



Way down south

Discover the mystic and beauty of the untamed pockets of wilderness along the south-western tip of Tasmania.

Words & photography JOCELYN PRIDE

“Here, there’s nothing between us and Antarctica,” says Pieter van der Woude perched at the helm of his tinnie. “When it’s rough, the waves crash over those cliffs.” Peering up at the massive walls of quartzite rising 12 metres above us, it’s easy to believe. History is etched into the zig-zagged lines and craggy overhangs, where for centuries the force of the Southern Ocean has pulsated and sculptured the aptly named Breaksea Islands, a delicate chain of rocky land masses jutting from the ocean on the south-western tip of Tasmania.

“Are you up for exploring,” Pieter calls excitedly above the noise of the outboard. “I’ve never seen it this calm.” Five heads nod in unison and we transcend into a series of secret caves filled with nature’s treasures. Dappled light dances across solid walls of quartz illuminating seams of colour ranging from burnished gold to pale pink. Stalactites hang in jagged solid masses locked together in time and vast beds of kelp gently wave their tentacles, beckoning us to go deeper into an unknown world. Feeling the rhythm of the sea, Pieter times each cave entrance and exit perfectly, riding the surge of the swell

to manoeuvre through gaps in the rocks. It’s spine-tingling stuff. But we’re in safe hands.

There are not many sea dogs better qualified than Pieter van der Woude to hang out with in this untamed pocket of Australia.

When Pieter hung up his flippers and snorkel after three decades as an abalone diver in these waters, he turned to small group tourism. Transforming his sleek vessel, the Odalisque, into a boutique cruiser (maximum eight guests), he now shares his passion for the area with a good mix of Australian and international guests. “People have a fascination for wild, remote places and this is up there with the best,” Pieter says. “There’s always something to discover. I reckon I’ve only seen about 30 per cent of what we have here.”

With no roads, the region of Port Davey and Bathurst Harbour is one of the few remaining true wilderness areas on the planet. As part of south-western Tasmania’s Wilderness World Heritage Area, it stretches over an area three times the size of Sydney Harbour. The only way in is to hike the South Coast or Port Davey trail (around six days carrying gear), sail or fly.

Arriving by light plane to rendezvous with the Odalisque is an adventure within

itself. Melaleuca might not be a place on everyone’s lips, but it’s revered in aviation circles for its runway — at 420 metres long (only 380 metres useable) it’s the shortest commercial runway in the world. Hand-built of crushed quartz by Denison “Deny” King, a bush legend who spent 50 years in this tiny former settlement as a tin miner, artist, environmentalist, husband and father, the airstrip serves as a legacy to ingenuity and determination. That’s how things roll here — an area shaped by the forces of nature with hardy characters braving the elements to carve a life from the earth.

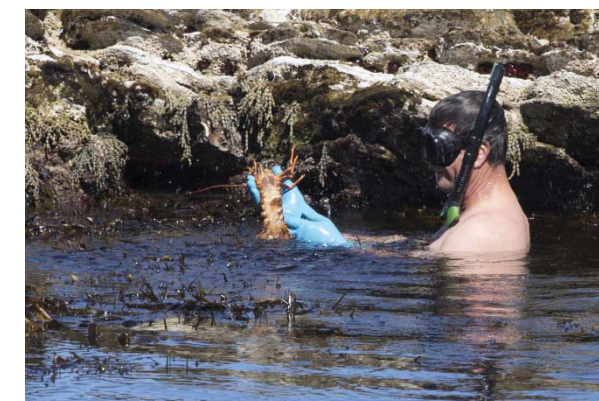
Life in slow motion

“There’s no time in Port Davey — only seasons.” This local phrase becomes our mantra for the four days we spend cocooned from the modern world on the Odalisque. With no connectivity, gadgets are blissfully silent, the art of conversation is resurrected and strangers quickly become friends.

The vessel itself is a touch of luxury amid the wilderness. At 20 metres long with three private double cabins (plus convertible couches in the saloon), the Odalisque holds the only overnight on-water accommodation permit issued



Opposite page: Spain Bay is a sheltered natural harbour.
Above: Each night Mother Nature paints the sky.
Left: Dining in style with water views.
Below: An abalone shell half hidden in an Aboriginal midden.
Bottom: Skipper Pieter van der Woude catching lunch.





Sometimes the raw power of the place is so overwhelming, my eyes sting with sudden tears. It's empty, yet overflowing with riches; silent, yet filled with a symphony of sounds ...

within the National Park. And with total flexibility, wherever we anchor, the tinnie is at the ready for exploration.

With the weather gods in our favour, the itinerary flows with the tide as we try to comprehend the magnitude and magnificence of the area. From lolling on the deck gazing at black swans gliding past, to hiking up mountain peaks and catching the grand sight of a sea eagle in flight, or creeping through forests dwarfed by stands of rare Huon pines, sassafras and celery-top pines, each day blurs into the next.

Under sunny skies, one morning we skim over the coffee-coloured waters of the channel to Spain Bay near the entrance to Bathurst Harbour. As a relic of the last ice age, Bathurst Harbour was formed by a drowned river system from the melting ice caps.

