

Best by southwest

A thrilling charter into Tasmania's pristine wilderness

MATTHEW DENHOLM

The only thing more remote than our Tasmanian South West Wilderness location is the prospect of spotting our quarry, the elusive, exquisite orange-bellied parrot.

We are searching the tea-tree and buttongrass of Melaleuca, a former mining outpost now home to walkers' huts and bird hides, for an individual OBP (the twitchers' nickname for this bird, which is one of the world's most endangered species). This bird is the last to fly north for the winter, clinging to its birthplace like a child to a mother's skirt on the first day of school.

We've checked two hides, to no avail, and have all but given up when the recalcitrant OBP is spotted, perched nonchalantly in a tree. Roughly the size of a budgerigar, it shifts on a branch to display the eponymous orange spot on its belly, as well as a light blue band between its eyes, green and gold plumage and flash of azure blue on the outer wing. One piece of luck enjoyed by this otherwise accursed species is that its breeding grounds around Melaleuca are part of the 1.58 million hectare Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area and thereby protected from development.

About an hour's small plane flight from Hobart, Melaleuca is also the entry point for one of Tasmania's newest wilderness experiences, a boat-based luxury, multi-day exploration of nearby Bathurst Harbour and Port Davey. Home for three, five or seven days on your all-inclusive expedition is the new purpose-built, 20m Odalisque, a spacious and comfortable vessel owned and skippered by Pieter van der Woude.

A former police search and rescue officer, as well as abalone diver, van der Woude has conducted charters on these waters, which are three times the size of Sydney Harbour, for film crews, scientists and tourists for many years. His new operation, Tasmanian Boat Charters, aims to provide an indulgent but authentic and in-depth exploration of Australia's most pristine estuarine system.

Guest chefs provide top-notch, modern Tasmanian fare, and there are hot showers, soft beds and adventure aplenty, including bushwalks to wild, deserted beaches; ascents of knuckled quartzite peaks for jaw-dropping panoramas; and moments in van der Woude's tinny that are by turns bone-jarring and sublimely tranquil, exploring long-forgotten bays and rivers.

Expert guides with encyclopaedic knowledge interpret the region's ancient geology and unique wildlife plus fascinating anthropology, from evidence of long indigenous occupation to more recent doomed, romantic explorers and hardy Huon pine lumberjacks and whalers.



PICTURES: CHRIS CRERAR



The flight from Hobart's Cambridge Aerodrome to Melaleuca's white quartzite gravel airstrip is spectacular, offering picturesque views over the city, the D'Entrecasteaux Channel and, finally, the dramatic south coast of fluted sea cliffs and towering peaks. We are met by van der Woude, a straight-talking Tasmanian with legs like old-growth trees, and guide Peter Marmion, whose regular visits to the southwest since the early 70s have fostered genuine passion and comprehensive knowledge.

After a short tender boat ride along the often narrow Melaleuca Inlet, guided by a group of elegant egrets leading the way like silent sentinels, we emerge into the wide expanse of Bathurst Harbour. This impressive body of dark, tannin-stained water is framed by the razor-backed Western Arthur mountain ranges and closer peaks, notably the dominant Mt Rugby, and stretches up to 7km from east to west and up to 11km north to south.

The sense of wilderness is immediate. The only sounds when the boat is silent are birds and lapping water. Amid this isolation, in a sheltered cove beneath the omnipresent Mt Rugby, is the home anchorage for Odalisque. Our first cruise is westward, about 15km through the Bathurst Narrows and Bathurst Channel.

The scenery quickly changes again, from the broad expanse of the harbour to a more intimate waterway, as we cruise through a flooded river valley of brown hills and peaks rippled with knuckled white quartzite, pro-

Odalisque framed by the Western Arthur mountain ranges, top; guide Peter Marmion, with passengers on Balmoral Hill, above; skipper Pieter van der Woude in his tinny on Melaleuca Inlet, above right

Checklist

Three, five or seven-day trips aboard the purpose-built 20m-long, 10-passenger vessel Odalisque are available between February and May. More: tasmanianboatcharters.com.au.



truding like bones through stretched skin. Pockets of forest that have avoided bushfires cling to lush gullies on slopes otherwise vegetated by buttongrass and tea-tree that fall abruptly to the waterline. There are tiny islands, too, often surprisingly heavily wooded. They are small, yet complete, like islands in children's books frequented by smugglers seeking secret tunnels and hidden treasure.

Itineraries are fluid, moulded by wind and weather, time and tide and the interests of individual clients. There are two distinct worlds to explore — the calm, reflective and mountain-fringed waters of Bathurst Harbour, its channel, narrows and tributaries; and more exposed and hostile, to the west of the aptly named Breaksea Islands, including impossibly rocky coastline, wave-battered islands, and stunning sandy beaches and dunes in and around Port Davey.

While this is a water-based experience, there are plenty of opportunities to exercise sea legs with hikes up any number of peaks, all offering top-of-the-world vistas of distant ranges, languid waterways and remote coastline. Peaks such as Mt Stokes, Mt Beattie and Balmoral Hill offer extraordinary bang-for-buck experiences; even short hikes provide views many travellers would be willing to trek for days to see.

They are walks, too, that don't involve heart-testing ascents. From Spain Bay, in Port Davey's south, we traverse a deserted, prehistoric and undulating landscape, home to darting parrots and nonchalant wombats, and emerge through a thick clump of forest to one of the world's most spectacular beaches at Stephens Bay. This beach is about 4km long, with dense white sand rising to pristine, virginal dunes, some hiding ancient Aboriginal middens. A tannin-stained brook bubbles under smooth, white rocks to the Southern Ocean. Giant kelp is strewn across the sand, with trunks as thick as those of a small tree, along with intact sea urchins; overhead a white-bellied sea eagle cruises silently, hunting for a living lunch. Offshore, intensely-shaped rocky islands are washed by dangerous, surging surf, while beyond lies a forgotten and dramatic coastline, culminating at South West Cape.

Almost as inspiring as the landscapes is the food back on board Odalisque, prepared by chef Ben Hay, on loan from Hobart's Willing Bros wine bar. Several meals are among the best I've enjoyed on land or afloat, such as flat-head, panzanella salad with raspberry vinaigrette, and pan-fried scallops, lemon and fennel puree, blood sausage and marinated capsicum.

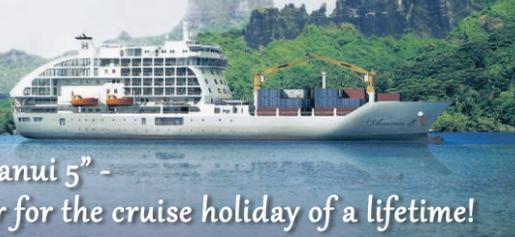
When it's almost time to fly home, we linger as long as possible at Melaleuca, soaking up the serenity. We learn that the last recalcitrant OBP still hasn't joined his brethren on the flight north. After just three days immersed in this unique, peaceful paradise, it's a reluctance I share.



CHRIS CRERAR

Odalisque afternoon tea ashore, featuring local produce

Matthew Denholm was a guest of Tasmanian Boat Charters.



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