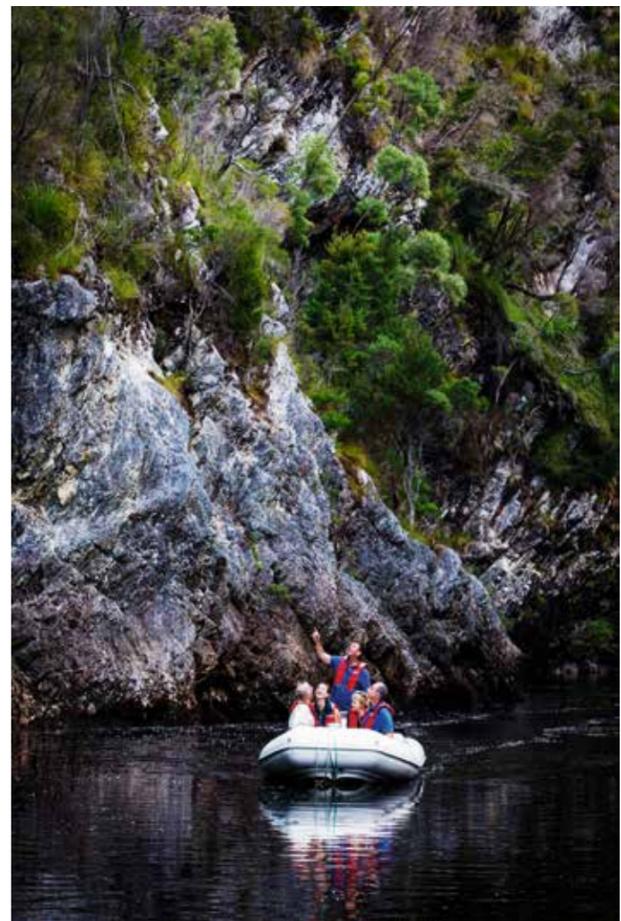




WHILE THIS BOATING AND HIKING ADVENTURE TRAVERSES THE WILDS OF TASMANIA, IT'S DONE IN GOURMET STYLE.  
Words and Photography **Mark Daffey**



*The land that roads forgot*



**Opp page, clockwise from top left:** crab in Bond Bay; gnarled trunk of a fallen peppermint gum; sea urchin; breakers around Sugarloaf Rock off Stephens Bay; sand patterns; Bottlenose dolphins in Bramble Cove at sunset; hikers on Stephens Bay beach; Mt Rugby looms over the Odalisque in Bathurst Harbour; fresh oysters. **Left:** hikers on Stephens Bay beach. **Above:** inflatable dinghy in the Davey River Gorge.



Tasmanians will tell you April or May are the best months of the year for hiking or sailing; the weather is at its most settled then. But Pieter van der Woude knows only too well how quickly conditions can change in the island state's remote southwest.

The former abalone diver, who now skips Tasmanian Boat Charters' boutique cruiser, Odalisque, has been plying the waters around Port Davey for 30 years. There have been countless times when fierce storms and house-sized swells have forced him and his crews to shelter inside the protective coves and bays of this natural harbour, so you'd think he'd know every nook and cranny by now.

"Not a chance. I've probably only explored around 30 per cent of it," he estimates. "It's a special area that's very hard to get to. That's why I think it's worthwhile sharing. And no one else does it in the style we're doing it in."

The 20-metre-long, aluminium-hulled Odalisque was purpose made in Fremantle three years back with Port Davey in mind. In an area that's three times the size of Sydney Harbour, inside the Southwest National Park and the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, there are no roads – the only way of seeing it is on foot or by sea craft, and access is via a 40-minute plane flight or a six-day hike. That's where the Odalisque fits in.

Not only can it accommodate up to three couples at a time, but Piet and his crew can also take you to some of the planet's best-preserved wilderness country. Then to top it all off, you'll return to the boat each mealtime to chow down on first-rate spreads prepared using fresh, local ingredients. Sounds like the perfect recipe for a four-day break.