"What we're seeing is a layer of tannin-stained fresh water on top of salt water," Pieter explains. "Beneath the top layer, the visibility is incredible — 50 metres at least." And because the top layer is dark, it means sea creatures such as colourful sea pens that usually live at great depths can be seen closer to the surface — the only place on the planet this phenomenon occurs.

After being welcomed by a few playful dolphins, we scramble along a scrap of a track through button grass moorland draped across the rolling hills to Stephens Bay, the site of one of Australia's largest Aboriginal middens.

Through the sands of time

Stephens Bay is a showstopper. Bordered by sand dunes, waves curl in perfect sets onto a 4-kilometre stretch of virgin shoreline. There's not a footprint to be found, only squiggles and faint criss-crossed lines made by the living creatures lucky enough to call the beach home. However, turn the clock back 40,000 years and it would've been a different story.

"The Needwonnee people used this as their summer camp," Pieter says, the bone-white sand squeaking as we stroll along the shore. "They lived in bark huts and made canoes to move around and hunt."

Nearing the end of the beach, we cross from the water's edge to gaze up at the



Needwonnee people's dining table and waste management system — towering mounds of sand up to 15 metres high scattered with animal bones, pretty shells and fragments of tools.

It's an outdoor museum; a profound glimpse into the lives of the traditional custodians of the area who once lived in harmony with this precious environment.

Keen to show the abundance of sea life that sustained the Needwonnee people, Pieter leads us along to a series of rock pools where he strips down to his bathers, dons a pair of gloves, a mask and a snorkel

Top: Drawing breath on one of the daily hikes. Above: Landings happen anywhere, anytime, thanks to the creativity of the crew.

and jumps in. Within a few minutes, he emerges wrapped in leather straps of bull kelp holding a crayfish. "Nuh, too small," he says tossing it back and resubmerging into the inky water. This time we follow the flash of his blue gloves as he dips his hands into crevices underneath the slimy rock ledge and eventually comes up with treasure. Two enormous crays and an abalone to boot.



Above: At three times the size of Sydney Harbour, there's a lot to take in.

Left: A small snippet of one of Australia's largest Aboriginal middens.



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Back on board, chef Kerryn Oates prepares platters of crayfish barbecued in butter with a dash of sweet chilli, slithers of abalone with a hint of garlic, salad greens and warm crusty bread, complemented by a fine Tasmanian pinot gris.

Although the food isn't always plucked straight from the sea in front of our eyes, the focus is on Tasmanian produce. Pieter draws on chefs from Hobart restaurants to come on board as guest chefs, showcasing the state's rich culinary scene.

Nights are spent in carefully selected anchorages to minimise and reduce impact on the seabed.

We dine on the deck and watch as nature paints the sky with gentle puffs of pink fairy floss before the sun sinks and a blanket of stars unfolds across the universe. Sometimes the raw power of the place is so overwhelming, my eyes sting with sudden tears. It's empty, yet overflowing with riches; silent, yet filled with a symphony of sounds; calm, yet poised, ready to embrace the fury of nature.

On the last day we return to Melaleuca for the finale — an encounter with the critically endangered orange-bellied parrot. With less than 35 pairs left in the wild and around another 350 in captivity, it's ranked as one of the world's rarest species.

As the breeding ground for the holy grail of bird watching, hides are set up across the button grass plains and feeders housed behind the small museum, with volunteers monitoring sightings and bird behaviour.

Escape Routes

How

~ Tasmanian Boat Charters run all-inclusive cruises on the Odalisque with itineraries from three, four or up to seven days in duration. Private charters with a full crew and catering can also be arranged. The cost includes transfers, return flights from Hobart to Melaleuca, all meals featuring local Tasmanian produce, wines, beer, accommodation in cosy private cabins and all guided excursions.

~ Flights are on a light aircraft operated by Par Avion airways leaving from Cambridge aerodrome, approximately 3 kilometres from Hobart Airport. Transfers can be arranged from the airport or Hobart CBD. The spectacular flight between Cambridge and Melaleuca is approximately one hour.

When

Cruises run from late January through to early May. Picking the "perfect" time is like taking a ticket in the lottery. However, Pieter

It's peak time for bird activity and we gawp in awe at the small bundles of colourful feathers as they dart from feeder to feeder, oblivious to the face of extinction.

Even after only four days, leaving a place of such mystic and beauty tugs at the heartstrings.

As we fly above the untouched landscape, I reflect on the poignant sign I read along the Needwonnee interpretive walk in Melaleuca: "Our ancestors moved across this landscape for more than 35,000 years. Their imprint is everywhere." 🌊

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specifically chooses late summer into autumn as it's when the weather is usually more settled. February is the best time to see the orange-bellied parrots but it can be hot. March and April tend to be the calmest times of the year.

Good to know

- ~ For a guaranteed departure, each cruise needs to have a minimum of four guests booked. Check before you go.
- ~ Flights to and from Hobart are completely weather dependent. It's a good idea to factor in a buffer day in both directions. Pieter's daughter, Alice, coordinates bookings and ground support and keeps guests informed regarding weather conditions.
- ~ Waterproof bags are provided to transport luggage via tender onto the Odalisque and the vessel carries sturdy wet weather pants and jackets if required.
- ~ Clothing is completely casual with layers being the key. Comfy hiking boots are essential as well as a wide-brimmed hat.