losing battle for warmth with a brisk southerly. "I really don't like this," said Jane, one eye on the sheer, 70 m cliff to her right. "But the view is worth the terror."

About 20 km north, Ile des Phoques Nature Reserve appeared as a grey lump in a brushed blue-blanket sea. In the

Declared a national park in 1972, Maria Island is one of few places where human and natural history coexist comfortably. Eastern grey kangaroos are common around Darlington, where they feed in the shadows of Maria Island's built heritage, such

slightly hazy distance beyond, the southern cliffs of Schouten Island created an underline to the peaks of the Freycinet Peninsula. Another green-tinged rocky stack rose before us, the closest of a jagged triplet of lesser peaks on Bishop and Clerk's northern flank.

To the west and below, the wind was making art on the watery surface of Fossil Bay, smoothing foam and pushing eddies. Further west, the lowering sun swaddled Darlington. The island's large and fearless marsupial population would soon begin grazing lawns around town and we were keen to catch feeding time. Reluctantly, we left our breezy eyrie and with more direction from Hanny, began the long descent to the warmth of Darlington. 

For more information and how to get to Maria Island see page 114.

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