WHY MARIA ISLAND IS A SPECIAL PLACE?

"With its wild beauty, layered history and close encounters with wildlife, Maria Island has drawn generations of visitors who seek an escape from ordinary life."  

The serene beauty of Maria Island, its significant terrestrial and marine environments, and its Aboriginal and European heritage all contribute to it being one of Tasmania’s most cherished national parks, held close to the hearts of many people. Further notoriety has been brought to the island by the inclusion of the Darlington Settlement as part of the World Heritage Listed Australian Convict Sites, and its listing as a site of National Heritage importance.

These diverse values make it a special place where Tasmanians and visitors go to immerse themselves in outstanding natural and cultural experiences that are accessible, authentic and enjoyable.

VISITOR TRENDS

The number of people visiting Maria Island has been increasing over the past decade. The introduction of a larger, more frequent and regular ferry service in 2017 has accelerated that growth, and data from the Tasmanian Visitor Survey (TVS) indicates a propensity for further increases in visitor numbers as travel returns to a more ‘normal’ state in the coming years post-pandemic.

The ferry operates most weeks throughout the year. From September until April, it operates four return services a day (except Christmas Day), ramping up to five services during peak periods. During May to August, the ferry services are reduced to five days a week. While most visitors access the island by ferry, there are small numbers of visitors who arrive by light plane, sea kayaks, privately owned boats or commercial boat tours.

2019-20 was on track to see another increase in visitors to the island; however, due to the onset of travel restrictions associated with COVID-19 in March 2020, visitor data for 2018-19 has been used as they were unaffected by COVID-related travel impacts.

According to data from the Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS), visitors arriving at Darlington increased from 21,000 in 2014-15, to 38,700 in 2018-19, a jump of 84% within four years (this includes Tasmanians as well as visitors from interstate and overseas).

The TVS reflects the growth recorded by the PWS, and shows:

- There were 506,000 interstate and international visitors that visited a national park during their stay in Tasmania during 2018-19.
- The proportion of interstate and overseas visitors who visited the East Coast has grown steadily since 2014-15.
- 356,000 interstate and international visitors visited the East Coast in 2018-19.
- More than half (53.5%) of the interstate and overseas visitors to the East Coast visited a national park during their stay in Tasmania in 2018-19, a proportion that has remained relatively stable over the past decade.
- Just 8.4% of interstate and overseas visitors that visited the East Coast during 2018-19 visited Maria Island. This highlights the untapped potential for ongoing increases in visitation to Maria, even without further growth in visitation to the East Coast.
COMMERCIAL OPERATORS

There are currently 13 licensed commercial tourism operators offering tours and other experiences on Maria Island National Park. These operators offer a range of visitor products including guided overnight walks (using semi-permanent standing camps, historic houses and camping sites), guided day walks, small cruises, bike hire, ebike tours, photographic workshops, yoga and art retreats, boat charters and adventures.

There has been significant growth in visitors hiring bikes, and increasing interest in cruise ships visiting the area. Three operators have been offering fly in and guided walk experiences. There is one operator offering a sightseeing tour to the waters around Ile Des Phoques Nature Reserve, and another operator offering snorkelling tours in the marine portion of the national park.

The PWS has received an Expression of Interest for a new Maria Island Wildlife and Heritage Experience on the island and interest is likely from other operators as the island is ‘re-discovered’.

WHO ARE THE VISITORS?

Visitors undertake a range of recreational activities within and around the national park – short walks, bushwalking, camping, fishing, bike riding, beach activities, diving, snorkelling, nature study, exploring historic heritage and boating in waters surrounding the island.

Tasmanians make-up a large proportion of the visitor market to Maria Island. This includes regular visitors (especially groups of families or friends) with a strong attachment to the place, first-time visitors, and also some returning since their early childhood visits (past family, friends and school trips). There is also the continuing attraction of the island to school groups and tertiary students (undertaking research and studies).

There are also interstate and international visitors. These may be independent visitors or part of an organised tour provided by a commercial operator. They could be day visitors, backpackers or adventure seekers, or those seeking to encounter the World Heritage convict site and wildlife, or to escape to an island to enjoy the sense of remoteness within a dramatic terrestrial landscape that interfaces with a marine ecosystem.

VISITOR EXPERIENCES

“The intrinsic values of Maria Island are not only the historically or naturally significant physical assets, but also the spiritual and social values born by human use, stories and activities on the island throughout time.”

In recent years, various tourism reports have been prepared for Maria Island with the intent to promote it as a destination and to improve visitor experiences. The Maria Island Re-Discovered Visitor Experience Plan, the most recent plan, articulates opportunities to enhance visitor experiences whilst maintaining the island’s values and World Heritage status. The Plan describes Maria Island’s essence and explores ways of improving the experience, primarily for day visitors, but also for multi-day visitors.

The Plan outlines all the various stages of the visitor experience; from the first awareness and considering visiting Maria Island, to deciding to travel to experience the place, starting the Maria Island journey with visitor information services at Triabunna and then to sharing stories about their experience. Along this visitor journey are key opportunities to assist visitors to plan, be educated and make choices about how to enhance their experience and manage their impacts.

The visitor experience statement is:

“Celebrating its spirit of mystery and sublime isolation. Maria Island invites intuitive and accessible exploration, igniting the curiosity of visitors to uncover its many layers of human, ecological and geological stories.”

The Maria Island Re-Discovered Visitor Experience Plan makes recommendations across six themes as shown below.

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<th>THEME</th>
<th>RECOMMENDED ACTIONS IN THE PLAN</th>
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| Communication and interpretation | • Visitor journey planning incorporates the best practice model of customer experience principles—starting from awareness through to advocacy.  
• Improved website (PWS), self-guided booklet, and social media campaign with compelling visitor orientated content.  
• Welcoming services on arrival at the jetty and Commissariat Store.  
• Guided walks and behind the scenes tours of Darlington.  
• Island interpretation reveals more of the Indigenous, convict and industrial story. |
| Gateway to the island | • Gateway welcome centre creating an inviting arrival experience, either as a shelter at the jetty or a new gateway centre, or a staged approach of both.  
• Jetty visual presentation improved.  
• Passenger arrival and luggage transfer services for groups. |

2 Details of this proposal can be found at https://www.cg.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/164370/Project_brief_Wildlife_Heritage_MIW_Final.pdf
3 Maria Island Re-Discovered Visitor Experience Plan
KEY QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

What actions are needed to improve the quality of visitor experiences within the national park?

What actions may be needed to better manage access by different transport modes to Maria Island (eg ferry, light planes, seaplanes, private boats, water taxi, cruise boats/ships, helicopter) or when visitors are on Maria Island (eg walking, bike, trail running, ebikes, motorised scooters, golf carts/buggies, mini-bus)?

What impacts will arise with growing visitor numbers and/or changing types of users of transport options?

What is the best way to manage visitor impacts to retain the core values and distinctive experiences that attract people to the island?

What infrastructure and resources need to be in place to manage visitor growth and visitor impacts?

The revised Management Plan will need to consider the potential benefits and implications of these recommendations and assess these against the views of the community. Any new proposals and or changes to management will need to be assessed in context of the limitations of the island’s resources and infrastructure, eg water supply, power, sewerage, all of which are at or beyond their capacity at current visitation levels.

Your response to these questions or the development of the draft plans can be provided through Have Your Say on the PWS website at https://parks.tas.gov.au/be-involved/have-your-say/maria-island-management-plan-review