

Hazard lights

The five mountains of the Hazards, as seen from Saffire's lounge.

Opposite: rabbit pithiviers with celeriac purée, cavolo nero and chestnuts.



JEWEL OF THE ISLE

There's something big happening on the small island. In a pocket of pristine Tasmanian wilderness, Leo Schofield discovers Saffire Freycinet, a new luxury lodge that offers five-star polish in an untamed setting.

Photography **Luke Burgess**





Sensitive architects don't confront nature.

They collaborate with it. So when Tasmania's best-known architect, Robert Morris-Nunn, and his partner Peter Walker were commissioned to design Saffire, the Federal Group's new \$32-million luxury boutique resort in Freycinet National Park on Tasmania's east coast, they approached the task deferentially.

The site is one of the island state's most precious wilderness landscapes, with spectacular views across Coles Bay to a range of mountains known as the Hazards. This famous geological feature separates Coles Bay and Wineglass Bay, and is to the island state what the Olgas are to the Northern Territory. Supposedly named after one Richard Hazard, the American captain of a whaling vessel, they comprise five mountains: Mount Parsons, Mount Baudin, Mount Amos, Mount Mayson, and in the middle, the tallest, Mount Dove. They are composed of granite containing orthoclase, a rare mineral that makes the mountains appear to miraculously change colour depending on the light, mostly to pink but sometimes blue-grey, sometimes a soft violet. Monet painted his haystacks and the façade of Rouen Cathedral at many different times of day under different light conditions, and the great American photographer Edward Steichen made more than 600 images of the same shadblow tree at different times of the day and year. Reincarnated today, either of these artists might be similarly inspired by the Hazards.

Morris-Nunn and Walker certainly were. "From its inception, Saffire was imagined as an iconic project to redefine tourism in Tasmania," says Walker. "The location was scarred from its previous use as a caravan park so the project became as much about repairing the site and interpreting its unique qualities as it was about creating a space from which it could be experienced," he says. "We shaped the main building as the end point in a journey in which views of the Hazards are shielded and revealed and finally presented as a destination, which is a panoramic overview of the Hazards and their context."

Downsizing from the original proposal of 100 rooms to just 20 suites ensured that all Saffire's guests can experience the Hazards in the same way, through floor-to-ceiling windows that frame the spectacular play of sun and shadow on every nub and hollow of the rocks opposite, across the calm, glassy waters of the bay. The same view can also be enjoyed in Cinerama form from the dining room, lounges and terraces of the main building, which sweeps in a long parabola of glass along a slope above the suites.

Of course, it takes more than fine architecture to make a resort something out of the ordinary, and while the architects were fretting over details such as the discreet vertical panels in the window embrasures that open in balmy weather to admit the sea breeze, or the television screens that descend via remote control from the ceilings, or the miniature Zen gardens of raked sand and rock outside each suite, others were attending to interior design. Natural materials, such as stone and native timbers, abound. Bathrooms are large and luxurious, floored and faced with marble. Furniture is a mix of classics, such as Herman Miller chairs, and custom-designed pieces, some rustic, many designed by local artists. Lighting is soft, subtle and energy efficient.

