

Living

ON THE

Edge

TASMAN
PENINSULA

Tasmania



Take on the challenging Three Capes Track and you'll be rewarded in spades. Luxury accommodation, dramatic scenery and upside-down cake are just the beginning, writes **Michael Crooks**. Photography by Chris Crerar.



I don't feel like the king of the world; instead, I have the sense of standing on the precipice to its end.

It's good advice, not solely for the obvious reason. Last September, three years after Tasmania's Parks and Wildlife Service opened the Three Capes Track – a multi-day guided experience that features dorm-style accommodation and takes in capes Raoul, Pillar and Hauy on gravel pathways, steps and timber boardwalks – the Tasmanian Walking Company (TWC) unveiled an indulgent option. In a deal with the state government, the TWC has built two \$8 million-plus eco-friendly lodges for its Three Capes Lodge Walk (taswalkingco.com.au), a four-day trek that compensates a hiker's toil through the often heart-stopping landscape with a comforting hot shower, lovingly prepared meals, a soft bed and access to a wine cellar. For surviving The Blade, I was rewarded with an afternoon tea of freshly baked pear and ginger upside-down cake, followed by a foot massage. Welcome to luxury hiking.

We begin the Three Capes Lodge Walk at Denmans Cove, after being bussed from Hobart to Port Arthur and then whisked across the bay in a private boat. From here, we start following our guides through the small gums and spot the occasional wallaby. I'm part of a hiking pack of nine, each of us wearing supplied backpacks that hold necessities such as warm clothes for the lodge, a toiletry bag and anything else we want to lug, like a book or tablet (the company holds on to your main luggage at its Hobart office). It isn't long before we get our first commanding view, across the water to the Port Arthur Historic Site, where the sandstone of the former penal settlement glows yellow under a splash of sunshine.

We stop for a rest at Surveyors Cove then trudge through a wind-flattened plain sprinkled with countless varieties of tiny wildflowers, each of which the guides can name, along with the birds that take wing among the foliage, from petite southern emu-wrens to noisy yellow-tailed black cockatoos.

I spot a flash of orange stripes in the distance and am stunned to realise I've locked eyes with... a cat. Mitch, a guide, explains that unfortunately feral cats thrive in Tassie but he's never seen one until now. "Well done," he says. "You can be our critter spotter." He's joking, of course, but I take the role weirdly seriously, constantly scanning the bushland in the hope I'll spot a wombat or echidna or something scientists believed was extinct.

The TWC recommends walkers embark on small and long hikes before joining this tour. You'll want to be pretty fit as the guides take you up challenging inclines and winding, slow-rising gravel paths where the *choosh, choosh* of hiking boots is often the only sound to be heard.



(Clockwise from above)

A quick stop on the Three Capes Track; arriving at the lodge; the sun sets over Port Arthur

On reaching the rise of one peak, I see what I first assume is a mirage brought on by mild fatigue: a gleaming structure of wood and glass nestled within the bush. This is Cape Pillar Lodge, a masterwork of eco-architecture that sleeps 20 in small twin and double rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows that showcase lush bushland and a galaxy of stars only visible in the purest of air. Powered by solar and wind, this will be our digs for the next two nights. (Other TWC guests spend the first of their three nights at Crescent Lodge, near Surveyors Cove, but my group is doing a truncated version of the walk.)

Inside is an expansive communal living space with a long wooden dining table, a sleek kitchen and a lounge area with plush white couches overlooking a gorgeous eucalyptus landscape and the ocean beyond. You can charge your phone here but forget wi-fi. Still, access to networks is "disappointingly good", says TWC general manager Heath Garratt. So yes, you're still free to irritate your friends with photos of your food.

It takes about three steps...

I've only just begun to climb The Blade – a narrow, boulder-strewn incline that sticks out from the end of Tasmania's glorious Cape Pillar – when my stomach drops to somewhere around my knees. I'm on the second day of a 48-kilometre hike across the south-east corner of the island state and my guides have been spruiking this geological wonder (so named for how sharply it rises from the cliff). Some of my fellow hikers have even been threatening to declare themselves "the king of the world" here.

