

An aerial photograph of a rugged coastline. The left side of the image shows the ocean with gentle waves. The right side is dominated by a steep, forested hillside that meets the sea. The trees are a mix of green and yellowish-green, suggesting a specific climate or season. In the distance, more landmasses or islands are visible under a hazy sky. The text 'CHANGE OF' is superimposed in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the image.

CHANGE OF

An aerial photograph of the Cape Pillar Lodge, a modern building with a dark, corrugated metal roof and walls, nestled deep within a dense, lush green forest. The lodge features large glass windows and a wooden deck. The surrounding landscape is a vast, undulating forested hillside under a soft, hazy sky.

Freed from the daily grind, **FIONA DONNELLY** finds herself falling in step with nature while trekking Tasmania's wild Three Capes Lodge Walk.

Cape Pillar Lodge.

P A C E

Purgatory Hill. Hurricane Heath. Perdition Plateau. I'm poring over a map of the Tasman National Park at my home in Brisbane, researching a four-day hike I'm about to take – trekking the pristine Three Capes Track in Tasmania. The bleak romanticism of the placenames I'm uncovering is giving me a touch of cold feet about my impending departure. But it's also ratcheting excitement levels.

There's a weather warning current for a polar blast. It's set to bring freezing temperatures, rain and snow from Antarctica to south-east Australia – and could even cause flurries in sunny Queensland. What on earth is it going to be like in already wintery Tasmania?

I'm filling in on this story at the last minute, due to a Covid lockdown interstate, so I've had no time to do preparatory work. I've never done a multiple-day walk before. I've never carried a loaded 10-kilo pack, either. My bedroom is littered with gear borrowed from kind friends, some of which I have little idea how to use.

Why did I say yes? Well, there's a massive carrot enticing me to fly south – provided I can hold my nerve and stay the course. I'll be travelling the Three Capes Track guided by the award-winning Tasmanian Walking Company (TWC). And I'll be doing the trek in sustainable, off-grid luxury, staying overnight at the beautifully appointed yet low-impact Crescent Lodge and Cape Pillar Lodge enroute.

Equally motivational is the news that on the third night, there's a seat at the launch of the intriguingly named Restaurant at The Edge of The World (RATEOTW). TWC owns the only private accommodation in Tasman National Park. It's the first time the company has held this event. When it was announced the series sold out in four hours. So, I'm not the only one excited by the prospect of tackling

a trek, then having the opportunity to digest the essence of this remote destination over a languorous six-course dégustation.

It's chef Luke Burgess, who helped to put Tasmania on the food-lovers map cooking at Hobart's now legendary Garagistes, who'll be at Cape Pillar Lodge cooking up a storm for RATEOTW. He'll be walking the track separately. And he'll be doing it twice, first delivering a grill to smoke the abalone he'll serve in one of the dishes, then carrying in the bulk of what he needs for our dinner in a 23.5-kilo pack, without using any single-use plastic. Now that's an impressive feat which puts my own 10-kilo pack and pre-walk nerves firmly in perspective.

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The bus arrives to collect me from my overnight digs in the heritage Henry Jones Art Hotel. It's an ideal introduction to historic Hobart, all rough-hewn walls, cosy fires burning in the lobby and mist-mired views across the city's working docks. A smiling Clinton Garratt jumps out to say G'day and guide me aboard. It's 10°C. Garratt is wearing light shorts and a short-sleeved T-shirt. I'm clad in thermals, walking trousers and a fleece jacket, with my rain jacket on top. My

new Mongrel woollen beanie and thermal gloves are stuffed in my pocket, just in case.

Garratt, a former IT professional radiates good health. Normally he works as a guide but broke his leg on a run 10 weeks ago, so he's taking things gently while recuperating. He's not even using a stick. It's a shiny advertisement for the benefits of exercise.

At TWC's Hobart headquarters I meet fellow walkers – retired and practising medics, a radio journalist, a facilities manager, an IT worker – an interesting bunch. The group has come from around Australia, and includes a couple of Tasmanians curious about





Clockwise from top: Crescent Lodge; lodge views; Luke Burgess prepares the dégustation. Opposite: Tasmania's unique scenery.



their backyard. Our experienced guides, Steph Wilson and Bert Spinks, give us our first briefing. We're provided with snacks, a lightweight Mont rain jacket and a backpack.

When we arrive at Stewarts Bay, a fast boat is already at the dock. It whisks us to Denmans Cove – an exhilarating yet surprisingly smooth trip. On arrival, we're told the recent bad weather means they can't land the boat today, so we're presented with our first challenge – getting our feet wet. We duly unlace our hiking boots, tug off socks and wade in. The shock of the freezing dark water is a wake-up call to any senses that aren't already twanging.

The ascent to our first overnight stop, Crescent Lodge, is easygoing. A couple of hours after landing at the Cove, we're ensconced in the communal living room, admiring storm-tossed treetops waving outside the floor-to-ceiling windows of the lodge. There's hot coffee and most of us are tucking into fat wedges of pear and ginger cake, getting ready for early evening drinks – Tassie pinot and local Josef Chromy bubbles. These are paired with platters of local cheeses, then followed by braised beef cheeks and panna cotta and more wine. This is turning into my kind of walking holiday.

The Three Capes Lodge Walk unfolds over four days and three nights. It entails tramping between two and six hours a day, interspersed with regular snack breaks and lunch stops pre-catered by lodge chef Zena Roberts. The track often hugs the peninsula's dramatic coastline. It's a model of discreet construction – an easily traversed combination of sturdy timber boardwalk topped with wire mesh, crunchy gravel and pavers made mainly from dolerite, the ancient rock that features in the dramatic sea cliffs we all marvel over. Soaring to 300 metres, they are the tallest cliffs in the southern hemisphere.

