



Rare GEM

Tasmania's transformation from bushwalkers' paradise to serious luxury player is complete with the arrival of Saffire Freycinet, discovers **FRANCES HIBBARD**



The sculptural beauty of Saffire's main building.



Rooms with a view: the 20 guest suites fan out from the stingray-cum-wave main building.

Tasmanian timbers, stone and contemporary-meets-classic style at Saffire Freycinet.

Every room faces the pink-granite mountains known as the Hazards.

The last time I came to Tasmania was for a significant anniversary. We chose an eco retreat at which to spend our special day. It was late autumn and a cold front had snap-frozen the state. I had no idea Australia was capable of such bone-crushing bitterness.

And so, our carefully planned romantic escape turned into a bit of a fiasco: the anniversary evening itself was spent shivering beneath a deflated doona in a villa notable for its girl-guide-hall-inspired decor; the CD player (no iPods at this point) regurgitating the room's lone "sounds of nature" album over and over.

The following day involved a combination of arguments and searching

for an alternative place to stay; electric blankets, or at very least hot-water bottles, a non-negotiable inclusion.

We desperately wanted to be green, but learnt the hard way that we weren't. Well, not yet anyway. Back then it just involved too much ... suffering. Eco's mindful-yet-miserable origins were still to be replaced by the luxury-with-a-side-serve of carbon-neutral of today.

Thus, there's a slight nigggle of trepidation en route to Saffire Freycinet, here on the Tasmanian east coast's answer to Amalfi: Coles Bay. The lodge is built on some fairly strict environmental principles; there's a hefty commitment to sustainability; a determination to leave "a light footprint". Is it groundhog day, I wonder? I've changed, but has Tassie?



ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY
FRANCES HIBBARD

Will the soft strains of *Sounds of Nature* be waiting for me once again in my grim little guest room?

Any lingering fears I have of suffering for my supper are banished on arrival as Saffire's staff greet me by name and hand me a welcome drink (their iPhones had alerted them to my driving past the brand-spanking new lodge's gate moments earlier).

The main building's architecture is arresting; simultaneously dramatic and discreet — part stingray, part wave, part mirror image of the pink-granite Hazards mountain peaks it faces across Great Oyster Bay. Its glass front seems to seize the vista and bring it within grasping distance for guests; the internal moat and tinkling waterfalls somehow put you back outside with the waves. A curvaceous and

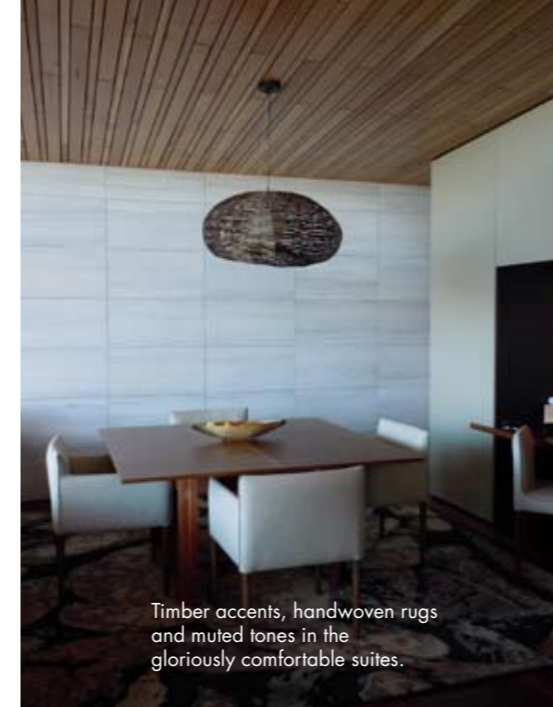
intricate ceiling fashioned from celery-top pine towers above; tactile sandblasted marble forms walls and floors; Tasmanian oak panelling adds texture and warmth.

During summer, families flock to the Freycinet Peninsula and Coles Bay (Australia's first plastic-bag-free town, by the way) to commune with nature: fishing, swimming, hiking over to iconic Wineglass Bay or scrambling over the lichen-covered rocks at nearby Friendly Beaches. Some are lucky enough to have one of the "shacks" that line the bay's shore — shacks, or weekenders, being something of a Tassie obsession; accessible to many thanks to the state's shorter distances and, until recently, lower real estate prices.

