



Maria Island National Park

PAINTED CLIFFS



The Painted Cliffs are beautifully coloured and patterned sandstone, carved and moulded by the sea, and bordered by rock pools teeming with marine life. Take your snorkelling gear and binoculars with you.

Return walk: 2 hours

IMPORTANT: The cliffs are best visited within two hours of LOW TIDE. Tidal information is available at the Commissariat Store (Visitor's information) near where you disembark from the ferry, or on the notice board at the ranger station.

1. Ranger Station

From the Ranger Station, follow the gravel road south as indicated by a signpost. As you leave the Darlington township you will cross a small creek. From here head across the paddock towards the cottage you can see on the hill.

2. Mrs Hunt's Cottage

During the first convict period the Commandant, Major T. D. Lord, constructed his own residence on this hill. If you look carefully you may be able to find the footings. Mrs Hunt's house however, was built in the early 1900s, over the ruins of the old Visiting Magistrate's dwelling of the second convict period. As you can see, the position commands an excellent view of Darlington and

the surrounding waterways, which would have been important for the commandant and later for Mrs Hunt. Ruby Hunt was by all accounts a bit of a character and operated a pedal wireless, which at the time was the only communication link with the mainland of Tasmania. It is also said that she would hang a lantern in her cottage window to guide in the ship that collected and delivered the mail for the island. Have a look around the cottage and then continue up the hill to rejoin the road.

3. Grassland grazing

The trees on the coastal side of the road are she-oaks, and may once have covered greater areas of the island. During early settlement their burning qualities made them prized as firewood. Forester kangaroos, wallabies, Cape Barren geese and native hens can often be seen grazing in the cleared paddocks, while pairs of flame robins dart around. Like many birds, the male is brightly coloured, grey and white with a big splash of red on his breast, while the female is shades of brown with some white and better camouflaged in grassy surrounds. Off in the distance on the mainland of Tasmania, is the long sandy expanse of Rheban Beach stretching across the horizon. In the foreground as the road curves to the left, you get your first glimpse of Hopground Beach. At the far end of this beach you'll find the Painted Cliffs.

4. Hopground Beach

Just before you reach Counsel Creek turn off to the right and walk along the beach. Take your shoes off and feel the sand beneath your feet. Where the creek meets the sea, you may smell a rotten stench. This is part of the natural recycling process. During storms, seaweed from Mercury Passage is ripped off the sea floor and thrown up onto the shore. It is then either broken down by bacteria below the creek's surface (hence the smell), or eaten by sand fleas and sand hoppers, which provide food for the sea birds you may see foraging about. Birds seen here include oystercatchers (both the pied and the black), crested terns, Pacific gulls and hooded plovers. Hooded plovers are the tiny birds which race along the beach, keeping just in front of you until they reach the end of their territory, then they fly out to sea and wheel back onto the beach behind you. Sea eagles can occasionally be seen gliding on the wind currents. As you walk along the beach keep an eye open for animal tracks on the sand.

5. The Painted Cliffs



At the end of the beach you will see a sandstone outcrop. This is the beginning of the Painted Cliffs. Although this sort of rock formation is not uncommon, it is rare in a natural situation for it to be so extensively and beautifully exposed. The patterns are caused by ground water percolating down through the already formed sandstone and leaving traces of iron oxides, which have stained the rock formation. This probably occurred millions of years ago in a monsoonal climate. More recently, sea spray hitting the rock face has dried, forming crystals of salt. These crystals cause the rock to weather in the honeycomb patterns that you see. Wave action has also created some interesting features. Rock fragments moved around by the water have gradually worn small potholes and notches into the cliff face, eventually resulting in the undercutting of the cliff. This is a continual process and as you walk further along you can see how quite recently the cliff top has collapsed, plunging sandstone blocks and she-oaks down to the sea. Here you will find small plants such as pigface and coastal beard heath clinging to small pockets of soil. This is a very fragile environment so please do not walk on the cliffs or scratch the formation.

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6. Marine life

Now return to the beginning of the rock formation, observing on the way the rock pools filled with seaweeds, shell fish and sea anemones. Snorkelling is a great way to see the variety of sea life. Look for multicoloured sea stars, crabs, pink encrusting coralline algae, and green-striped and red anemones. Seaweeds include sea lettuce, Neptune's necklace and many types of brown kelp. When you reach the beach again, a path near the pine trees will lead you up to the gravel road. Follow the road back towards Counsel Creek.

7. Howell's Cottage

On your right hand side through the trees you will see a small cottage known as Howell's cottage. The Howells were a farming family who came to Maria Island early in the 1900s and were among the last permanent residents to leave Maria Island before it became a National Park in 1972. As you enter the cottage you will see that the inside is lined with wood from old packing cases and then covered with newspapers. If you have a close look you can read some of the newspaper articles. Return to the road and follow it back to Darlington.

If you have plenty of time, below are a couple of side tracks you can take on the return journey.

8. Bird watching

A little way along, towards Counsel Creek, you will see on the right, the turn off to Mount Maria. If you are interested in bird watching, follow this track up a couple of hundred metres. This open woodland is home to many birds including the forty-spotted pardalote. For the best chance to see one of these tiny endangered birds, using binoculars, lie on your back under one of the large gum trees and quietly watch the tree canopy. Another bird you might see is the swift parrot. This bright green parrot is unusual in that it feeds on nectar much like a honey eater, while most parrots eat seeds, flower buds and stems.

9. Oast House

To return to Darlington via the Oast House, turn left off the Mt Maria track at the Oast House junction.

Some time before 1845, during the second convict period, hop kilns were built on the site now known as Oast House. The building has probably been modified, as it is known that during the Italian entrepreneur Bernacchi's winemaking phase it was used for crushing grapes. The surrounding grounds were developed as hop fields during the first convict years (between 1825 -1832), and then gradually expanded during the subsequent periods of the island's development.