



Pictured: Saffire Freycinet, a Luxury Lodges of Australia member, commands spectacular views across the Freycinet Peninsula and has only 20 suites to minimise the impact on the environment

Opposite page: The cold clean waters surrounding Tasmania allow seafood to thrive

PHOTOS: SAFFIRE FREYCINET; PENNICOOT WILDERNESS JOURNEYS

TASTE NATURE'S BOUNTY IN TASSIE

While in Sydney, Mavis Teo hops on a short flight to the southernmost island Down Under for a culinary adventure.



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ith barely three days to spare for a short getaway while in Australia for a work trip, I can only focus on one of two interests during my jaunt to Tasmania. It is a tough toss-up between cuisine and art, but my stomach has the final say.

Sure, one will find it hard to say no to the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona) in the Tasmanian capital of Hobart, Australia's largest private art gallery (at 6,000sqft). Owned by a maverick gambler, it houses an eclectic collection that includes ancient Greek tetradrachms and contemporary works by the likes of Damien Hirst and Chris Ofili. But I find it even harder to pass up on Tasmania's food scene.



Above and right: Guests on a Tasmanian Seafood Seduction tour go on a day cruise where they feast on seafood straight out of the sea
Far right: For a bird's eye view of Coles Bay and Wineglass Bay, go on one of the walks through Freycinet National Park



Art and food against a backdrop of wildly beautiful wilderness are the main draws to Tasmania in recent years, accounting for a 21 per cent increase in international tourist arrivals from 2017 to 2018. As Australia's last inhabited island state frontier to Antarctica, the landscape developed a reputation for being isolated and desolate when it was a penal colony in the 19th century. Placed in harsh conditions where survival was key, the settlers and ex-convicts worked hard at finding and growing food.

Today, Tasmania has one of the highest agricultural standards in the world. The island, however, has other things going for it too, such as microclimates that allow a huge variety of things to grow – from apricots and cherries to wasabi (notorious for being hard to grow), as well as clean, cold water where salmon and other fatty fish thrive. The quality of its produce has inspired chefs both local and from other states to set up shop, contributing to a vibrant and edgy dining scene. As the saying goes, the proof is in the pudding. I put this to the test as soon as I land in Hobart, the capital city.

ISLAND OF PLENTY

At scandi-chic Franklin, one of Hobart's top tables, the culinary team led by Analiese Gregory dives for abalone, sea urchin and seaweed, and also forages for fungi and saltbush. These make their way into the dishes. The octopus and saltbush dumplings are a crunchy and succulent blend of umami and natural saltiness from the native herb.

Then there's Fico, in the heart of Hobart, which one should not miss. The bistro reminds me of a busy Italian trattoria but it is 10 times more hip. Cheery service from the staff warms up the sparse, industrial interiors as they work their way around the tables, dishing out a blend of Europe and Tasmania. My favourite here is the homemade ravioli stuffed with local goat cheese for its heavenly blend of creamy comfort and robust flavours.

For tipplers (and a room with a view in the hotel it is in), I check into The Story Bar in MACq01, where you will find around 30 Tasmanian gins on the menu. To learn about Tasmania's history, hotel

guests can request for a storytelling tour by master storyteller Justin Johnstone who will fill you in on the colourful characters (both reputable and disreputable) who lived in Tasmania during its founding days and whom the 114 rooms are named after. MACq01 sits along the wharf, offering panoramas of the crystalline waterfront, and is just a five-minute walk to the Constitution Dock where my Tasmanian Seafood Seduction tour with Pennicott Wilderness Journeys starts at 9am the next day.

EASY EXCESS

Although the tour is advertised as a half-day event, I suggest that you do not pencil in anything else afterwards, especially restaurant bookings. Our day of non-stop eating and drinking starts with a local cheese platter with strawberries and free flow of Jansz sparkling wine (or other Tasmanian wines, craft beers and ciders, if you prefer).

We cruise down River Derwent and through D'Entrecasteaux

Channel that runs between Bruny Island and the southeastern Tasmanian mainland to Tassal Salmon Farm, where Pennicott gets its salmon. We glide past towering sea cliffs and sandy beaches, spotting dolphins, seals and seabirds along the way.

At Get Shucked oyster farm on Bruny Island, the crew pull up two baskets of oysters from the water. These should have come with a warning. We realise too late that there are more oysters than we should fill our stomachs with, as more seafood awaits us. A guide dives into the frigid waters for abalone and sea urchin, which we eat raw. The former we have sashimi-style, pan-fried with garlic and chilli or butter, or steamed in sake.

Although bursting by now, we keep going. The best is yet to come. Two large rock lobsters which are dispatched off humanely are served raw or blanched. By the time I roll out of the boat and onto the dock, it is 4pm. I take a while to get my bearings as I am heady from the drinks and sleepy from slurping down 30 oysters.



Pictured and above: Saffire Freycinet's stingray-shaped main building houses the reception, lounge and spa while the conjoined suites fan out into the surrounding bushland



THE WONDERS BEYOND

One, however, can never have too much of a good thing. I find myself in an oversized wader, trudging against thigh-high waters in the Apsley River the next day for more oysters. I am now 2.5 hours away from Hobart by car on the eastern coast of Tasmania where I have checked into Saffire Freycinet, a Luxury Lodges of Australia member and also one of Australia's most well-known luxury hotels.

A very popular activity that it offers is the all-you-can-eat oyster experience at Freycinet Marine Farm, where guests gather around a white linen-covered table 50m out in the sea and have freshly shucked oysters paired with sparkling wines. This time, I opt to do it as a brunch activity, so that I have room for the degustation dinner at Palate, the restaurant at Saffire Freycinet.

Chef Todd Adams insists that 80 per cent of the kitchen's produce be sourced locally on the island. Besides seafood, Tasmania is also not short on grass-fed meats and free-range poultry. One standout dish that showcases some of these local delights is a dish of tender Marion Bay chicken with pillow-y sea urchin.

The stingray-shaped hotel with only 20 rooms commands spectacular views across Coles Bay and a craggy mountain range known as The Hazards, which stands in front of a silvery bay known as Wineglass Bay. I get to see it from a viewpoint at the end of a guided walk through pink granite rock formations the next morning. Even if you opt to vegetate in your room, you will be rewarded with the same views through the ceiling-to-floor windows in your room which you will find hard to leave.

Besides the comfort and simple aesthetics lent by the mix of furniture which ranges from classics like Herman Miller chairs and custom-designed pieces, there's also the very luxuriously stocked fridge, the contents of which are included in the room rate.

While high gastronomy may be one reason to stay here, the chic interiors, priceless views and a whole compendium of interesting activities that range from relaxing to adventurous are the reasons to stay longer. If you have the luxury of time, do park yourself here for a few nights – which I will when I return. ■

Check out Saffire Freycinet at luxurylodgesofaustralia.com.au and book unique tours at pennicotjourneys.com.au.

Pictured: Enjoy oysters in Apsley River which flows from the Great Oyster Bay, bringing with it oyster seeds that are allowed to grow and flourish at Freycinet Marine Farm
Below: To harmonise the interiors with the pristine environment that Saffire Freycinet is set in, natural materials like stone and local timber are used

