

Beautiful and tragic: the saga of Wukalina

by Bob Brown
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On Wukalina Beach it is hard to imagine that anything was once amiss. Our eyes – and cameras – are diverted by the horizon-to-horizon wild beauty of this remnant piece of natural Earth in northeast Tasmania.

But this area is as geographically beautiful as it is historically tragic. For thousands of years this coastline at the top of Australia's island state was the pristine and peaceful home for a community of the Palawa people.

Then in 1803 the British colony in Sydney sent 49 soldiers and convicts to set up a Tasmanian outlier at Hobart, 300 kilometres to the south of Wukalina. The colony expanded and within three decades all but 150 of the 15,000 Palawa had been shot or died from European diseases to which they had no resistance.

Word of the first British massacre at Hobart Town in 1803 would have reached the Wukalina coast within days. But what could the First Tasmanians do? Hurling their spears to fight the overwhelming power of guns (perhaps 200 of the invaders were killed), the Palawa died in their thousands.

An 1830 visitor to the Wukalina region recorded that "... at every boat harbour along the whole line of coast the bones of the murdered aborigines are strewed over the face of the earth and bleaching in the sun".

Yet not all of them died.

A few score women were taken by British and American sealers to the islands in Bass Strait that separate Tasmania from the Australian continent. Today there are 10,000 Palawa from this matrilineal ancestry and they are reclaiming their birthright, language, customs and lands.

There is no better way to learn about this saga of clawback from the brink of oblivion than to take the three-night four-day Aboriginal-owned and operated Wukalina Walk.



Wildlife on the Wukalina Walk, an Aboriginal owned and operated hike in Northern Tasmania
 Photograph: Rob Burnett

After morning tea at the Aboriginal Elders' Centre in Tasmania's second city, Launceston, and a two-hour drive to the end of the road, we walk east in constant warm rain which makes the xanthareas (grass trees) glow. The warmth also activates woodland leeches which, harmless as they may be, have one walker squealing for detachments from her sock.

We are escorted by Palawa guides to two overnight stays in a dome-shaped community base, its architecture inspired by Aboriginal huts, with four outlier twin cabins.

This cosy resort is behind granite boulders, two minutes' walk from the beach and its backing lagoon. Around the evening campfire, elder Clyde Mansell tells us the story of the Palawa creator spirit Muyini. Clyde descends from a daughter of local warrior Manalargenna whose bronze bust with ochred locks has a pride of place in the modern Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

The rain stops, the clouds clear, and the stars, including the Southern Cross, join a rising moon to light up the surrounding thickets and heathlands. A brushtail possum comes looking for scraps. After roast lamb or muttonbird with vegetables and Tasmanian wines, the camp falls into a deep sleep.

On day two our young Palawa guides Jacob and Carleeta take us north to an ancient Palawa campsite set safely above a white beach washed by foaming waves. It has freshwater ponds on spongy black soil with a scatter of shells and stones – the midden or waste pile of thousands of feasts when the Wukalina world was at peace.

The Palawa could not have envisaged their destruction. Just as few, in 2019, can envisage the scientific projection that 6C of anthropogenic heating, on top of the one degree so far, will eliminate all life on Earth.

Carleeta takes a wallaby's incisor tooth, affixed to its jawbone, out of her dilly bag and shows how it is used to pierce shells for necklacing. All the stones and bones in this midden had a use for the community which thrived here above the emerald sea.



Accommodation on the Wukalina Walk, Tasmania Photograph: © Rob Burnett Images

Jacob is tall, efficient and ever-cheerful, even when telling us of a previous tour group that derided Palawa customs and complained there was not enough red wine. He holds up cunnagong, an edible green succulent with delicate pink flowers: its sap is medicinal and soothes the itch of the leech bite on the back of my partner Paul's neck. Back at camp, after lunch, Jacob hurls a tea-tree spear and Carleeta shows how a sensationally strong seaweed thread is used to bind plates of bull kelp and make voluminous bags. She makes a water cup by tightening the thread stitched around a single kelp "leaf" like the strings of a purse, and shows us the rudiments of grass weaving.

