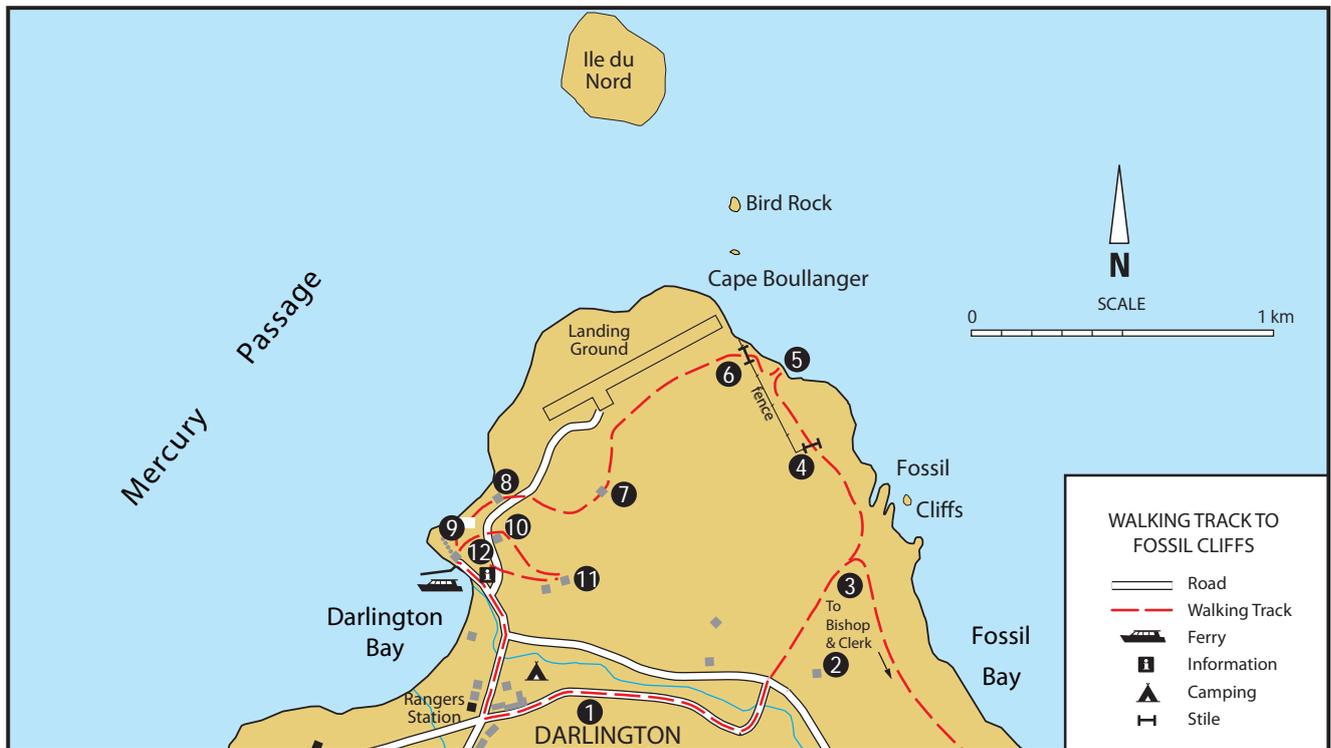




Maria Island National Park

FOSSIL CLIFFS



The Fossil Cliffs offer an insight into the past environments of Maria Island. Extending along the northern shores of the island, these spectacular cliffs plunge sheer to the sea. This walk takes you to the edge of the cliffs where you can see expansive views of Freycinet Peninsula and Schouten Island. A former limestone quarry allows you a close look at the many animals immortalised as fossils in the rocks. Be sure to wear sturdy shoes as the path can be slippery underfoot. The cliff edges can be hazardous so please be careful.

Round Trip: 1 1/2 - 2 hours.

You can reverse the circuit described by starting at the Commissariat Store (point 12) and heading up the hill to the old barn.

1. The Twelve Apostles

Leave Darlington on the road behind the penitentiary. To your right are the foundations of twelve small houses. In the 1880s an entrepreneur called Diego Bernacchi tried to develop a wine industry on Maria Island. These houses were built for the vineyard workers. In the 1930s, after the decline of the industrial era, the houses were removed to New Town in Hobart.

