



RICKY FRENCH

The little penguins of Low Head are nothing if not predictable. Every evening the colony gathers in the shallows near the mouth of the Tamar River on the north coast of Tasmania, waiting for the cover of darkness. As the purple sky fades to black, tour guide Cindy Darko leads us to the beach as the first penguins pluck up the courage to make the dash. She shines a yellow torch beam on the forerunners, like a spotlight illuminating escaping convicts.

Where one goes, the rest follow, and we watch spellbound as dozens waddle the gauntlet straight past our feet, over the rocks and to their nesting boxes burrowed among the box thorn bushes. Designed to keep the birds safe from predators, many were assembled by local school children, who even adorned the interiors with artwork.

It's only a few minutes' drive back to Low Head Beach House, our own sleek, three-bedroom nesting box in the sand dunes, clad in zinc and anchored by stone, nestled above a gently curving beach. Full-height glazed sliding doors frame a view you could never tire of, across Lagoon Bay to the Low Head Lighthouse on the headland, and over the river (an estuary, really) that weaves 70 woolly kilometres inland to Launceston.

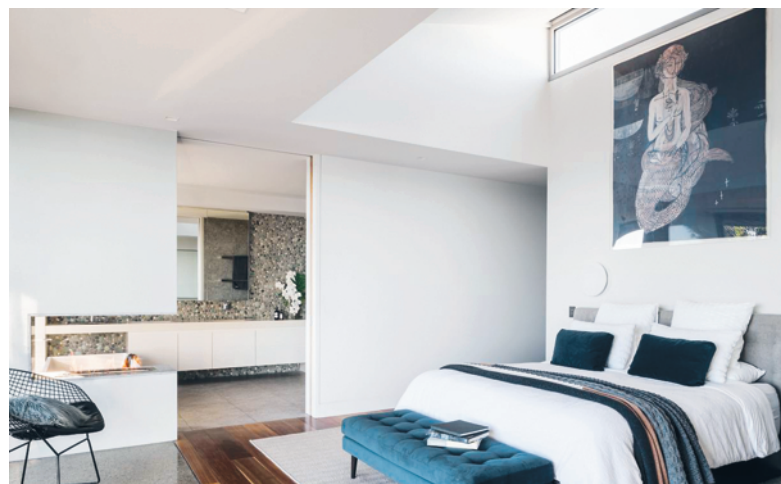
While the home is embedded in the landscape, the landscape is also embedded in the home. During construction, beautifully coloured pebbles were collected from nearby East Beach and sprinkled on to the aggregate in the polished concrete floor. Local artwork colours the interior, with Launceston artist Nigel Lazenby's brilliantly coloured renderings of she-oak seeds popping against the neutral palette. The result is a home that dazzles.

Low Head, 5km north of George Town, is an unexpected location for such a high-end property. Launceston-based owners Cathryn and Dean Cocker had been dating for only a few months back in 2006 when they decided to take a drive on Australia Day, and maybe look for a beach house to buy. As you do. "We got to the turn-off to Low Head and wavered a bit," says Cathryn. "But we decided to drive in for a look."

A derelict old house on the beachfront caught Cathryn's eye, so she decided to knock on the door and ask the owner if they wanted to sell. No one answered the door, but the town answered the question of location. It was on the water, undiscovered, and less than an hour from the city. They drove back to Launceston, flicked through the newspaper

NESTING TIME

A beach house with penguin neighbours



Natural light and sweeping views at a contemporary Tasmanian hideaway

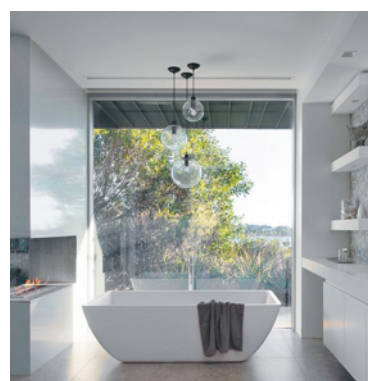
and found a block of land for sale. At first, the block didn't look promising, being completely overgrown with boobialla. "We forged our way through the foliage," says Cathryn, "and broke through to find this astounding view. We knew this was the spot." And so on the same day that the idea of buying a beach house first crystallised, they made an offer.

But it would take 10 years of saving and planning before the house was built. Every Australia Day Cathryn and Dean would drive out to their vacant block, bash through the boobialla, set up a picnic table and chairs and gaze out to sea, dreaming of the house that would one day occupy the site.

The house was finally finished on Cathryn's 50th birthday in November 2016, and was everything they'd dreamt of. Luxurious without being ostentatious, big enough to

host a function for 80 people, yet cosy enough for a couple. The open-plan living area is flush with modular lounges, ottomans and a circular daybed in a heavenly window corner. Bean bags beg to be pulled alongside the gas fireplace by night, or taken to the deck by day. All three king bedrooms have ensuites and glass sliding doors that open to the deck and the sea, but the light-filled master bedroom is truly special, with soaring ceilings and a deep, free-standing bath set next to the flickering flames of a second gas fireplace. A patch of the original boobialla has been left in place outside the bedrooms as a natural privacy shield and windbreak. A hot tub and outdoor kitchen invite summer evening festivities and there's every streaming service under the sun. You can't help but feel nested.

While the luxuries are laid on, you're con-



TO-DO LIST

DINE

Walk, ride or kayak to Seafood Shack at the Low Head Pilot Station for fine burgers, calamari and Tassie wine, beer and cider. Head to Don Mario in George Town for Italian, or Cafe 1069 for brunch.

lowheadpilotstation.com.au

SEE

Get up close with the little penguins on a guided tour. Visit the Pilot Station Maritime Museum. Watch container ships negotiate the treacherous mouth of the Tamar River en route to Launceston. Check out the windswept Low Head Lighthouse and be there for the sounding of the foghorn (every Sunday at noon) if you dare.

penguintourstasmania.com.au

DISCOVER

Tour local wineries, including Bay of Fires Wines, House of Arras (sparkling specialists), Piper's Brook and Clover Hill. Have lunch or a tasting before flying home at Josef Chromy Wines in the beautiful rural setting of Relbia, five minutes from Launceston Airport.

josefchromy.com.au

ESSENTIALS

Low Head is 40 minutes from Launceston. Accommodation at Low Head Beach House is \$1000 a night, for up to six people. No children under 12. airbnb.com.au

stantly reminded this is a beach house at heart. A peek in the garage reveals kayaks, mountain bikes and other sports equipment, and a switch-back timber boardwalk leads to the water. We play beach cricket, and kayak on the glassy river to the historic pilot station. Dean asks later if we saw the resident octopus he once saved from being pecked to death by seagulls after becoming stranded at low tide. It's always nice when newcomers ingratiate themselves to the locals.

It's the Low Head community that Cathryn hopes will benefit from places like this. "Locals have thanked us for having faith," she says. "It's brought visitors to an area they probably would never have considered before. And it brought the two of us together. All the hard work has been worth it."

Ricky French was a guest of Airbnb and Tourism Tasmania.