By day two I've jettisoned most of my layers and I'm welcoming the mizzle, enjoying the occasional gusts of driving rain on my face, while my body stays warm and dry inside the rain jacket. By day three I'm in shorts. My wet-weather trousers never even make it out of my pack.

There's no snow, but we regularly walk into cloud that's so thick and all-encompassing you barely tell where it ends and the sea below begins. The moody weather creates a sense of camaraderie and helps you slip into a meditative state while walking. It forces you to focus on what's in front of you – perhaps gnarled lichen-encrusted branches, or a native shrub like a bushman's bootlace, or frilly-edged fungi, or even the colourful seed-laden cast of a Currawong. Occasionally, sharp silver glints cut through the mist to reveal the presence of the roiling ocean below.

It's a transportive moment when we reach Cape Pillar and glimpse Tasman Island. As we approach the landmark it's semi-shrouded in mist. There's even a perfect arc of a fogbow for us to photograph. Then, from nowhere, a patch of blue sky appears and the sun is shining. The mist drifts away. The island is fully revealed – we can see the lighthouse. Someone even spots a whale below.

For a 48-kilometre hike you experience an amazing variety of scenery – from wind-blasted native heathland to ancient wet sclerophyll forest, vertiginous cliffs and booming ocean. The guides help interpret what we're seeing, pointing out flora and fauna, telling tales as we walk.

Burgess, who's currently based in Tasmania helming a Hobart 10-seat pop-up restaurant called Seven and a Half, is a huge fan of ►



The view from Three Capes Track. Clockwise from right: Burgess prepares a dish at Restaurant at The Edge of The World; striped trumpeter crudo with tomatillo kosho. Opposite: native trees surround the boardwalk.





Booking info

Restaurant at the Edge of the World 2022 will be held during the Three Capes Walk throughout June.

\$3995 per person; tariff includes accommodation, meals, use of backpack and weather-proof jacket.
taswalkingco.com.au

the benefits of walking and mentions the mental clarity it boosts. He's had plenty to mull over – planning for the feast on our third night. Given the remoteness of the cleverly camouflaged lodges, there's no room for improvisation or spontaneity on his part. If he forgets the butter he can't exactly pop to a nearby shop. He's also committed to giving guests a proper taste of his adopted home.

"A big part of the menu is the integrity of the ingredients – that's all got to be woven in to it," Burgess says. "You've got to consider what's best, and in season – and how best to show it off. I guess these are all issues at the core of a certain style of cooking these days."

The table settings for RATEOTW are prettily low-key – leaves and gumnuts, grevillea blossoms from the track. A stunning appetiser of just-shucked native Angasi oysters sets the tone for the evening ahead. The oysters are slow-grown at Fortescue Bay – a few kilometres away from where we sit. Burgess pairs them with a vivid green purée of green girl apple, a local heirloom variety, and a bay leaf and eucalyptus oil. The wine match is an elegant, low-dosage blanc de noirs by rising local star Sinapius. The combination of the salinity of the oysters and aromatics from the oils magically evokes the sea mist-swathed tracks we've travelled earlier.

Of course, it's deliberate. "On the walk previously I got a sense of the tea-tree and the eucalypts," says Burgess. "Then as it gets warmer you smell all the oils being released, so that inspired the bay and the eucalyptus oil, and the sweetness from the apple."

There's an incredible sense of peace and achievement. It's tradition to take a swim. I walk in ankle-deep and then loiter.



Everything that follows ties in. The Japanese-style crudo albacore we eat with fermented leek, chilli and seaweed, recently swam in the waters we've been walking alongside. "Tuna is a no-no but albacore is more sustainable and more available," says Burgess. "They run along this coastline in massive numbers, breeding and spawning – so the geography just makes sense."

A braised blacklip abalone and exotic mushroom course is the dish everyone swoons over. "If you're from interstate you know how much abalone can cost," says Burgess. "In Sydney at a restaurant like Golden Century it would be a couple of hundred dollars a kilo." It's textural and luxurious – a slippery mix of abalone and southern calamari with lion's mane and nameko mushrooms in a sesame-laced Japanese style broth.

A comforting ragù of slow-cooked Bennett's wallaby tail gets a hit of heat from kanzuri fermented chilli, and it's freshened with a cabbage slaw. The cabbage is something the wallabies plunder in the garden, so Burgess suggests there's poetic justice to the pairing.

While Burgess is busy in the kitchen, Dan McMahon ably talks us through the wine options. Burgess is as meticulous about wine selection as he is about ingredient provenance. "I love using wine as a seasoning. It might provide acid or richness or even fruit to a dish. These wines are from a bunch of people whose farming practices and mindset match exactly how I think about food – it's an organic and holistic approach."

A dessert of lemon posset comes with a local gin alongside. "Lemons are in season, so we just bring in cream from Elgaar and gather some lemons from the backyards of Hobart," says Burgess.

The ocean gin by Dasher + Fisher brings us back to the coast (like every path you take here). It's truly a memorable evening – even the shock news we need to be packed and out of our rooms by 6.30am the next day isn't enough to shake the mood.

The hike ends at Fortescue Bay, after what is the most taxing day of walking including hundreds of stone steps up Mount Fortescue, an elevation of 490 metres. There's an incredible sense of peace and achievement. It's tradition to take a swim. I walk in ankle-deep and then loiter, watching as little sandy coloured fish dart away. Then I keep going forward and finally find myself pushing under, as the occasional kelp frond floats past. It's another rude shock to the system – but it's perfect. We're finishing this walk as we started. With a sensory reset. I lick the salt off my lips as I make my way back to shore wondering how I can track down more of those Angasi oysters before heading home. ●