











Bay of Fires *walk*

Feeling uptight? In need of a little relaxation? How about some intoxicating landscapes, fascinating wildlife, great company and delicious food – plus a little exercise – to help you unwind. WORDS + IMAGES *Gabi Mocatta*

An early riser at the Bay of Fires is treated to nature's greatest spectacle. You wake in the morning peace and pad out onto the beach. You just sit quietly on the silky sand: there's the slightest breeze and the sea is glassy. Wallabies graze serenely on beachside heathland and the world is still. Waiting. Then with a white blaze on the horizon, it starts, infinitely far and achingly bright. Molten light breaches the curve of the earth and spreads a spangled sea with shot silk. Lichen-orange rocks glow fiery neon and there's a flood of warmth on the skin. A Bay of Fires sunrise is an experience that's almost visceral. It's enough to make you gasp every time.

In this far north-east corner of Tasmania is a world that has remained almost unchanged for millennia. This is a natural domain of wide white beaches and coastal heath, a swathe of Tasmanian seaboard protected in the broad sweep of Mt William National Park. Anyone can walk the beaches of Mt William, and camp under casuarinas that sing in the wind. But come to Tasmania seeking rest, rejuvenation, escape – a gentle journey – and the guided, four-day Bay of Fires Walk is the path to take.

It's on their second day in the Bay of Fires that walkers get to experience that first magnificent Tasmanian East Coast sunrise. The night's been spent at Forester Beach Camp, a comfortable base of tents tucked in a swale behind sugary dunes. The previous day's trek has been the first stage of unwinding: a gentle, blustery amble by ice-blue sea, filled with amiable chatter and deep breaths of champagne air. Guides – greatly knowledgeable about the landscape, great cooks, and simply great companions – have whipped up a storm the previous night. Fine Tasmanian wine has been enjoyed.

And now it's a quiet morning before the others are up and you roll out of your feather sleeping









bag on your comfortable bunk in your private tent. You're already deeply in the tranquil Bay of Fires groove. An early morning sea dip might be in order, or just a wander and wildlife-watch on the beach at sunrise. With your walking companions still in wave-washed dreams, it feels like you're the only person on earth.

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The Bay of Fires was not always such an unpeopled wilderness. To the early European explorers of Tasmania, people seemed very much in evidence: the campfires of those original inhabitants were abundant enough to be the inspiration for the name of this bit of coastline.

During the walk, guides point out great mounds of shells, the discarded remains of centuries of seafood meals enjoyed by Aborigines. These huge middens are a reminder of the days when tribes migrated to the coast in winter to forage for shellfish, hunt muttonbirds and capture seals. Until 10,000 years ago, Tasmania's first inhabitants crossed back and forth across the land bridge that connected Tasmania with the mainland. Today, that bridge is covered by the waters of Bass Strait. In the Bay of Fires, this history seems close enough to touch with shell middens and artefacts very much in evidence, and, looking north, the islands of the Furneaux Group – once peaks on the Bassian Plane – loom.

On the days we walk the Bay of Fires it seems pleasantly deserted. This is an end-of-season trip, and our group is smaller than most – usually there are 10 people and two guides. This walk, we decide, must be self-selecting for happy, easy-going people, each with their own fascinating story to tell. Or maybe this is just what being in the Bay of Fires does to us. There's a filmmaker, an art teacher, a UN refugee worker and a prominent psychologist and his graphic designer wife. By lunchtime on the first day, we're laughing like old friends. The guides are wonderful young people, expert on the area and full of energy and fun. They set the tone that makes this walk so special – and





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best of all, carry all the heavy fresh food on their backs. All we carry is a spare change of clothing and something warm for the evening.

Food. This the Bay of Fires Walk does with amazing panache. Guides have been trained and menus planned by admired Tasmanian chef Daniel Alps, so this is no simple camp cooking. Forget cardboard muesli with clods of powdered milk. One memorable breakfast was savoury hotcakes piled with juicy mushrooms and spinach.

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Although the Bay of Fires Walk is all about the journey, there's no denying that the exquisite Bay of Fires Lodge, which is reached on the second night, is the focus for many walkers. Built atop a beachside promontory, looking east over the Tasman Sea, the lodge is so carefully hidden among the coastal vegetation you can barely spot it on your approach. The lodge – and the walk itself – are the brainchild of architect Ken Latona. Simple, serene, elegant and designed for environmental sustainability, this building is nothing short of breathtaking. Walking in off the beach, you can't help but feel you've stumbled upon a designer home shoot, where the emphasis is on utmost tranquility. Except by now, you feel pretty tranquil yourself, and you realize you fit right in.

Under a soaring skillion roof, the lodge is built almost exclusively of beautiful, smooth Tasmanian eucalypt timber and glass. The structure rests lightly on the landscape, with a wide deck on stilts reaching out towards the sea. Solar powered, with composting toilets and on-site water treatment, the lodge aims to make as little





WORLD'S BEST:

In September 2005, the Bay of Fires was named second best beach in the world by Conde Nast Traveller *magazine in the UK, beaten only by Anse Du Grand Colombier on St Barthelemy in the French West Indies.*

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impact as practicable on its surrounds. Guests have great fun learning how best to pump their water for a hot shower at night before slumber in beds of crisp linen – heavenly after a long day walking on the beach. Though eminently civilized, the lodge still feels remote. You can't even get here by vehicle, and that's part of the appeal. All supplies have to be carried in and out or brought in by the helicopter which makes deliveries once a year.

Bay of Fires isn't just about walking. After their first night at the lodge, guests rise early for a day on the water. It's time for sea kayaking on Ansons River and out into the wide mouth of Ansons Bay. Again, this is an activity that's both active and meditative. Gliding along, we startle a heron fishing in the shallows. We continue, barely rippling the black water, noiselessly advancing towards the sea.

The Bay of Fires is a hotspot for wildlife. This afternoon, we spot eagle rays flying gracefully through the shallows and, as we walk back to the lodge along the sands of the Abbotsbury Peninsula, we see hundreds of nesting seabirds, including threatened hooded plovers, scurrying busily across the beach, one of their largest remaining breeding grounds.

For birders, the Bay of Fires is a delight. Around 100 species frequent the area, and several – like the Tasmanian thornbill and the yellow wattle bird – are found only here. On early mornings and in the evening, walkers spot wombats, wallabies, possums and even quolls. Echidnas lumber across the path at any time of the day, and it's not uncommon to startle an eastern grey kangaroo, at home here in its last intact coastal habitat, the reason for this national park's creation.

Time seems to slow wonderfully in the Bay of Fires, so that when the moment comes to leave the lodge for the last time, you feel as if you've been relaxing here for an age. Leaving along a sandy path through fragrant inland heath and peppermint forests, walkers look inside themselves and find total peace.

Contemplative, our group walks in silence. Black cockatoos shriek in the treetops, and a gentle Bay of Fires breeze ruffles the air.



FACT BOX:

The four-day guided Bay of Fires Walk experience starts at Evandale near Launceston in Tasmania's north. A scenic drive takes guests to the walk's start in Mt William National Park This is a relatively easy beach walk that requires only moderate fitness but serious commitment to relaxation is essential. One night is spent in a tented camp and two at the breathtaking Bay of Fires Lodge. Food is seriously good and there are hot showers at the end of the day. The walking season runs from the end of October to the beginning of May. Cost: $1750 per person. Contact: (03) 6391 9339. bayoffires.com.au

Or you can visit Mt William National park in any season and camp under the casaurinas. Stumpy's Bay is a favourite, and often secluded, camp spot. For more information on Mount William National Park see: parks.tas.gov.au/natparks/mtwilliam

