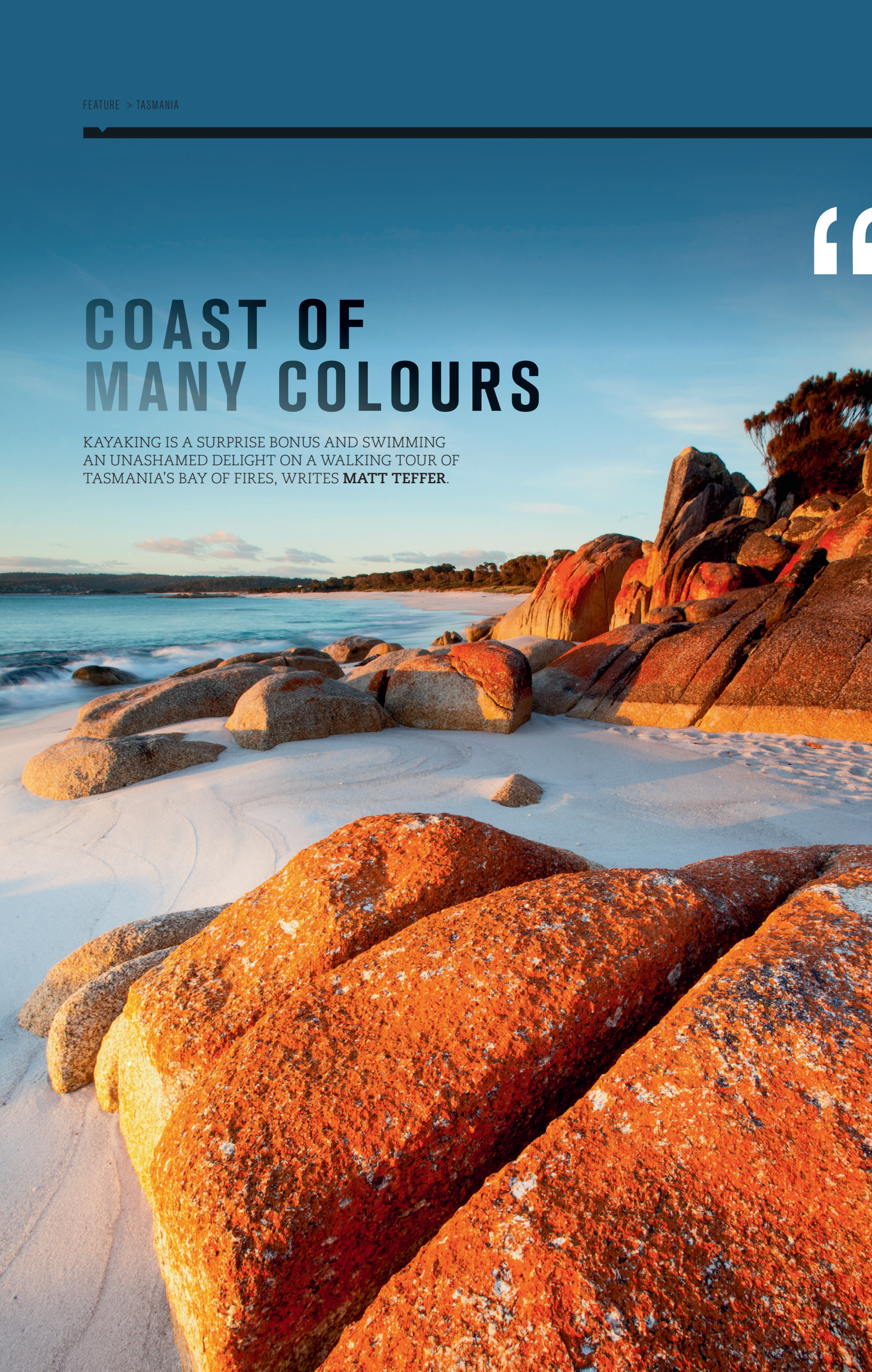


COAST OF MANY COLOURS

KAYAKING IS A SURPRISE BONUS AND SWIMMING AN UNASHAMED DELIGHT ON A WALKING TOUR OF TASMANIA'S BAY OF FIRES, WRITES **MATT TEFFER**.



“**D**ivorce boats”, the guides call them.

On a weir on the Anson River in Tasmania's north-eastern corner, a small flotilla of double kayaks lie in wait for a group of travel writers. They can be tricky to steer – and so can the kayaks. To avoid the clashing of paddles

(and egos), fore and aft partners need to seamlessly sync up their strokes.

Fortunately, this is no white-water adrenaline rush – more a leisurely drift downstream – and everyone in our party settles into their brief riverine marriages easily enough. Scoring a single kayak, I've no one to blame for my wayward course but myself.

A lone white heron guides us from river bend to river bend, and after a few easy kilometres we reach the mouth of Ansons Bay. It's here the real adventure begins.

A northerly headwind has sprung up out of nowhere and there's no escaping it on the exposed waters. It feels like we're being blown backwards as we paddle hard through the relentless, choppy waves. After an hour of the most intense upper-body and inner-core workout I've had in recent memory, we finally reach the distant shore on the other side of the bay, where a well-deserved picnic spread awaits.

Of course, by the time the day's paddling is recalled over dinner after a few glasses of local red, what was in reality a stiff breeze will have become a howling Antarctic gale worthy of a Shackleton-esque epic.