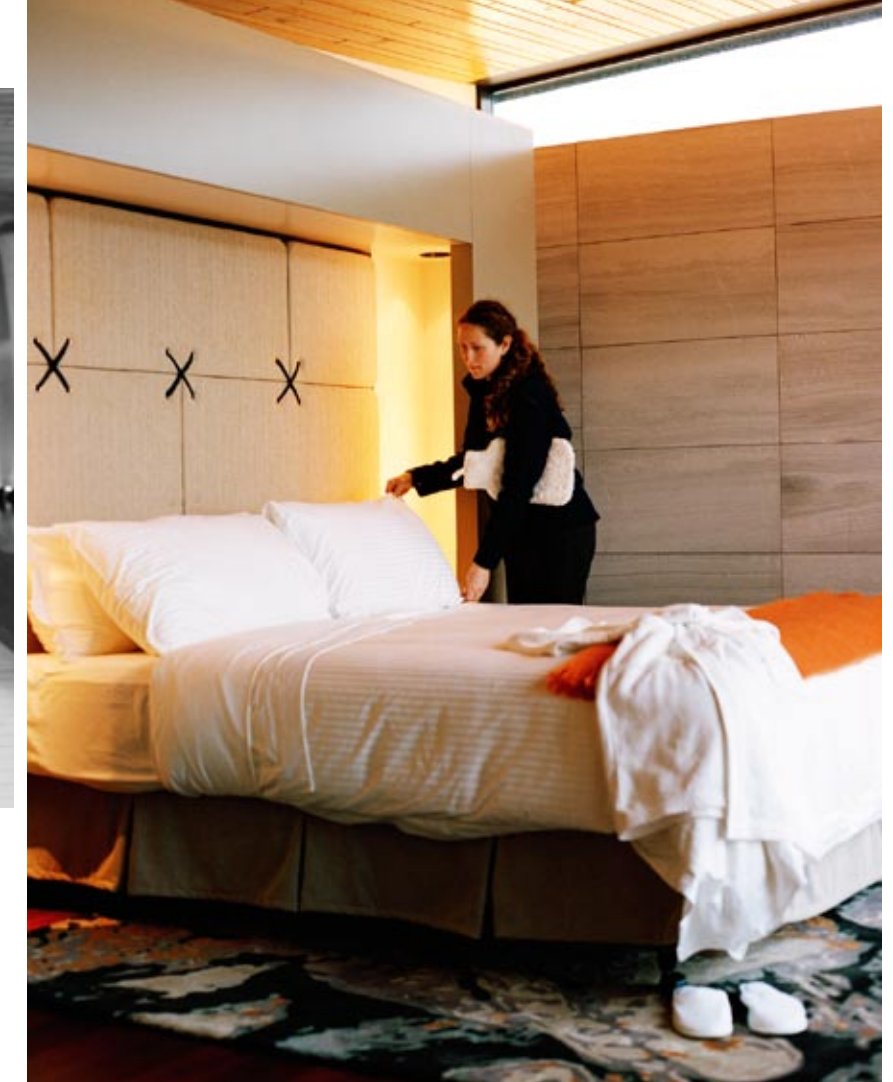
Recruited from Hobart's stylish Henry Jones Art Hotel, the resort's youthful general manager, Matt Casey, had the task of choosing everything from the 1000-thread-count bed linen to the stylish electric kettles, to the Bugatti jars that hold Yoshinos, irresistible Japanese cracker-coated peanuts, and the seriously indulgent contents of the mini-bars. Few details have escaped Casey's attention.

He is particularly choosy about staff. "I look for discretion combined with friendly, smooth-running service – our jobs shouldn't look like work. We aim to create a service culture where everything comes naturally." And although his listener's eyes may glaze over as he expands on "service culture", the results of his selection and motivation strategy are evident in a fine team of executives and employees gathered from thither and yon with a collective experience in rival resorts and adjunct hospitality enterprises that is awesome.

Realising that remote properties such as this one must consider the physical as well as spiritual experience, Casey and the owners went in search of a chef who would provide an added lure for clients. They wanted someone



other than just a journeyman capable of knocking out three decent meals a day. More of a star. As fate would have it, the Orient Express group had just sold Lilianfels, its Blue Mountains resort and spa, and its chef, Hugh Whitehouse, was pondering his future. So were more than 50 other chefs who applied for the job at this sexy new Tasmanian property. However Whitehouse was the number-one choice. During his six-year intendency