2. Cement Works

As you follow the road you will notice some beautiful blue gums (*Eucalyptus globulus*). These trees can be distinguished by their large single gumnuts, which can often be seen scattered on the ground around the trees. The road soon crosses a creek bed and proceeds to a large red brick ruin. This dates from Bernacchi's cement works and was built around 1889. Part of the kiln structure on the hill behind, is thought to be of convict origin. During the convict era this area was used to fire bricks, and later for lime-making.

3. Towards the edge

As you continue up the gully, listen for the screech of yellow-tailed black cockatoos. Before long you will come to the edge of the cliffs. Take care near the edge as it is very unstable. These cliffs form a stark contrast to the cove at Darlington. A fault which runs from the north to the south of Maria Island resulted in the eastern side of the island being lifted up. This, in conjunction with the powerful wave action of the sea on the eastern side, has left the layers of rock exposed, leaving us with one of

the best geological exposures of its kind in the world. The layers you see were laid down over a very long period of time, in what was once an ancient shallow sea. The layers represent sea floor, shoreline, and freshwater environments.

Of particular interest is a series of beds which make up the Darlington limestone. This was quarried for use in the manufacture of cement and lime. Many animals secrete calcium carbonate in the form of shells or skeletons. When the organisms die their shells fall to the sea floor, and under certain conditions accumulate to form limestone.

4. Over the stile

From the signpost at the edge turn to your left and head up the hill. Climb over the stile, and follow the worn path until you come to a concrete drain. Carefully follow this down to the rock shelf, where the limestone was quarried. You can still see the remnants of the tram line which connected the quarry with the rest of the cement works operations.



Fossil Cliffs in foreground with Bishop and Clerk in distance

5. An ancient sea-bed unearthed

Looking at the cut face of the quarry, you will see that the grey limestone is studded with thousands of mussel-like shells (*Eurydesma* sp.). The soft parts of the creatures have rotted away, leaving only the hard shells, which have lasted almost 300 million years. To look at the contents of a different layer, descend to the lower platform. Be careful, as the climb down is precarious, the swell is unpredictable and can rise suddenly. Here you can see a variety of fossils including sea fans, coral-like creatures, scallop shells and sea lilies. It is thought that such an extensive accumulation of fossils may be related to the cold conditions associated with the polar sea of the time. Amongst the fossils are some large rocks, called dropstones. These were transported by floating ice, which melted, dropping the stones onto the sea floor to settle amongst the finer sediments. The stones consist of different rock types, including granite and quartzite, and may have come from nearby, or from great distances away.

Climb back up to the cement drain and follow it to the path which leads down to the second stile.

6. Bird rock

Climb over the site and walk along past the airstrip. Ahead of you is the Ile du Nord. In 1826 it was proposed that the Hobart-based female convict factory, which supplied yarn for Maria's cloth factory, be moved here. This never eventuated. Closer by is Bird Rock, a favourite roosting place for sea birds. The white colour, resulting from their droppings, makes it look quite spectacular in certain light. Look out for white-bellied sea eagles which may be seen soaring high above.

7. The Miller's house

In 1844 most of this area was planted with wheat and barley. If you turn left and head up the hill, you will find the remains of the mill where the grain was ground. This cottage was built in 1846, but all that remains of the mill itself is a large stone circle round which the mill's long tailpole was rotated so that the blades could catch the wind. Walk down the hill to the newly fenced cemetery.

8. The cemetery

During the convict days this cemetery was for free settlers. Convicts and many others lie in unmarked graves somewhere on the island. These graves date from 1825 to 1942, reflecting the various periods of island history.

9. The silos

From here you can see the silos. In the 1920s these were used to store the cement. Beside them is another ruin from the same period—this massive building stored material ready to be ground into cement.

10. Convict Barn

Further up the hill is a large red brick barn. Built in 1846, the bricks are slowly disintegrating. When they were made they contained some seawater and as the water evaporated it left behind crystals of salt. These crystals expand and grow causing the bricks to slowly decay. Continue up the hill to some ruins.

11. Ruins upon ruins

These ruins include the religious instructor's house (1843), which became the Bernacchi's home in the 1880s, and that of the Grand Hotel (1880), which was built over the original convict hospital.

12. Commissariat Store

Built in 1825 this is the oldest remaining building on the island. Downstairs was used for storage and distribution of rations, while the upper storey housed military supplies. Behind it used to stand a bakehouse.