Scaling the knife's edge, I see the bloodcurdling 300-metre drops either side of me and say, "Wow", because this sounds better than, "I want to go home." The giant mound of shrub-covered rock that is Tasman Island looms large before me as I inch as close to The Blade's tip as I can bring my quivering legs. I take in the view of stunning dolerite cliffs and a massive breadth of cobalt-blue ocean that stretches to Antarctica. I don't feel like the king of the world; instead, I have the sense of standing on the precipice to its end while a southerly tries to throw me into the violent whitewash below. "Don't fall," comes the half-joking voice of a guide behind me.



An uphill slog is capped off with a sundowner at Cape Pillar Lodge. (Previous pages) Taking in views of The Blade at the tip of Cape Pillar

On the winding gravel path, the choosh, choosh of hiking boots is the only sound to be heard.



Hikers bound for Cape Hauy (left); the lodge's pot pie with roast pumpkin

And there's no shortage of opportunities, as I discover after a warm shower (more an eco-appropriate mist than flow) and an hour in a heated cabin where a lovely therapist gives my tired feet the sort of massage one might more expect in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs than in the remote Tasmanian bush. Then, wearing my trackies, socks and thongs, I'm welcomed to the main lodge by a guide who offers me a Tasmanian craft gin. "There'll be canapés soon," he says. I regret not packing a tux.

Dinner is a delicious chicken, leek and mushroom pot pie followed by plum cake with cream and more locally crafted spirits. Breakfast the next morning is pear and almond ricotta pancakes drizzled with maple syrup, leaving me to wonder whether we might be the first people to ever gain weight during a 50-kilometre hike.

That might be the case, if not for the serious thigh workout that each day brings. We explore the cliffs of Cape Pillar on our way to The Blade and are told these are the highest dolerite sea cliff edges in the Southern Hemisphere, sheering straight into the wild ocean 200 to 300 metres below. At one unfenced, hold-your-breath edge, a guide explains how the dramatic, jagged coastline was formed. I do my best to concentrate on the details of magma flow and tectonic plate movement but having heard we'll be dining on Tassie salmon canapés and braised beef cheeks tonight, accompanied by a local cabernet merlot, my mind wanders back to the lodge.





Cliff-top views of the stunning Cape Pillar and expansive Tasman Sea

Later, we tackle a cruel amount of steps through the mossy cool-temperate rainforest of Mount Fortescue. It's here that an old ankle injury niggles and I casually ask the guides what happens if someone is unable to walk any further. "If you're injured, we call in the helicopter," a guide explains. "The costs are paid by the hiker. Are you limping?"

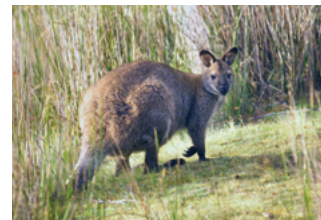
"Of course not," I say and walk on.

The rewards are worth the discomfort, including the view from Cape Hauy, a day's walk north of Cape Pillar. Standing on its tip, where knee-high trees have been bonsaied into varying shapes by the blasting southerlies, I take in the incredible shoreline and the dolerite sea stacks sculpted by erosion as a soaring white-bellied sea eagle scans the faraway bushland below.

About two hours later, I step onto the soft white sand of our final destination: Fortescue Bay. As if I've activated a sensor, tails the size of dinner tables suddenly pop out of the flat sea – a humpback and its calf are splashing close to the shore. My wildlife-spotting cred considerably upgraded, it's not a bad end to a journey through Tassie's awe-inspiring wilderness. ●

Making tracks

Wildlife is not in short supply in this part of the Apple Isle. Here are three critters to look out for.



↑ Bennett's wallaby

Found all over the island state, these small wallabies are easiest to spot after nightfall. You can identify them by their little black paws, which look like gloves.



↑ White-bellied sea eagle

You won't forget watching these majestic birds soar. They favour the winds at Cape Pillar, Mount Fortescue and Cape Hauy so have your binoculars at the ready.



↑ Fur seal

The aptly named Seal Spa is the best spot for sighting colonies of fur seals, which seek refuge at the base of Tasman Island (it's also a great place for lunch).