**MAKING HAY WHILE THE SUN SHINES**

Piet decides to make the most of the sunny weather while he can by motoring through the Bathurst Channel, an ancient river valley that remains flooded after melting icecaps caused sea levels across the globe to rise following the last Ice Age.

The channel connects Bathurst Harbour with the yawning Port Davey, where we'll continue on towards Spain Bay, just inside the port's protective mouth. From there, we'll walk across



buttongrass moorlands to an empty beach facing outwardly, towards Antarctica.

Sunlight struggles to penetrate through the top, tannin-stained layer of fresh water in the channel, preventing vegetation growth and attracting few fish. Piet assures us, however, that the diving is world class.

“The fresh water sits on top of the salt water, and beneath that top layer it’s crystal clear. As long as you carry an underwater torch, you can easily see for 40 or 50 metres.”

What’s down there is a unique marine habitat populated by invertebrate sea hares and sea pens that are usually only found in the murky depths of the ocean, way out to sea.

Huge swells curl over a submerged reef just outside the harbour, and dolphins play in our bow waves as we enter Spain Bay. We jump in the Odalisque’s tender and motor ashore as a juvenile sea eagle flies overhead.

The little-used track across to Stephens Bay is damp and spongy underfoot – a scourge that’s common to these parts. At one stage, during the state’s early colonial days, Port Davey was earmarked to become a major settlement. Later, a Melbourne businessman named Critchley Parker surveyed its potential as a possible Jewish homeland, prior to the formation of Israel. But the peaty soil’s benign properties made it unsuitable for agriculture or pastoralism, helping contribute to its present-day status as a World Heritage-listed wilderness region. The truth is: it’s unsuitable for anything else.

Stephens Bay’s sweeping two-kilometre-long beach bears the brunt of Southern Ocean swells, and we stroll from one end to the other. Sharp, yet brittle quartzite sea cliffs give way to towering sand dunes, and only a sprinkling of offshore islands – nesting havens for seabirds – disrupt an otherwise aquamarine horizon.

At the beach’s furthest end are Australia’s largest aboriginal middens, evidence of a time when as many as 5000 nomadic natives roamed this part of Tasmania, warming themselves using wallaby skins and seal fat that they’d smear on their skin. Piet warns us to tread carefully over this fragile environment. Like the remains of alluvial tin mines found around the Melaleuca airstrip, he’s well aware of their historical significance.

#### WHERE THE WORLD’S YOUR OYSTER

Adrian Mathews has been busy preparing canapés and dinner while we’re gone. While Piet charts a course to our anchorage for the night, deep inside Schooner’s Cove, our guest chef hands around platters filled with Southern Bruny Island oysters and Tongola cheeses. They’re washed down with craft beers or boutique Tasmanian wines cherry-picked from vineyards from across the state.

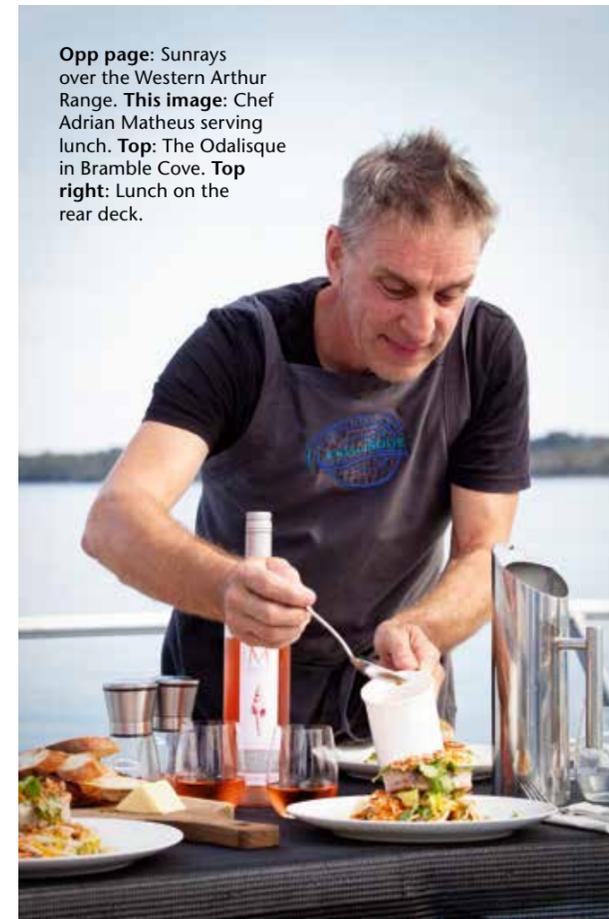
After years of working in fine dining restaurants on the mainland, Adrian only recently moved back to his home state with his wife. The two bought a simple cottage in Bream Creek, close to the Tasman Peninsula, where he sources as much seasonal produce as he can from farmers markets, dairies and fisheries around his home. Anything else is topped up from hand-chosen establishments in Hobart.

