



PREVIOUS PAGE: Saffire Freycinet is built in the shape of a stingray.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Sculptures of the native cockatoo in the garden at Saffire Freycinet; interesting artwork abounds in the luxury lodge; Australian fur seals congregate at Shouten Island; the Saffire Freycinet boat moored in a nearby bay.



The jewel of the isle

THERE ARE DOZENS OF HIGH-END HOTELS IN AUSTRALIA, DAZZLING IN THEIR OPULENCE AND GLAMOUR. THEN THERE IS THAT HANDFUL THAT IS SO EXCLUSIVE THAT SUBTLETY IS THEIR DEFINING CHARACTERISTIC. SAFFIRE FREYCINET, ON TASMANIA'S EAST COAST, IS ONE OF THESE; A HAVEN OF UNDERSTATED LUXURY

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER

Set within acres of Australian bushland on the fringe of Freycinet National Park, Saffire Freycinet is remarkably well-hidden. The organic shapes of the buildings meld into the surrounds seamlessly, generating the aura of a secluded hideaway. As my friend and I pull up in front of the main structure on a weekend getaway, we are immediately struck by the flowing lines, designed by award-winning Tasmanian architect Robert Morris Nunn and associates Circa Architecture.

"Welcome to Saffire," says guest services manager Russell Kiseljev with a welcoming smile as he leads us inside. "You might not know this, but from above, this building is

shaped like the stingrays that are found in the bay here." The fluid lines are echoed in the timber ceiling of the lobby made from curved Tasmanian wood-beams, which opens out onto a magnificent wall of windows. Gazing over the top of the 20 chalets, a light breeze ruffles the opal-blue water in the bay, fringed with pure-white sand and watched over by a posse of dusky-pink granite mountains known as the Hazards.

"We're so glad you could join us," Russell says as he feeds us morsels of information about the lodge, a member of Healing Hotels of the World and Luxury Lodges of Australia. Saffire's allure, particularly in the southern hemisphere's



summer months, is quickly making itself known. Guests from across the globe are finding their way to this luxury enclave.

By the time we reach our expansive suite, complete with a private plunge pool, fully-stocked kitchen, and deliciously-deep bath, our luggage is waiting for us, unpacked from the car by unseen hands. The complimentary snack basket, is overflowing with samples of local produce, and a barista-worthy built-in espresso machine takes up a corner of the kitchen. We sit sipping cafe lattes on the deck as we watch the sky start to darken, streaks of pink and orange visible on the edge of the bay.

The darkness sets in and pinpoints of light flicker into existence in the sky as we sit next to the windows in Saffire's open-plan restaurant, every table boasting spectacular views. Executive chef Hugh Whitehouse has pulled out all the stops here, creating culinary masterpieces from premium local ingredients, designed to showcase the best of the season. The edible flowers garnishing the dishes come from the Saffire Kitchen Garden, while sea lettuce, salt bush buds and samphire are wild-foraged. The cold waters of the east coast of Tasmania ensure seafood is fresh and plentiful, along with tender free-range meats from the farming communities to the north.

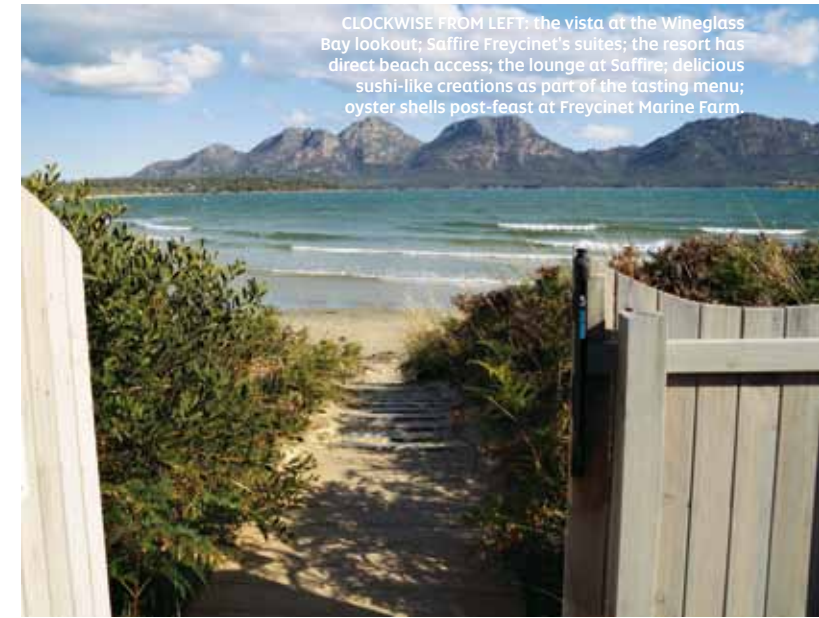
We can't resist the opportunity to sample an array of Hugh's dishes, so throwing diets to the wind we order the tasting menu – six courses of sheer epicurean indulgence. Perfectly-sized portions are artistically