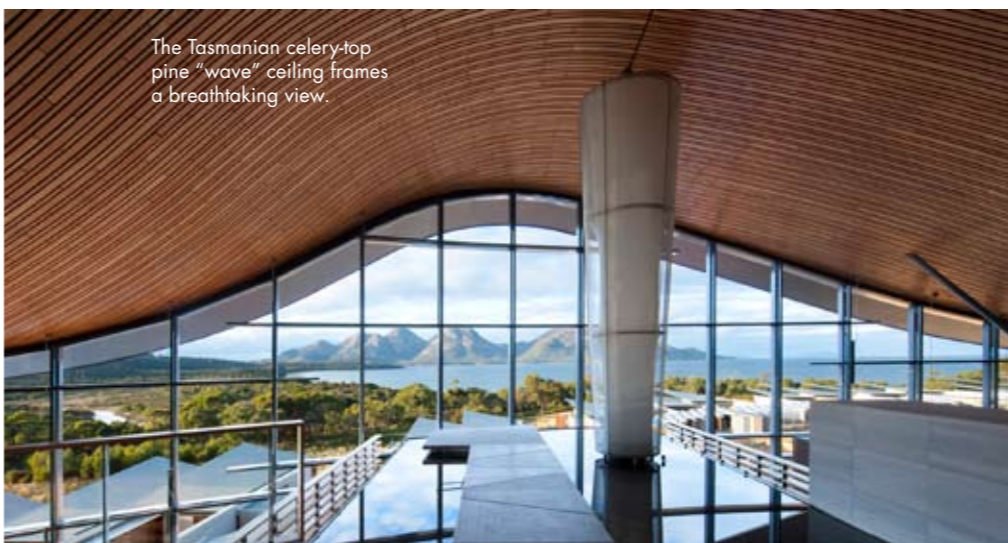
And Saffire Freycinet was very nearly a substantial resort, catering to this ▶



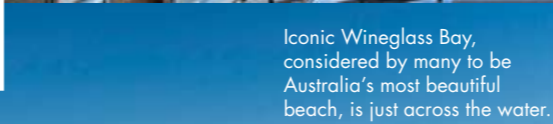
The Hazards, reflected in the windows of the guest suites.



Timber accents, handwoven rugs and muted tones in the gloriously comfortable suites.



The Tasmanian celery-top pine "wave" ceiling frames a breathtaking view.



Iconic Wineglass Bay, considered by many to be Australia's most beautiful beach, is just across the water.

onslaught (a relative term in Tasmania). But instead its developers, the Federal Group — who also own Hobart's pioneering Henry Jones Art Hotel — decided to channel the intimate spirit of a shack, albeit with a five-star spin. There are just 20 suites at Saffire, each with a view of the ever-changing, always-breathtaking Hazards. Interiors

year nod — uses the best of the region's produce to create dishes that sing of Tasmania yet defy parochialism. Think southern rock lobster; salty samphire and local calamari; the south's beloved blue-eye trevalla; Cape Grim pasture-fed beef; Tasmanian black truffles; Freycinet Marine Farm oysters (brave Saffire guests can don waders up at said farm and step into the bay to see how it's done); sugar-cured ocean trout from Macquarie Harbour on the west coast.

Sommelier Andrew Michalanney presides over a diverse cellar that is gloriously heavy with Tasmanian specialities: elegant cold-climate pinot noirs and shiny sparklings; a mix of big names and ones to watch.

It's a world-class dining experience, but with none of the predictable fine-dining stuffiness. Staff are passionate, proud and smiling. And indeed, Saffire's charm is this warmth — in every sense, I'm thrilled to report — as well as a hardcore commitment to the tiny details that really make the difference.

At the spa, the super-high-end Natura Bissé Diamond Collection is used for facials while body treatments feature a sapphire-dust-infused crème created for Saffire by renowned facialist Marionne de Candia (she currently manages the celeb-friendly Rae's on Watego's at Byron Bay). A unique treatment table, fashioned from a reclaimed piece of timber that fell in the Daintree during Cyclone Larry, takes pride of place.

Everything here, it seems, has a story. Nothing feels generic, or expected. And so when I return from dinner to find a flask of steaming hot-chocolate waiting on the bench, hot-water bottles warming the bed, and handmade chocolates beckoning, I'm shocked. Deliciously so.

Finally, reluctantly, I accept that I have to depart my shack-cum-suite (you can sign on for a host of experiences during your time at Saffire, such as a trip across the waves to windswept and beautiful Schouten Island, but it takes some serious motivation). There's a Saffire-branded bag sitting on the passenger seat of my car. It's only halfway through the drive back down the coast to Hobart that I realise it contains a stash of the homemade biscuits also found in my suite.

Details, details ... We're not in eco Kansas anymore Toto.

www.saffire-freycinet.com.au

are a snapshot of Tasmania's finest: huon pine "picture frames" edging the centre window with the greatest aspect; celery-top pine again for the ceilings; chess sets fashioned from sassafras. Does any other state have such a palpable love affair with its native timber?

The colour palette is muted, with dramatic accents — a manifestation of the landscape, if you like. Furniture is a mix of classic and contemporary. Think Eames (there are actual vintage pieces from the designer throughout Saffire), not Ikea. The bathroom floors are heated; the bathtub is ridiculously deep; the room's iPod — attached to a pumping stereo — is preloaded with hundreds of songs; there's not one but two flat-screen televisions and the DVD library list is the most thoughtful I've ever seen in a hotel. There's a plunge pool. A Smeg oven in my kitchen. A replenishable supply of Louis Roederer champagne in my fridge.

If this is a shack, I want one.

At Saffire's Palate restaurant, executive chef, Hugh Whitehouse — previously at Darley's at Lilianfels in the Blue Mountains, which was awarded two hats and a regional restaurant of the



Spa Saffire, where sapphire dust features heavily in the signature treatments.



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