“We encourage our chefs to prepare food with a story – to source and serve dishes that mean something to them – using Tasmanian produce as much as possible,” says Alice van der Woude, Piet’s 27-year-old daughter, and experiences manager for their family-owned Tasmanian Boat Charters. “We give them a budget and some guidelines, the rest is completely up to them.”

Over the course of the next three days, Adrian will prepare mussels in Willie Smith’s cider, saffron and cream, or Bluefin tuna



**Opp page:** Sunrays over the Western Arthur Range. **This image:** Chef Adrian Mathews serving lunch. **Top:** The Odalisque in Bramble Cove. **Top right:** Lunch on the rear deck.



and kim chi slaw-fermented eggs with a Vietnamese dressing for lunch. Dinners are reserved for three-course meals combining spicy chilli, chickpea and pimento soups with blue-eye trevalla, or rosemary and garlic marinated lamb rump followed by a rhubarb, plum and raspberry steamed pudding. Breakfasts of homemade granolas, bacon and eggs, or smashed avocado, champagne ham and rocket on toasted sourdough help kick-start the day.



#### ACTIVITY-FILLED DAYS

And so it is that we fall into a daily pattern that’s heavily influenced by the weather. On our second afternoon, we putter up the Davey River in the inflatable dinghy, passing Settlement Point where loggers harvesting Huon pine would collect their bounty after it had floated downriver. We continue on until the menacing rock walls either side grow higher and almost touch.

Our last morning is spent circumnavigating the appropriately named Breaksea Islands, riding the swells before they crash through arches and explode inside blowholes.

Then we hike up Balmoral Hill, where views of untouched forests and mountain ranges stretch beyond the horizons, and where the entirety of Port Davey spreads out from beneath our feet.

More than once, I catch other guests gazing over our surroundings in silent wonder. After a morning spent fossicking for shells and examining marsupial prints on a beach inside Bond Bay, then tramping through the coastal bushes behind to investigate some 3500-year-old aboriginal petroglyphs, retired school teacher Veronica Sylvester regrets that she might never make it back.

“It’s been so fulfilling that I’m struggling to absorb it all,” she laments.

Piet, sitting next to her, smiles. “That’s a very nice thing to hear,” he says. And even better to be able to share it.

*Mark Daffey travelled courtesy of Tasmanian Boat Charters.*

#### CHARTER DETAILS

*Tasmanian Boat Charters’ four-day, all-inclusive expedition around the Port Davey Marine Reserve operates from February to May. Prices start at \$4,800 per person, twin share, and include return flights from Hobart to Bathurst Harbour; accommodation aboard Odalisque; expert skipper, interpretive guide and guest chef; menus featuring gourmet Tasmanian produce; fine Tasmanian wine and local boutique beer; and tailored itineraries, from jet boat excursions to walking, bird-watching, photography and beachcombing. For more, visit [tasmanianboatcharters.com.au](http://tasmanianboatcharters.com.au)*