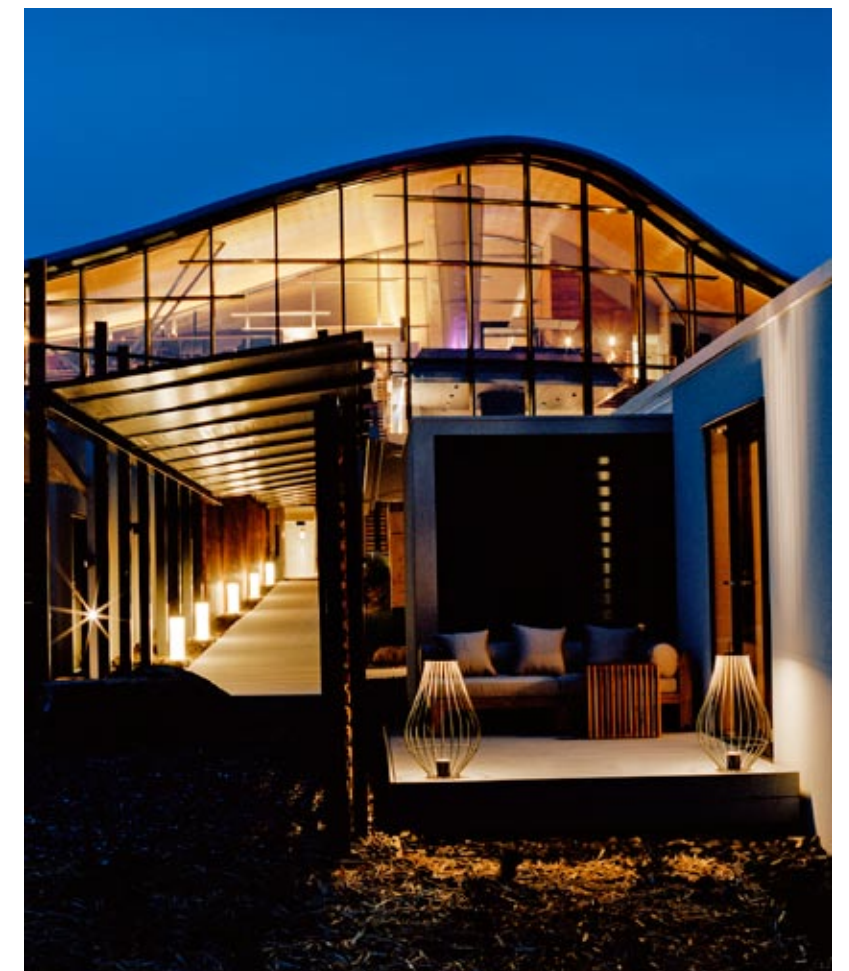


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at Lilianfels, his restaurant, Darley's, had been double-starred and declared best regional restaurant in New South Wales. "It was a big move for me," he says. "I insisted on certain conditions, including bringing my sous chef Simon Pockran with me and a two-year contract." Terms agreed, he arrived in Tasmania four months ahead of Saffire's scheduled opening, time profitably spent building his team, which includes pâtissier Gareth Were, an alumnus of Michelin-starred kitchens in Britain and Europe, and local Laura Gibbins, who was spirited away from nearby Freycinet Lodge.

His brigade in place, Whitehouse spent weeks travelling around Tassie, familiarising himself with the fabled local produce, such as the mighty Wessex saddleback pigs from Mount Gnomon Farm, organic Grandveve cheese from Birchs Bay, grass-fed beef from Cape Grim, the pungent local Shima wasabi that Tetsuya reckons is as good as that grown in Japan, and heirloom apples. He knows his apples. "I was brought up in Kurrajong. My father was an orchardist."

So from day one Whitehouse was turning out unusually good fare, probably the best of any resort in the country. Not all fancy, although he does a mean dégustation. Sometimes his dishes are plain as a hospital sheet, but no less delicious for being direct. For instance, one would travel further than Freycinet to find fish and chips as glorious as his fresh fillets of flathead served with a simple tartare sauce and a couple of halved pickled-



Treasure chest
Above, clockwise from top left: Palate, Saffire's stylish restaurant; inside a premium suite; Julia Fisher teaches guests how to shuck oysters; the Hazards at sunrise. Opposite: General manager Matt Casey (left); turning down those 1000-thread-count sheets (right); Saffire sparkling by night (bottom).