Kayaking definitely wasn't on my mental menu when I signed up for the Bay of Fires Lodge Walk with the Tasmanian Walking Company. The four-day, 32-kilometre coastal trek usually starts at Boulder Point at the northern end of Mount William National Park, with a spot of overnight glamping in protected dunes at Forester Beach, but I pick up the trail at Eddystone Point.

After the eight-hour commute from the frenzy of Sydney (a flight to Melbourne, a near-miss transfer for the twin-prop to Launceston, then a three-hour drive), it's a surreal sensation as our party of nine guests and three guides stroll barefoot along the wide open beach, the only people in sight.

The coast here is a riot of colour. Clear turquoise waters, beaches of pristine white sand, brilliant green coastal heath and granite boulders stained flaming orange by lichen. You might think it's these fiery rocks that gave the Bay of Fires its name, but that would be a rookie error. For thousands of years, local Aborigines used fire to maintain the landscape, and it was these flames that Captain Tobias Furneaux spied from the deck of HMS Adventure as he charted the



TAKE ME THERE

TASMANIAN WALKING COMPANY

The four-day Bay of Fires Lodge Walk is available from October 1, 2017, to May 1, 2018. Prices start from \$2380 a person for twin share, including transfers from Launceston airport, meals, alcohol, qualified guides and kayaking. A Gore-Tex jacket and backpack are provided. taswalkingco.com.au

FLY

Qantas flies daily from Melbourne to Launceston, with connections from all capital cities. There are also daily flights from Sydney and Melbourne to Hobart. See qantas.com

CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN: the vibrant coast of Mount William National Park; kayaking on the Anson River; the perfectly positioned Bay of Fires Lodge.

east coast of Van Diemen's Land in 1773. Clearings of "marsupial grass" remain as evidence of the Aborigines' practice, the ash-fertilised low grasses creating a convenient hunting ground for wallabies, pademelons and the like.

Later, we stumble across a large animal dropping in the middle of a track. "Could be a Tasmanian devil," says guide Dayna Trevaskis, a font of local knowledge of all things floral and faunal. The devils use their "scats" as a sort of social networking device – Faecesbook, if you will. A quick sniff will let them know who else in their contact list has been through the area and even what their last dinner was.

As we string out into our own walking rhythms along the empty beach, my mind relaxes into a meditative state and the deadlines, crowds and concrete of the "real world" fade away.

"This is the real world," smiles guide Jai Ellis, a mellow soul from Alaska who has spent the season showing stressed-out city slickers Tasmania's natural wonders.

He points to a barely discernible smudge of honey-gold just visible through the windswept trees clinging to the headland ahead. The Bay of Fires Lodge will be our home for the next two nights.

"There's something about Tassie. You get here and the weight is just lifted," says Zane Denmen, chef and co-manager of the lodge. As our tired tootsies soak in warm foot baths, he serves up beer (James Boag from Launceston) and a homemade bhuja mix on the lodge's open back deck.

It's the perfect spot to drink in the last light of the golden hour, enhanced by the glowing Tasmanian hardwood and pine of the lodge's two elongated timber-and-glass pavilions. Built in 1999 by local architect Ken Latona, the lodge treads lightly on the earth. Electricity is from the sun, water from the clouds and the toilets are of the composting variety – a cupful



of sweet-smelling pine shavings replaces the need to flush.

While the back deck is cosy enough, the front verandah provides a 180-degree view of national park and the relentless swells of the Tasman Sea as we enjoy pre-dinner canapés of smoked salmon sushi matched with local wines. Seven kilometres to the north, the blinking light of the Eddystone Point Lighthouse reveals how far we've come since our afternoon hike.

In a neat circle-of-life moment, Zane tells us his father was the lighthouse's last

keeper. For the first 15 years of his life, Zane and his siblings led a free-range life in the shadow of its tower – the only rule: "Be home before dinner."

The meal he prepares for us tonight is a relaxed long-table affair. Guests and staff dine together on braised chicken over a laksa base with fragrant rice, accompanied by a salad of pan-fried cauliflower and pine nuts. After a dessert of panna cotta and burnt pineapple and an exchange of war stories with my fellow travel writers (they win), it's time to retire for the evening.

A familiar pair of hiking boots signposts the door to my minimalist Scandi-meets-ryokan lodgings. Like the nine other guest rooms, it looks out to casuarina, prickly box and she-oak, bent by coastal winds into a naturally created zen garden.

I open the glass-louved panels, the better to allow the crashing ocean below to lull me into a sound sleep.

On my last morning, I stroll five minutes down the track for a final walk along the beach. The waters look almost equatorial, sparkling under the sun in an array of vivid blues and greens. It's an unseasonably hot day – at 29 degrees, a veritable heatwave for this part of the world – and I toy with the idea of plunging in.

This far south the sea temperature surely can't match those tropical, turquoise hues. Am I willing to take the hit to my nervous system that's no doubt in store? A lack of towel and trunks provides a second excuse to pike out. Then again, I have the beach – the whole bay, it seems – to myself.

What the hell. I can always air-dry.

I strip off behind a rock and slip into the waves. The water is "invigorating", but not the Antarctic cold I expected. A swell has come up overnight, but the headland provides shelter and creates a nicely pitched left-hand break. To my surprise, I find myself bodysurfing in Tasmania.

Pins and needles pricking my fingertips and toes signal that it's time to head in. It's just as well that I've booked a session in Australia's most spectacular bathtub as a special farewell to the Bay of Fires. The hot water brings back feeling to my extremities as I soak up the view of this wild coastline from an open-air bathing pavilion, backed by a soundtrack of pounding surf, bird song and chirping crickets.

The writer travelled as a guest of the Tasmanian Walking Company and Qantas.

