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# PROUD as a local

Lilly Donkers



**W**e're licking cream off our fingers and blobs of blueberry jam off our lips. I wish I could say we've earned this delicious morning tea of fresh scones and apple pies, but we haven't – not yet anyway. I push one last scone into my gob just in time to save the glossy red strawberry teetering on top from sliding off and escaping down the cracks in the decking.

Looking around I see our group – three guides and seven guests – spread out in the sunshine on the veranda of the old Penitentiary. A wombat waddles past and we see the face of her happy baby hanging out from between her legs. A pair of Cape Barren geese sits in front of us, snug against each other like lovers, gently plucking at the grass with their strong grey-yellow beaks. I'm on Maria Island with new Tassie tour company See Tasmania. ➤

ABOVE: Wind-blown trees



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The company was set up by three mates who saw a gap in the market for laid-back day trips with a satisfying amount of hiking, a dedicated focus on quality Tasmanian food and in-depth interpretation.

Though I've visited Maria countless times there's always more to learn about its complex cultural heritage. From Aboriginal inhabitation to the National Park and World Heritage-listed Probation Station it is today, Maria has (almost) seen it all. Aboriginals, convicts, whalers, farmers and an eccentric Italian entrepreneur named Diego Bernacchi have all left their mark on this beautiful place.

Guides Brenton and Kirk pack up our picnic then we follow them south to the Painted Cliffs. The wind-tossed ocean smashes against the sandstone rock face, slowly modelling it into ever-more curvaceous shapes and revealing the colourfully marbled layers. We pick our way through the ruins of the Oast House as Brenton explains that this is one of the oldest hop-drying buildings in the country. By 1847 it was producing an impressive three tonnes of hops each year. Up and over a small, scrubby hill, Maria's main settlement Darlington comes back into view and we stumble freely downhill to the cluster of ancient white-washed buildings.

While we've explored for the last two hours, guide Daniel has been preparing a luncheon feast.

We fill our plates with a smorgasbord of delights and sit together around the big Mess Hall tables. We feel happy, relaxed and in good hands.

'Pass the scallops please!' a voice calls from the end of the table.

'Pass the grilled vegies thanks!' someone calls back.

A loaf of bread – baked by Kirk last night – makes its way around the group, followed closely by a tall jug of lemon water. We could sit here all day eating and chatting, but there's more island to explore.

I top up my drink bottle, don my hat and run after our merry group, which is quickly disappearing into the gum forest. The afternoon adventure takes us up to Skipping Ridge for spectacular views of Bishop and Clerk, the Freycinet Peninsula, and across to the Tassie mainland; then down to the Fossil Cliffs for a geology lesson. Brenton takes us to more ruins and points out a faded 'DB' carved into a brick, said to be the initials of Diego Bernacchi himself. We all oo in appreciation and take abundant photos.

There's an hour to fill before the late afternoon ferry picks us up from the island. What better way to spend it than with a cheese and wine spread? Sitting outside Maria's oldest building – the Commissariat Store – we dine on King Island and Coal River Valley cheeses, an array of East Coast wines and a homemade raspberry flan. We raise our full glasses and look around at each other – everyone is suitably wind-blasted and sun-fried.

'Here's to Tasmania!' someone says. 'Cheers!' we all salute in agreement.

I turn to face the Mercury Passage. A salty breeze drifts in and I can see the wake of the approaching ferry. Two kids are jumping off the jetty, shrieking with surprised joy as their bodies hit the blue water. Hooded plovers sprint along the beachfront, and the Maria Island ranger walks by and gives us a friendly wave.

I take a good slurp of my wine and grin – I'm as impressed as a tourist, but as proud and smug as a local.



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE LEFT: Guides Kirk, Brenton and Daniel; the historic buildings of Darlington; lunch spread; scrumptious home-made scones; enjoying a beach walk; a Cape Barren goose.

**i** Lilly Donkers travelled with See Tasmania on their Maria Island Grand Picnic tour. For more information and to check out their other tours visit: [www.seetasmania.com.au](http://www.seetasmania.com.au)