At the famous oyster farm, one dons high-waisted waders and mingles with the molluscs.

onions. He also does a remarkably good chicken soup, the broth as elegant as the best consommé but with serious hunks of poached chicken and old-fashioned barley. And fresh vegetables. Oh, that's another neat idea. Outside the elegant

lounge is a kitchen garden where, eventually, all the herbs and a good many of the vegetables used in Whitehouse's kitchen will be grown in beds raised high above ground level so as to discourage marauding marsupials.

Other touches impress. Having worked in Dubai and at a five-star resort in the Maldives, food and beverage manager Andrew Michalanney not only assembled a knockout list of local and overseas wines but also insisted that other essential elements of a truly sophisticated international bar, such as Hendrick's gin and a humidor stuffed with Cuban cigars, be available.

It goes without saying that from the get-go a spa was seen as critical to the success of this upscale getaway. Many luxury resorts have franchised spa operations but Saffire's has been custom-created. Spa manager Felicity Runciman was spirited from spas in Byron Bay and Ayers Rock, while Fiona Jak was a local discovery. A member of the family that owns the resort encountered her in Launceston where her caring hands alleviated an orthopedic condition of one of his offspring so effectively that she was hired on the spot. All of the spa treatments are inspired by the surroundings and most

of the products used are particular to Saffire. Even the smooth stones used in the hot stone massage are handcrafted from the pink granite of the Hazards.

Naturally, given that visitors are in one of the most fascinating and hauntingly beautiful spots in Australia, excursions are mandatory. These can take the form of cycling, jogging or bushwalking, a hike via the track by Mount Amos to Wineglass Bay, day trips across to Schouten Island or long solitary walks along the sands of Friendly Beaches. Expert guides are available when needed, their number including Ben Kain, just back from guiding in the Arctic Circle, or Emma Fletcher, a marine biologist who takes guests out to a famous oyster farm owned by Giles and Julia Fisher. There one dons high-waisted waders and mingles with the molluscs. Returning to terra firma you can shuck the oysters you've collected and down them with a glass of Champagne. "This experience is a real favourite with our international visitors," she says. "They love getting into the waders and striding out into the water, running their hands through the tiny bead-like shells that will grow into big fat juicy oysters."

If you just want to chill out on site, the spa is waiting to offer a body sculpt, a scrub, a bespoke massage or the intriguing "dual renewal", a chance for couples to share a romantic side-by-side makeover. But perhaps the simplest pleasure is the most memorable: wake at dawn, lift the blinds using the remote control, then lie back on down-filled pillows between those 1000-thread-count sheets and watch the dawn light up the Hazards. Or do the same thing at sunset, preferably with a Hendrick's martini on the side table.*



THE FINE PRINT

Getting there

Saffire is located just outside Coles Bay on Tasmania's Freycinet Peninsula. It is about two and a half hours by car from either Launceston or Hobart. Transfers by car, minibus or helicopter can be arranged. 1800 723 347, saffire-freycinet.com.au

Eat & drink

All meals are served in Saffire's restaurant, Palate, but in fine weather may also be taken on the patio or in the suites, which all have outdoor seating.

Rates

Deluxe suites start at an introductory rate of \$1250, which includes breakfast, lunch and beverages until 6pm. Rates with dinner and wines included are slightly higher.

Excursions

The room rate includes 11 local excursions, such as a visit to an oyster farm, kayaking, a gourmet picnic, quad biking and cooking lessons. The one-day excursion to Schouten Island with a chef-prepared lunch is an extra \$495 per person.



Colour matching

The shades of orange used in the interiors, such as here in the restaurant, reflect the region's distinctive lichen. Opposite: Chef Hugh Whitehouse (inset) and his southern rock lobster with miso custard and crayfish consommé (right), which can be served outside (left).