

TOUR

TASMANIA



TIDE LINES

Expert eyes reveal a whole other world on the Freycinet Peninsula, writes **Jim Darby**.

They were lucky campers. Before it was a luxury lodge, the site where Saffire now sits on Tasmania's Freycinet Peninsula, facing Great Oyster Bay with the Hazards mountain range beyond, was a caravan and camping ground. One of those campers was a young Mick Quilliam, artist, guide and palawa (Indigenous Tasmanian) man.

He recalls sitting on the beach with his grandmother, who would pass on the knowledge and traditions, like the tales the tidelines tell: "The tide is a menu. Wait and look and it'll tell you what's out there." Look closely at that strip of flotsam the high tide leaves behind on the sand and sure enough, there it all is – shells of scallops, black-lipped mussels and angasi (native flat) oysters, as well as crab claws and assorted scraps of seaweed.

Back in the day, before the Europeans arrived, he says they'd only take one type of shellfish, roast them over coals and leave the shells there to be seen, "that way the next mob would see them and choose a different variety for their food." Pioneers in sustainable harvesting.

Quilliam is leading us on one of Saffire's guest experiences, a guided walk called Connection to Country. It's one of the many ways Indigenous culture is being revived in Tasmania, restored from the decades of misconception when it was said that the last of the Indigenous Tasmanians had died.

We meet at the lodge reception and stop a few steps out the door, already surrounded by the native gardens.

Here he acknowledges his elders and ancestors and welcomes us to their country. He then grabs a stalk of lomandra, a native grass, and pulls out a knife. Quilliam isn't short of a quip, giving "thanks to Uncle Stanley" and then cuts the grass to reveal a foam-like interior.

With the reeds that remain, he gives two twists forward and one twist back and before you know it, you have a string to bind or carry anything that needs binding or carrying.

In this part of Tasmania, the "mobs" belonged to the Oyster Bay people whose country is thought to have stretched south of Freycinet towards what is now Hobart



and the northern banks of the Derwent River and up the east coast to a town now known as Falmouth and its tidal lagoon.

"There's at least 2500 generations of Indigenous Tasmanians," Quilliam says. That's quite a store of accumulated knowledge. "Everyone had a totem, your grandparents gave you a totem. They watched and saw what you were interested in and then chose that way.

"It was then your job to know and understand that totem, say it was a particular shellfish or type of seaweed, and share that understanding. They wouldn't sit around at night looking at their phones, they'd share the knowledge of the totems."

Quilliam pulls some skins from his bag and flicks one fashionably over his shoulder. "Looks good doesn't it?" he says with a smile. But that isn't how they'd wear them. It's blindingly obvious once you see it, but the fur side is in for warmth and the skin side faces the elements to keep the rain and wind at bay.



Saffire, Great Oyster Bay and the Hazards mountains (top); Mick Quilliam with a skin (left); and working on some ochre (above).

Before European settlement, Tasmania was already a land of abundance, so much so, Quilliam says palawa could live into their 80s. As the population grew, so did the demand for food, leading to smarter ways of growing, harvesting and trapping.

They also built structures, dome-like buildings for shelter, that could house as many as 13 people, with villages of six or so of the smaller shelters and a larger one for communal and ceremonial uses.

As we make our way towards the beach, he stops at a honey myrtle bush. "I call this one the Vicks VapoRub tree. It'll fix your sore throat or your upset stomach." Not far along is a silver banksia, its cones are good for fire where they'll burn as embers for up to an hour and they're also good for carrying from one fire to start another.

Take away the luxury lodge and the shops and if I was needing to survive around here, my first move would be to make sure Mick Quilliam was around.

There's a lot to learn. **T**

THE DETAILS

STAY

Saffire Freycinet is a luxury lodge on Tasmania's east coast with suites for two from \$2500 a night, including accommodation, meals, drinks and most activities (such as Connection to Country). It is just over two hours' drive from Hobart or Launceston airport and there's a dedicated Saffire guest lounge at Hobart Airport. 2352 Coles Bay Road, Coles Bay, Tasmania, 7215. Phone: (03) 6256 7888.

See saffire-freycinet.com.au

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Jim Darby was a guest of Saffire Freycinet.