(There is a Celtic basket in Dublin's National Museum of Ireland which is almost exactly the same as those woven by the Palawa women here on the other side of the planet.)

The beach is populated by red-legged silver gulls and oyster-catchers and is lightly strewn with kelp. Two pairs of rare, tiny hooded plovers are nesting safely above high tide level near the lagoon. Outside the resort, a grey fantail sits patiently on her nest in a banksia tree. Heavy clouds loom on the seaward horizon and, in the night, we hear the muffled drum of rain on our insulated cabin roof.

The third day of the walk is 17 kilometres straight down the solid beach to Larapuna, against a brisk southerly breeze. We are joined by elder Rocky Sainty. Pied oyster-catchers screech and run in front to distract walkers away from their nests in the sand. By a combination of this subterfuge and superb camouflage (the overhead sea eagle can't spot their eggs), these ancient beach dwellers have thrived since the first humans arrived. But not now. Under the impact of introduced dogs, cats and off-road vehicles on many Australian beaches, their numbers are in serious decline. One million native Australian birds go down the throats of feral cats each day.



Comfort at the end of a day's hiking on Wukalina Walk, an Aboriginal owned and operated walk in northeast Tasmania. Photograph: Rob Burnett

At a rocky headland encrusted with orange lichen, Carleeta takes us up a track to another midden behind a flat granite platform where her ancestors feasted, danced and took in the superb view.

She introduces us to the crisp and faintly salty “sea spinach” which grows in profusion behind the rocks. Four black swans fly up from a lagoon and settle safely out to sea. *Homo sapiens* is intelligent. Incongruously, we are also the largest herd of mammals ever, consuming Earth's living resources at 170% their rate of replacement. Every morning there are fewer forests, woodlands, fisheries and species, but more human mouths to feed. Our herd's universal god is “growth”, ad infinitum. No wonder there is a general unease, a feeling that we should be sharpening our spears.

The Palawa of Lutrawita (Tasmania) lived for 40,000 years with a steady-state economy and population – 15,000 on an island the size of Ireland. They had happy, settled lives. Ten thousand years ago, as sea levels rose after the last Ice Age and the formation of Bass Strait separated Tasmania from continental Australia, they entered an aeon as the most isolated civilisation on Earth.



Carleeta, an Indigenous guide on the Aboriginal owned and operated Wukalina Walk in northeast Tasmania Photograph: Bob Brown

In 1642 Dutch navigator Abel Tasman passed along this coast and their isolated security came to an end. In 1773 Captain Cook's apprentice Tobias Furneaux also

sailed by Wukalina and saw smoke from the fires of the Palawa: he named this “the Bay of Fires”. Thirty years later those 49 British soldiers and convicts arrived at Hobart to set up tents and raise the Union Jack.

Less than a century later the granite Larapuna lighthouse was erected to keep future mariners clear of Eddystone Point. The solid keepers’ cottages provide luxury accommodation for our final night. Hot showers, cold beers, more fine Tasmanian wines and Aboriginal chef Sarah’s tasty wallaby lasagne (vegetarian options available) are followed by Auntie Sharon’s apple crumble and cream.

Between courses a brilliant sunset flames over the Bay of Fires. More rain is forecast but the wind has settled, wombats and wallabies graze on the marsupial meadow, and a full moon rises from the ocean.

Our final morning is sunny. Carleeta takes us up the cast-iron spiral staircase onto the viewing platform atop the lighthouse. Beaches curve north and south with no one else to be seen. The brilliant panorama is hard to leave, but the Wukalina Walk is its own reward, and Carleeta’s food-gathering words are echoing in my ears: “Whatever happens, I’ll be all right in the wilds of Wukalina”.

Returning home, I post Carleeta a shiny pink-shell Palawa necklace I had purchased from a Hobart gallery years ago. It belongs to her.