

Clients are likely to spot
Tasmanian devils at Maria
Island National Park.

Walking With the Devil

The Maria Island Great Walk in Tasmania brings visitors close to the island's fierce — and now endangered — namesake animal

by GIGI RAGLAND

KOOKABURRA SITS IN THE OLD GUM tree,” we sang as our small group walked the winding trail parallel to the Tasman Sea. When I learned this nursery song as a child, I imagined individually wrapped bubble gum hanging like Christmas ornaments from a large tree. It wasn't until later that I learned Australians refer to eucalyptus trees as “gum trees,” and that there are roughly 600 varieties of them. (Unfortunately, none actually produce bubble gum.)

We gazed skyward as a grove of trees loomed before us. Single-file, we trekked along Maria Island — a small island a few miles off mainland Tasmania, Australia — and through one of the largest and most ancient eucalyptus groves on the planet. Shaded by the tall canopy of the *eucalyptus globulus* (called “blue gums”),

our voices matched the exuberant energy level of our pace as we sang our way along the path, laughing at our attempts to remember the age-old children's tune. Suddenly, we heard a loud cackling from the treetops.

“So that's what a kookaburra sounds like,” said one of my hiking companions. “That bird really does sound like it's laughing, doesn't it?”

“I guess either the bird echoes us, or we echo it,” chuckled another guest.

We turned a corner, leaving the forest and entering a vast velvety green meadow that spanned the hilly valley before us. Perhaps it was the golden column of natural light shining through that made the atmosphere seem cinematic, but it definitely felt like a “Jurassic Park” moment. The rolling hills

were dotted with small, bear-like marsupials nibbling on the green grass, and our guides, Jo and Jessie, said they'd nicknamed the area “Wombat Wonderland.” The furry wombats shuffled away if we came too close, but they remained near enough for picture-taking. It was hard to leave the picturesque scene, but

we were approaching our luxury eco-cabins for the night; the temptation of a quick dip in

the surf before a candlelit gourmet dinner prepared by our guides drew us forward.

Plus, my No. 1 priority was to spot the Tasmanian devil. I had learned that Maria Island National Park is a sanctuary location where the endangered carnivorous marsupial can be seen in its natural habitat — that is, if one is lucky enough.

CREATURE FEATURE



A cancerous disease nearly wiped out the devil population on mainland Tasmania.

WHERE TO SPOT TASMANIAN DEVILS

Bonorong Wildlife Sanctuary

The sanctuary offers private behind-the-scenes tours where guests can get an in-depth update on Tasmanian Devil Facial Tumor Disease. www.bonorong.com.au

Tasmanian Devil Unzoo

On the Devil Tracker Tour, clients can view images of wild devils captured on infrared camera the previous night. www.tasmaniandevilunzoo.com.au

Devils@Cradle

The conservation facility offers After Dark Tasmanian Devil Feeding Tours, which include facts about the disease. www.devilsatcradle.com

THE DETAILS

Great Walks of Australia
www.greatwalksofaustralia.com.au

The Maria Island Great Walk
www.mariaislandwalk.com.au

After a cancerous virus called Tasmanian Devil Facial Tumour Disease nearly wiped out the creature on the mainland, the “Save the Tasmanian Devil Program” was established in 2012 in an effort to quell their extinction. A healthy population of devils was brought to Maria Island in an attempt to safeguard the species.

I booked The Maria Island Great Walk to trek along quiet beaches, observe unique Australian wildlife and have the chance to see a little devil. The journey is one of eight distinctive Great Walks of Australia; these are independently owned and guided walking experiences through some of the most pristine landscapes in Australia, including Tasmania. Much of the remote terrain of the World Heritage National Parks can only be reached by foot and via a guided Great Walk.

On the four-day guided The Maria Island Great Walk, guests will feel like they’re on safari. Our daily treks revealed a wonderful variety of Australian wildlife roaming free in the protected island wilderness of the national park. I saw large Forester kangaroos, wombats, wallabies, pademelons (another small marsupial), an echidna (Australia’s equivalent to a North American porcupine) and a variety of birds.

After exploring the national park’s wilderness on carefully planned routes that led us into the bush, up and down coastal cliffs and through long stretches of silent and virtually deserted beaches, our small group of eight people became a close-knit crew ready to take on whatever the natural landscape of Maria Island might have in store for us.

That is, as long as our competent guides were leading the way. Personable and polite, Jo and Jessie enthusiastically engaged the group in conversation on the history and geology of the island. The vibrant, 20-something women not only carried with them large backpacks filled with the usual hiking and medical sundries and extra water while trekking, but also provided lunch and teatime treats for all of us — just another way to enjoy a Great Walk in the wilderness.

On the last day of the last hike, from the corner of my eye, I saw something dart across a creek bed. The white stripe across its black body gleamed in the sunlight, making the Tasmanian devil visible to me and about a dozen other awed visitors. Much to my surprise and delight, I discovered that the wily, snarling black-and-white creatures look and sound much like the cartoon character, especially the ferocious growl.

I had seen the “crown jewel” of the island state’s wildlife; my Tasmanian safari list was complete. **X**