A light breeze ruffles the opal-blue water in the bay, watched over by a posse of dusky-pink granite mountains known as the Hazards

presented, each with a flourish, starting with a quartet of delectable sushi-like morsels including scallop and lime crème fraiche and sugar-cured ocean trout and avocado. More treats follow – a meltingly-soft fillet of Pink Ling in a sourdough crust precedes a mouthwatering tortellini of slow-braised rabbit, leading on to the Cape Grim pasture-fed beef, so tender it melts into liquid flavour. We are given a brief respite before the cheeseboard appears, packed with irresistible local farmhouse cheeses. The poached apricot dessert is the perfect finale, bursting with the taste of summer.

In the morning, after an indulgent breakfast of poached eggs with *labneh*, salmon and avocado, we join a guided walk to the Wineglass Bay lookout nearby. As we stroll, guides Megan and Joel educate us, starting with the early history of the area as a whaling station, the local wildlife – a wallaby patiently poses for us in the car park – and the legendary characters, such as Black Hazard, the colourful captain of a whaling ship who lent the mountains his name. Within an hour we sit perched on the peak, taking in spectacular views of the perfectly-rounded bay. It is breathtaking, the grey-green scrubland contrasting with the cobalt water, as puffy, white clouds drift lazily across an endless sky. =>





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: the vista at the Wineglass Bay lookout; Saffire Freycinet's suites; the resort has direct beach access; the lounge at Saffire; delicious sushi-like creations as part of the tasting menu; oyster shells post-feast at Freycinet Marine Farm.



Sipping on drinks with the sun smiling down on us, piles of discarded shells mount on the table like the middens found along the coastline, evidence of long-past Aboriginal shellfish feasts

After a quick lunch back at the lodge we pile into a mini-van to go to the nearby Freycinet Marine Farm for an oyster experience. As we tumble out of the vehicle, we are issued with fly-fishing waders, which we drag on awkwardly over our clothes. Clumsy in the built-in rubber boots, we gingerly glide into the shallow water. Joel motions us over to the oyster racks, where he pulls out a handful of infant oysters, some barely bigger than a speck of sand.

"This is how an oyster starts. An oyster farmer buys these for a few cents each. At this farm there are thousands of them," he says, as he launches into a demonstration of oyster-farming, plucking examples from the baskets dangling from the racks in front of us.

The class finishes with a shucking lesson. Joel points out the oyster's sweet spot, prising the shell open with a deft flick of the knife and

expertly flipping the mass inside into restaurant-presentation pose. "Who wants to try it?" he asks. I gaze around the group taking in the shy, reluctant faces before volunteering. Stepping forward and tossing the oyster into my mouth its succulent saltiness takes me by surprise.

Leading us to a table set up mid-water, Joel pulls a white table-cloth from his backpack and flings it over the top. Bottles of bubbles, juice, limes and a Japanese-style dipping sauce appear, before he sets to work shucking a mound of oysters pulled directly from the water. Sipping on drinks with the sun smiling down on us, piles of discarded shells mount on the table like the middens found along the coastline, evidence of long-past Aboriginal shellfish feasts. This moment feels like surreal perfection.



IMAGES: Giselle Whiteaker & Saffire Freycinet

Only one thing could make this day any better. I slink into the spa to use the complimentary spa voucher provided with each booking. My therapist, Bronwen, leads me to the massage table and kneads me into utter relaxation, my thoughts fleeing as she smooths the final vestiges of tension from my body, leaving me feeling utterly pampered.

The morning dawns fine on our last day and a small group gathers, ready for the boat trip to Shouten Island. We are issued with warm, ankle-length jackets that can either be worn or draped as rugs to stave off the sea breezes. As we motor along the coast admiring the rock formations and birdlife, two dolphins swim up to kiss the boat. We all rush to the sides to watch them frolic alongside, darting back and forth across the bow in tandem like synchronised swimmers in a medal-worthy display.

As we reach the open ocean, the dolphins depart and Shouten Island appears before us. The rocky outcrop is home to a colony of Australian fur seals, which lie basking in the sun. Alarmed by

the boat's sudden appearance, they cascade down the rock face, an avalanche of seals tumbling and belly-flopping into the water where their confidence is restored by their aquatic co-ordination. They drift and roll on the surface, waiting for the stragglers to slide into the sea to join the flotilla.

Anchored in one of the beautiful bays, the turquoise water of the shallows reflects the sun's rays. The pure white sand brings to

mind a tropical paradise. Again a white table-cloth appears, but today it is a high tea that graces the table – scones with jam and cream, washed down with cups of tea.

Returning to the marina, our faces plastered with smiles, we feel rejuvenated. Saffire has been a haven of serenity, luxurious yet understated, comfortable yet indulgent. We're already planning our return to see the changing seasons ripple across the landscape. ☺