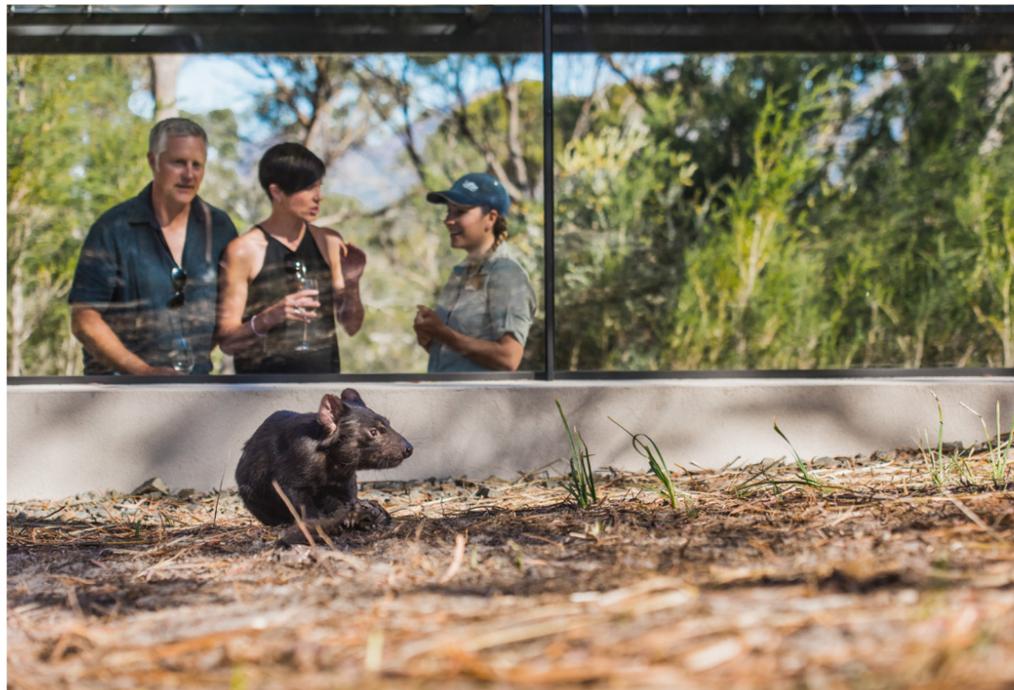


Devils' Advocates

Tasmania's most famous species is under threat—but all hope is not lost. **Elizabeth Warkentin** heads down under to see the conservation effort up close.



◀ A guide at the lodge Saffire Freycinet shows guests the Tasmanian devil enclosure.

OUR GROUP OF SEVEN stood in a small wooded area filled with eucalyptus and banksias in eastern Tasmania's Freycinet National Park. Anticipation filled the air. "We'll just pause here for a moment," said our guide, Ashlee Ugle, who works at Saffire Freycinet, a 20-suite lodge inside the park. "Sometimes, the devils can hear our voices and they might just come along." As if on cue, a grizzled black ball of fur emerged from the bushes. "There's one!" someone in the group called out. It was a Tasmanian devil, the world's largest carnivorous marsupial. (The animals are actually quite small, standing about a foot tall and weighing between 15 and 30 pounds.)

"This one's named Moltema," Ugle said. The creature scampered over, sniffing the air in search of food. Then another female, Mayberry, appeared, and the two came face-to-face, growling and barking. "It's not necessarily aggression," Ugle reassured us. "Often they're just sizing each other up to determine who's hungrier."

Saffire is one of Australia's most luxurious nature escapes, with wraparound views of Great Oyster Bay and the Hazards Mountains that you can take in from your private patio or, in some rooms, your plunge pool. The property is also at the forefront of the effort to save Tasmania's best-known animal from extinction.

The devils have not been present on the Australian mainland for about 3,500 years, but are a key species in Tasmania's ecosystem because they scavenge and remove carcasses from the landscape, and also suppress invasive species like black rats and feral cats. Stereotypes have long portrayed them as diabolical (hence the name) or, like the *Looney Tunes* cartoon character Taz, prone to tantrums. But in reality, devils tend to be shy, solitary creatures, and their spine-tingling screams are simply a way to establish hierarchy.

Sadly, because of habitat destruction and a high incidence of road collisions, the species is facing extinction. There's also a more immediate threat: Devil Facial Tumour Disease, or DFTD, a transmissible cancer that was discovered in the late 1990s. The condition, which is spread through contact, including bites, causes tumors to cover the mouth and jaw, making eating an agony for the animal; the devils ultimately die of starvation.



◀ Saffire Freycinet sits on Great Oyster Bay, in eastern Tasmania.

▼ The Hazards Mountains reflected in the glass walls of a suite at Saffire Freycinet.



Given that DFTD has a fatality rate of nearly 100 percent and that only 15,000 devils are left in the wild, the future of the species is in extreme peril.

But there is hope. The captive breeding program Save the Tasmanian Devil has been producing a new population of cancer-free animals. Once mature, the devils are sent to "retirement" homes, like the one at Saffire Freycinet, to live out the rest of their days and ensure they remain healthy. Saffire currently has six devils, who reside in a 2.5-acre forested enclosure, which is where our group had gathered to see them. The property offers a guided experience, like the one I did with Ugle, to witness the devils in their habitat. Saffire also sponsors research of a DFTD vaccine, which is under way at the University of Tasmania's Menzies Institute, in the state capital, Hobart. After guests participate in the devil experience, a short, handwritten letter is left in their room asking if they'd like to sponsor one of the creatures by making a donation to the institute.

After we witnessed the scuffle between Moltema and Mayberry, we got to observe mealtime. Ugle had brought a wallaby carcass—as well as that of a pademelon, a smaller marsupial—to the enclosure. I watched with a mixture of awe and horror as the devils, in small groups of two and three, jockeyed for position, grunting and snarling, their powerful jaws and teeth breaking bone and tearing flesh. Ugle explained that they were actually working together to share the difficult job of tackling the two cadavers. Even Melvin, the lone male, who was missing nearly half his fur because of bites, seemed to be getting his fill, as the dominant females allowed him to feed.

Seeing how Melvin had been taken into the fold, I recalled something I had been told by Nicole Dyble, Saffire's head "devil keeper," who has been working with the animals at the lodge since 2014. "This is surprising to a lot of people, but the devils can be affectionate, especially with enough contact," she said. "They can also form bonds with each other, and in captivity often sleep together in the same den."

Watching them now, calm after their meal, running through the bushes and washing their paws in the pond, I couldn't help wanting to touch one, especially little Melvin. I couldn't, of course, but I was still grateful to have seen him, and Mayberry, Moltema, and all the others—these embattled icons of Tasmania, healthy and happy in the twilight of their years. 🐾

Doubles at **Saffire Freycinet** from \$1,774, all-inclusive.

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