

GET OUTSIDE PROGRAM

MARIA ISLAND MAGIC

by Gina Mercer

One Friday, a group of excited people scramble onto the ferry at Triabunna with bulging backpacks – they’re off to Maria Island for the weekend. Nothing so exceptional about that. But this is no ordinary group. Here are 14 young recent migrants and refugees from places as diverse as Ethiopia, the Philippines, Nepal, Afghanistan, Myanmar, China, and Syria. They are accompanied by 2 National Parks rangers, 1 Wildcare officer, and 1 professional writer.

We all find a roost on the boat, some in the comfortable cabin, some leaning against the cold-wind railings. We’re busy getting to know each other, so there’s much chatter and laughter. Exclamations of awe burst out into the cool grey air as we watch the island grow closer and notice our ferry is escorted by gliding albatross and zooming shoals of Little Penguins.

The plan for the weekend is for this group of dynamic young people to get to know Maria Island National Park. It’s about developing connections, about feeling more at home in their new home, Tasmania. One element of the weekend’s activities is the learning of leadership skills. Another is the opportunity to write about our experiences, to strengthen these connections through writing. This is all part of the *Get Outside* program: a unique collaboration between National Parks, Wildcare, and the Tasmanian Writers Centre. This brilliant program even runs to a ‘library’ of camping and bush-walking gear, so that participants can take themselves, their friends, family, and members of their community, out on independent trips with all the right equipment (tents, spot trackers, sleeping bags, fold-up shovels, etc.,).

Arriving at the jetty on Maria Island, we sigh with delight at the sight of the calm blue bay rimmed by white sand awaiting us. We exclaim in Farsi, Nepali, Koren, Swahili, English, Mandarin... the air is alive with many flowing languages, all remarking on the beauty of our home for this weekend.

Over the next three days we all learn – so much. Sam, one of the National Parks staff, teaches us about different leadership styles, eloquently acting out the difference between extrovert and introvert personalities. Not such an easy task when English is the 2nd or 3rd language for most participants, and some have only been in a position to enrol in English language classes for 6 months (some have lived all their teenage years in refugee camps). I have a strong sense of the deep stories each one of the young participants bears, what each has been through before arriving on this island off an island - seeking a sense of 'home'.

The biggest event of the weekend is when the participants lead a walk up Bishop & Clerk on Saturday. None of the National Parks or Wildcare staff go on this walk, in order to allow the freshly learnt leadership skills to be put into practice without supervision. On Saturday morning, after a briefing in which Jodie, the Wildcare officer, acts out how we might need to crawl over the rocks on the final piece of the climb (gulp), we set off. All of us are excited and energetic, talking, and taking photos, observing everything from the small – Casuarina seedpods – to the vast – the view across the ocean from Fossil Cliffs. We spot a kookaburra and discuss the difference between 'introduced' and 'endemic' species. Terms learned only the day before.

The climb is long and hard. 'Scree' is one other new English word most participants only learned at that morning's briefing. We get to experience it up close and personal as we slowly clamber up the scree slope on a zig-zag path constructed by National Parks staff years earlier. As we stop to catch our breath, we utter blessings

to those unknown workers who laboured so hard to make our climb a bit easier. Most of the participants have never been on a long, strenuous walk in the Australian bush before. Yet we all make it to the breathtaking top of Bishop and Clerk. Once there, we share lunch and chat, and – sit in silence absorbing the vast beauty surrounding us. Clouds drift across the view, our thoughts drifting with them. Many photos are taken, of course, as we seek to embed the images in our minds and devices. One woman discovers she still has mobile coverage and instantly posts a photo on Facebook. We have all connected with the environment at a deep level... and there is that strong human desire to share this fresh connection with friends and family.

The climb back down is slower than the ascent. The path is slippery, the rocks unstable, our legs shaking with exertion (even the legs of the super-fit female Tae Kwon Do champion). The leaders of the walk are surprised at how long the return takes but do a brilliant job of ensuring everyone stays in contact and is nurtured all the long way down. Their calm thoughtfulness is rewarded by the fact that we return without a single injury, not even a major blister to report. No mean feat for a group of fifteen largely inexperienced walkers completing a 7 hour odyssey. All the training and preparation pays off.

That evening, after eating the very welcome spaghetti dinner prepared for us by the rangers who stayed behind, we sit in front of the fire and reflect. Everyone is a little high with the joy of being out in the bush all day, the glory of what we experienced, and the elation of achievement. We made it to the top – and back! In the faces in the firelight, I see the transformation this program can bring. People who, on the first day, were understandably reserved and quietly apprehensive, are now relaxed. We are singing and laughing and telling stories, making acute observations about this new homeland. We are taking it into our bodies and hearts – allowing Maria Island to transform us, growing ourselves deep into this beautiful place we all call home.