

RESORT TASMANIA

Island treasure

Can Tassie deliver on a \$10,000 weekend for two?
Peter Kerr takes the trouble to find out.

"Do you know why they call it Wineglass Bay?" chopper pilot Greg Ross asks as we skim over Freycinet National Park, the perfect curve of one of the world's best-known beaches lining up in the distance. The answer has less to do with its shape than with what happened here—the sea stained claret red by whalers turning blubber to oil in the early 1800s. Now the area is an international tourist destination, and a breeding ground for the growing number of humpbacks and southern right whales.



Clockwise: Saffire Freycinet and surrounds, including guest pavilion interior below.

Scudding in at around 3000 feet, it has taken just 30 minutes to get here from Hobart, a trip that takes around 2½ hours by car. Another advantage of helicopters, Ross points out, is they can set down anywhere with a reasonable flat space—if we had time, we could have stopped at a winery or distillery or two on the way.

He took some businessmen on a tour of wineries in the state's north-west recently over a couple of days. That cost them \$27,000, but the convenience of helicopter travel is opening up new ways of exploring Tasmania, in our case making a two-night trip from Sydney to the wildness of Freycinet Peninsula seem effortless.

Our ultra-luxury destination is the kind that draws dreamy, faraway looks from those who've stayed there. On earlier, more conventional trips we've driven past the turnoff, wondering what magic could possibly justify such expense.

Now we're on a mission to find out, travelling in style. Is \$10,000 for a weekend in Tassie worth it? Let's see.

As Wineglass Bay falls away, Ross picks out the names of the five squat mountains that are the Hazards, a spine of pink granite between the sea and our destination just beyond the national park and township of Coles Bay.

"You won't get another view like that, not even from a fixed wing," he says as the sleek profile of Saffire Freycinet peeks out from bushland on the other side of the bay. Shaped like the southern eagle rays—a type of stingray—that live in the bay, Saffire's iconic main building hovers behind the 20 private suites and pavilions dotted along its outstretched wings, everything facing the beach.

But we can't sample Saffire's "nothing is a problem" hospitality just yet. To the

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frustration of a pilot able to land on a patch the size of a picnic cloth, Saffire protects the solitude of its guests, and we divert for an airstrip a few minutes north.

"For me, this is actually the most beautiful beach in Tasmania," Ross says as we track along the white sand and turquoise water of Friendly Beaches. Another advantage of helicopters: the view is right there—180 degrees and unobstructed. We veer towards the airstrip, settle back to earth with nary a bump, and are whisked off in a silver van.

The burble of water is all we hear when we arrive. You enter Saffire Freycinet by the stingray's tail—a covered walkway with a slim pool along one side. There's a glimpse of mountains through glass doors, then, as the doors open automatically, the Hazards take your breath away, framed at the end of a reflection pool. The splashing of an internal water feature echoes through the building.

We ease into lounge chairs looking out to the mountains, take in the sweep of the undulating timber ceiling, the gentle lighting, the feeling of being part of the surrounding bushland, and are handed a sparkling rosé from northern Tasmania.

Saffire Freycinet opened in 2010, and the local and international awards have flowed



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Need to know
Saffire Freycinet has 16 suites and four private pavilions. Suites from \$2300, pavilions from \$2800, all-inclusive for two people per night. Tasmanian Air Tours operates transfers from Hobart Airport to Saffire Freycinet from \$4000 return, with fly-drive and scenic flight options.

since: best new tourism development, best interior design, best new hotel, best hotel in Australasia, best luxury lodge.

Designed by renowned Tasmanian architects Morris Nunn and Associates (now Circa Morris-Nunn Chua Architects), and built on the site of a caravan park, it set out to retain and restore the coastal vegetation and settle Saffire's dramatic shape into the natural environment.

Each suite and pavilion, connected by a covered walkway to the main building, has private views over the low heathland to the bay and the Hazards, which change colour from blues to greys to pinks depending on the light.

We're peckish but don't want to spoil our appetites. So we save the (all-inclusive) restaurant for later, agree that a charcuterie plate in our room is just the thing, and are shown to one of the four private pavilions that is ours for two nights.

This time, the view to the Hazards is just ours, as soon as we walk in the door: from the dining room, the lounge room, the

bedroom and the outside deck. Only the bathroom, with its heated floor, giant bath and shower with an array of jet configurations doesn't have mountain views—it looks onto the private plunge pool.

Organised activities aren't usually our thing, but on the coffee table is a neatly typed itinerary that we agreed in advance.

Saffire offers well over a dozen "experiences", including guided bushwalks, kayaking, a cocktail mixology class, archery and joining its resident beekeeper, everyone in full-body apiarist suits.

But a highlight of any stay at Saffire has to be the lounge bar for drinks of your choice (for me, a wonderful martini made with Fureaux gin from Flinders Island), followed by dinner in Palate Restaurant.

Imagine feeling as comfortable as you do at home but in an exclusive restaurant with friendly, thoughtful service and top Tasmanian produce from north to south, ocean to paddock, vineyard to veggie patch.

Executive chef Paddy Prenter is a Tasmanian who worked overseas and in Melbourne before returning to his home state, and describes his style as modern Australian with some Asian influence. His dishes are creative, balanced and superbly presented.

Our agreed activity the next morning is a guided walk for a different view from the lookout at Wineglass Bay.

Apart from our guide, it's just us and a doctor from NSW's Central Coast and his new partner. They've been in Tasmania about a week, hiring a car and using Hobart as a base, and have treated themselves to two nights of indulgence. They wouldn't normally stay somewhere so high end, he says, but this is something special.

On the chopper back to Hobart it's blue sky on the way out. Behind us, the Hazards are silhouetted on the horizon, topped by wisps of cloud. I ask Greg, our pilot, if he ever takes his family up for a trip to the beach or weekend away, and he pauses: "It still hits the hip pocket."

Our two nights away has added up to just over 10 grand. Is it worth it? That might depend on your life circumstances, the occasion, and if you find remote seclusion appealing.

But as we bear down on Hobart Airport, now flying through icy-cold rain, it's nice to know we'll be home before dinner. **L&L**

The writer was a guest of Saffire Freycinet and Tasmanian Air Tours.



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