

PEPPER BUSH ADVENTURES

ACCORDING TO LOCAL LEGEND, THERE'S A THIEF to thank for one of Australia's best bush adventure tour companies. Twenty years ago, with dignitaries ready for the official opening of a new lookout in the Sideling Ranges, about an hour's drive from Launceston in Tasmania, there was a robbery: the interpretative panoramic sketch of the view was stolen. Enter Craig Williams, a butcher-cum-landscape gardener with an artistic bent, who was employed to re-do the sign. "While I'm up there trying to do this sketch, people came along and asked me, 'What bird is that?' I'd say, 'It's a rosella', or 'It's a currawong'. Then they'd ask, 'What tree is that?' I'd tell 'em 'It's a sassafras', or 'It's a shining gum' or whatever it was," Craig recalls. "And then they'd ask, 'Are you a tour guide?' and I'd say, 'No, no, I'm just trying to do a sketch'. This went on for hours. By the time I got home, I'd decided I was going to be a tour guide."

Two decades later, the Sideling Ranges lookout is a place Craig visits often, because it explains why Pepper Bush Adventures is a success. "The area is so diverse," he says. "In five minutes you can catch a trout, in 20 minutes you can have a beach to yourself on the coast, in an hour you can be on top of a mountain, tasting the best Tasmanian wines, or fine dining in the city of Launceston."

Below the lookout sits the small farming community of Scottsdale, where Pepper Bush Adventures is based. All around, light glints off farm dams, streams and creeks. "There's a platypus in every one of those ponds down there," Craig says. "They thrive here."

Kangaroos graze unconcerned as Craig, Ben and Janine Williams (at right) join guests around the camp fire.





Knowing where the native animals are and when to find them is the core strength of Pepper Bush Adventures. Craig enthusiastically recalls recent guests from the United Kingdom who saw 12 species in two days, including five platypi. “You won’t see that kind of variety in such a short time anywhere else in Australia,” he says proudly. “We’re one of few tour companies in Australia that guarantees platypus sightings in the wild. We never fail to deliver.”

Intimate local knowledge passed down through generations allows Craig, who comes from a long line of foresters, trappers and all round ‘bushies’, to make such a bold statement with absolute confidence. “I grew up in the bush and learnt from my grandfather and my father and uncles. That’s what we share with our guests,” says Craig, who runs the business with his wife Janine. Their son Ben joined them as a guide five years ago, continuing the tradition of passing on local knowledge through the family.

With Scottsdale as a base, a Pepper Bush experience can take in all or part of what the north-east corner of Tasmania has to offer, including a tour of Launceston’s famous Tamar Valley wineries. Guests, who are mostly couples but sometimes families, travel in private groups accompanied by either Craig, Ben or Janine. They are transported in robust four-wheel-drives that can take them up mountains, on winding back roads and along dirt tracks in comfort. But Pepper Bush tours are not simply vehicle-based sightseeing tours. “We’re about giving clients a really hands-on experience, really letting them into our lives,” Ben says.

At Ben Lomond National Park, 70 kilometres south of Scottsdale, Ben guides hikes through alpine plant communities on an extensive plateau with a 1200-metre elevation. If pristine beaches are more

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Guests relax alongside kangaroos on the Quoll Patrol; father and son Craig and Ben Williams; all tours are conducted in comfortable 4WD vehicles; winemaker Shane Holloway checks the vines at Delamere Vineyards.



your thing, Ben or Craig will take you through the old tin-mining towns of Branxholm and Derby to the white sands and turquoise waters of Top Camp, in Mount William National Park. Here, a one-and-a-half-hour self-guided walk takes you around the headland to Stumpys Bay, where there's every chance the only footprints on the beach will be your own.

Along the way, there are plenty of opportunities to investigate the countryside: you can wait quietly by a waterhole for a platypus to surface; pick bush tucker such as sassafras leaves or native berries in the forest; or spot hawks, falcons, swamp harriers and wedge-tailed eagles soaring above. In the warmer months, echidnas are a common sight along the road. Ben and Craig are happy to stop and pick up a spiky monotreme so guests can have a closer look at these fascinating creatures.

While there's plenty to do in the daylight hours, most of Tasmania's wildlife is nocturnal and it's after dark that the Pepper Bush team's local knowledge truly shines. Two experiences, each set at remote cabins near Tyne River, about an hour's drive from Scottsdale, stand out. During the Canopy Capers night, the focus is on rare and endangered species. Guests explore a towering eucalypt forest as the bush comes alive with bandicoots, bettongs, wallabies, ringtail and brush-tailed possums.

Another rustic cabin, located in a grassy valley surrounded by the foothills of Ben Lomond National Park, is the setting for the Quoll Patrol. Here, kangaroos hop over to greet you as you sit, glass of local wine in hand, and watch enraptured as the sun bathes the valley in golden afternoon light. The spell is quietly broken when Craig announces that the entree is ready – delicious wallaby patties. For anyone who wonders at the contradiction of a wildlife tourism venture serving wildlife for dinner, Craig explains: "I was brought up on traditional Tasmanian bush foods and that's what we share with our guests."



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Beach walking in the north-east; Craig delicately handles an echidna; a rustic cabin in the foothills of Ben Lomond is the setting for the Quoll Patrol; Ben guides a walk up Ben Lomond.

**LOCATION**

Pepper Bush Adventures is based in Scottsdale, a one-hour drive north-east of Launceston in northern Tasmania.

GETTING THERE

Most guests arrive via Launceston, which is accessible by air via Melbourne. Pick-up from other Tasmanian locations by arrangement.

WHAT'S INCLUDED

All tours are conducted by Craig, Ben or Janine in comfortable 4WD vehicles. Lunch, breakfast, camp fire dinners, bush tucker, nibbles and local beers and wines provided.

WHAT TO BRING

As activities are varied, including winery tours, seaside walks and mountain hikes, sturdy shoes and a range of outerwear is advised.

WHEN TO COME

Pepper Bush Adventures operates year-round. North-east Tasmania has a cool, temperate climate, and wet weather is possible any time of year. Proximity to the sea, mountains and bush means itineraries can be adapted should weather conditions force a change of plans on multi-day tours.

CONTACT

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After eating dinner around the camp fire, a hush falls on the group. Then, a rustle from beneath the cabin is followed by a ruckus from the roof and the sudden crack of a twig in nearby undergrowth. As darkness falls, Craig turns on some lights along the cabin verandah, and there's an eastern quoll – an endangered species that's already extinct on mainland Australia. "He and his six siblings live under the cabin", Craig says. The quoll is soon joined by another much smaller one. "That's the baby of the family," Craig says. "They've been here for years, generation after generation." The quolls flit about on the lawn while guests sit watching, utterly gobsmacked. Soon a family of pademelons – a type of small wallaby – join in and, a moment later, a fat wombat waddles through the scene like he owns the joint. Ben shines his torch into a tree and says: "The brush-tailed possum will wander down from there any moment now." And so it does, its bushy tail swaying as it walks confidently through the group to sit on a log next to one of the guests. It's hard to tell who has the biggest, roundest eyes – the guest or the possum.

Of course, Craig has seen this many times before, but he still breaks out in a big smile, as he's proud of what his family has created – authentic wildlife encounters, a great business and a cultural exchange. "We give our guests a real insight into Tasmania," he says. "There's nowhere else you will see this many species in the same place. It's just so simple – sit back, have dinner and a glass of wine, and let the animals come to you. People say it's the best experience of their life."

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Brush-tailed possums and Tasmanian pademelons are the first to appear on the Quoll Patrol; a spotted quoll; Craig prepares lemon myrtle salmon.

