

NEXT TO NATURE

Hunker down in these slick new cabins in the Tasmanian wilderness

JANE NICHOLLS

A bathtub with a view is a precious indulgence. The outlook from this one is an elfish-green colour swatch of moss and lichen-covered tree trunks and lush rainforest liberally splashed with the slender bright pink-red fingers of Tasmanian waratahs decorating the bush like dozens of flowery flares. I have my post-hike feet propped up in the long, deep tub, magnesium-rich bath salts fizzing in the water and a glass of Josef Chromy bubbling on the bath caddy.

You would never know I'm in the middle of a caravan park, admittedly a super swish one with a clutch of exclusive new cabins. Discovery Parks – part of the G'Day Group, which has 90 destinations around Australia – spent \$20m upgrading this property on the edge of Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park. The redevelopment has added much-needed accommodation to the area, which draws visitors from all over for its rugged scenery and famous walks, including the Dove Lake Circuit and the start of the multi-day Overland Track hike.

For those who would normally eschew holiday-park accommodation (I may be looking in the mirror), drop your snob and think again. Discovery has gone to town with the fit-out of the 11 premium mountain cabins. Features include a kitchen with a Smeg oven, Miele dishwasher and fancy cookware and knives, underfloor heating, which is welcome here in the Central Highlands even in summer, a satellite Samsung TV that works a treat, gas-log fireplace and five-star bed.

There's a large balcony on which to enjoy morning coffee as you listen to birds and other sounds from the rainforest, and automatic blinds for those who like to shut out the stars at night (something the tree canopy effectively does anyway).

A generous welcome hamper for cabin guests includes Ashgrove cheeses and Tasman Sea Salt lavosh crackers, a full-sized bottle of the delicious Josef Chromy sparkling, chocolate truffles and other local goodies. The holiday park's mini-mart is extremely well-stocked with ingredients for cooking and ready-made meals as well as a great selection of Tassie tipples, all reasonably priced.

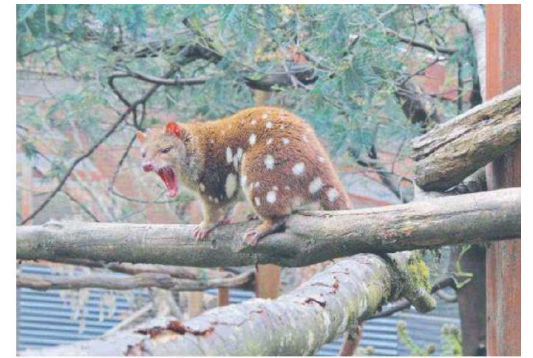
While there's no restaurant on site, there are several excellent options close by. The Melaleuca camp kitch-

en, one of two in the park, also brings its A game. Set your inner chef sizzling with a bunch of pizza ovens and stainless-steel stovetops or chat the night away around the enclosed fire in the middle of the cosy round stone building. An experienced holiday-park person in our group pronounces it the best camp kitchen she's seen.

For all that, I was a little taken aback when we first pulled up at the location of the new cabins. The ground around the elevated walkways connecting them is a jumble of logs where the land was cleared for their construction. These efforts included plumbing from central hubs hidden around the park to supply all the cabins with gas for hot water and cooking; there's no swapping out unsightly gas cylinders.

The reason the felled trees lie in situ is explained. The park sits on the Vale of Belvoir conservation reserve, so all development is in close consultation with Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife and the government's environment department. It was decided that the most eco-friendly approach for the cleared areas was to allow vegetation to return naturally. It takes longer but the regrowth will be in harmony with the local flora. Indeed, an older patch of revegetation near one of the park's established camp kitchens is already looking the part. In the meantime, once you leave the walkway and enter a cabin the surrounding rainforest

One of Discovery Park's new premium mountain cabins, above and below; spotted-tail quoll at Devils @ Cradle, top right



IN THE KNOW

Discovery Parks Cradle Mountain is about two hours by road from Launceston airport, or about 4½ hours from Hobart. Premium mountain cabins from \$392 a night; two-bedroom deluxe cabins accommodating up to six people from \$320 a night. As well as many walking trails nearby, activities include Devils @ Cradle feeding tours, the Sanctuary at Waldheim Spa and the Cradle Mountain Wilderness Gallery for excellent art and gift shopping.

discoveryparks.com.au
devilsatcradle.com
wildernessgallery.com.au

is serenely on display through expansive picture windows.

There is lots of live action on view at the Devils @ Cradle sanctuary when we join the after-dark feeding tour. The facility's conservation program is for Tasmania's three largest carnivorous marsupials – the Tasmanian devil, the spotted-tail quoll and the eastern quoll, listed as either threatened or endangered.

Our guide is keeper Pru Carpenter, a long-transplanted Brit who studied for her masters of conservation biology in Australia. She's one of those passionate and supremely knowledgeable hosts who has the engaging knack of seeming just as enthralled by the animals as we are, even though it's business as usual for her. She insists the devils "do not deserve the devilish reputation that goes with their name ... they should be rebranded Tasmanian sooks". She tells us the last eastern quoll was seen on the mainland in the 1960s; the species is now found only in the wild endemically in Tassie. She keeps the fauna facts coming and issues a warning as she feeds the mouthy marsupials. "If you do not like bits of animals being fed to other animals, it's not going to be your night."

The sold-out tour is entertaining, informative and ultimately sobering when Carpenter says habitat destruction from ongoing native logging is the biggest threat to the long-term survival of these animals. Near the end of the tour, she urges us to check out the work of Bush Heritage Australia and the Tasmanian Land Conservancy, organisations that buy private land to turn into reserves, and to consider supporting them.

"Maybe one of you is a secret millionaire," she says hopefully.

Nope, but I get a taste of what it must feel like when I'm zoning out in an open-air hot tub at the Sanctuary, a private part of the Waldheim Alpine Spa looking over the icy torrent of the Pencil Pine River. There's also a cold plunge pool, steam room and dry sauna and – after hopping happily from one to another for a while – I lie down for a massage in an airy room with an enormous window that almost brings the view inside.

Afterwards, I'm as content as the fat wombat I watch wobbling across the closely chewed grass outside the spa. Would it be indulgent to have another bath in my cabin? I've discovered Tasmanian waratahs bloom only for a short time near the start of summer. This is the first time I've seen them, so I decide soaking up my private view of their unique beauty is the proper course of inaction. There's time for another walk tomorrow.

Jane Nicholls was a guest of Discovery Parks Cradle Mountain and Tourism Tasmania.
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