

The boat less travelled

An INTIMATE boat expedition along Tasmania's *EAST COAST* with those who know and LOVE IT most is a *SECRET PASS* to some of the state's most SECLUDED beauty spots.

WORDS ALEXIS BUXTON-COLLINS

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Sunrises are special on an
East Coast Expedition
cruise; Sebouten Island.

PHOTOGRAPHY: SAM GRAUDINS PHOTOGRAPHY (VESSEL)



PHOTOGRAPHY: JASON CHARLES HILL (THE CANDLESTICK, CAPE HAU); SAM GRAUDINS PHOTOGRAPHY (VESSEL); STU GIBSON (PAINTED CLIFFS, MARIA ISLAND); LAUREN BATH SERVICES (WINEGLASS BAY)



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *The Candlestick*, *Cape Hauy*, on the *Tasman Peninsula*; *Skirt around the sheer sea cliffs of Cape Pillar and Tasman Island onboard Odalisque*; *See the swirling patterns of the Painted Cliffs, Maria Island*; *Wineglass Bay is one of East Coast Tasmania's celebrated beauty spots.*

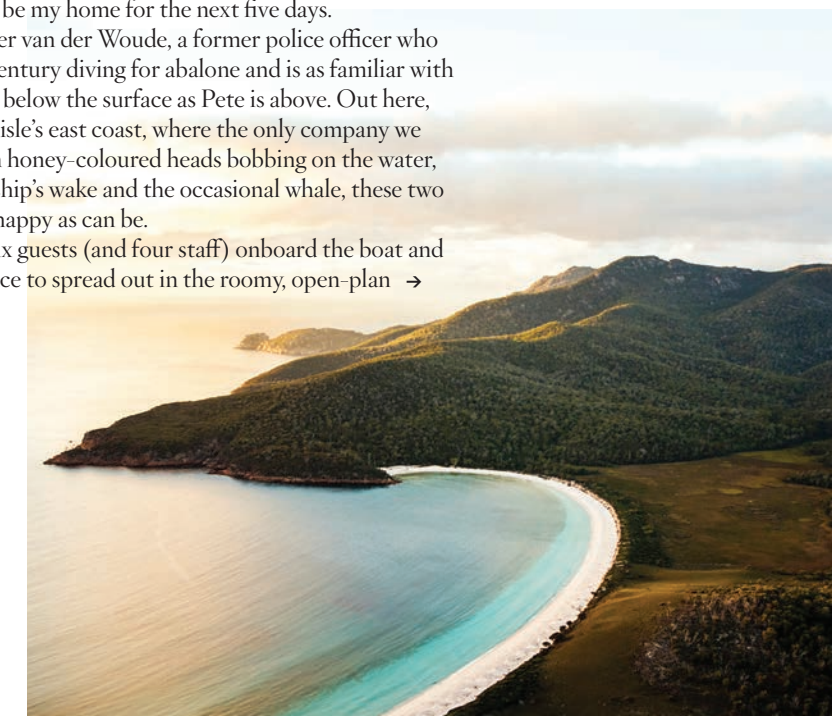
SPINDLY COLUMNS OF DOLERITE TOWER hundreds of metres above me, the dark-grey igneous cliffs slicked with a fine mist of sea spray. To my left a pod of whales breaks the surface, one by one, plumes of air spouting from their blowholes and mixing with the sea haze as shearwaters wheel and dart above the waves. Looking ahead, I see a small gap in the wall of rock where the water is churned into a maelstrom by powerful swells that detonate with a boom at the base of the cliffs on either side.

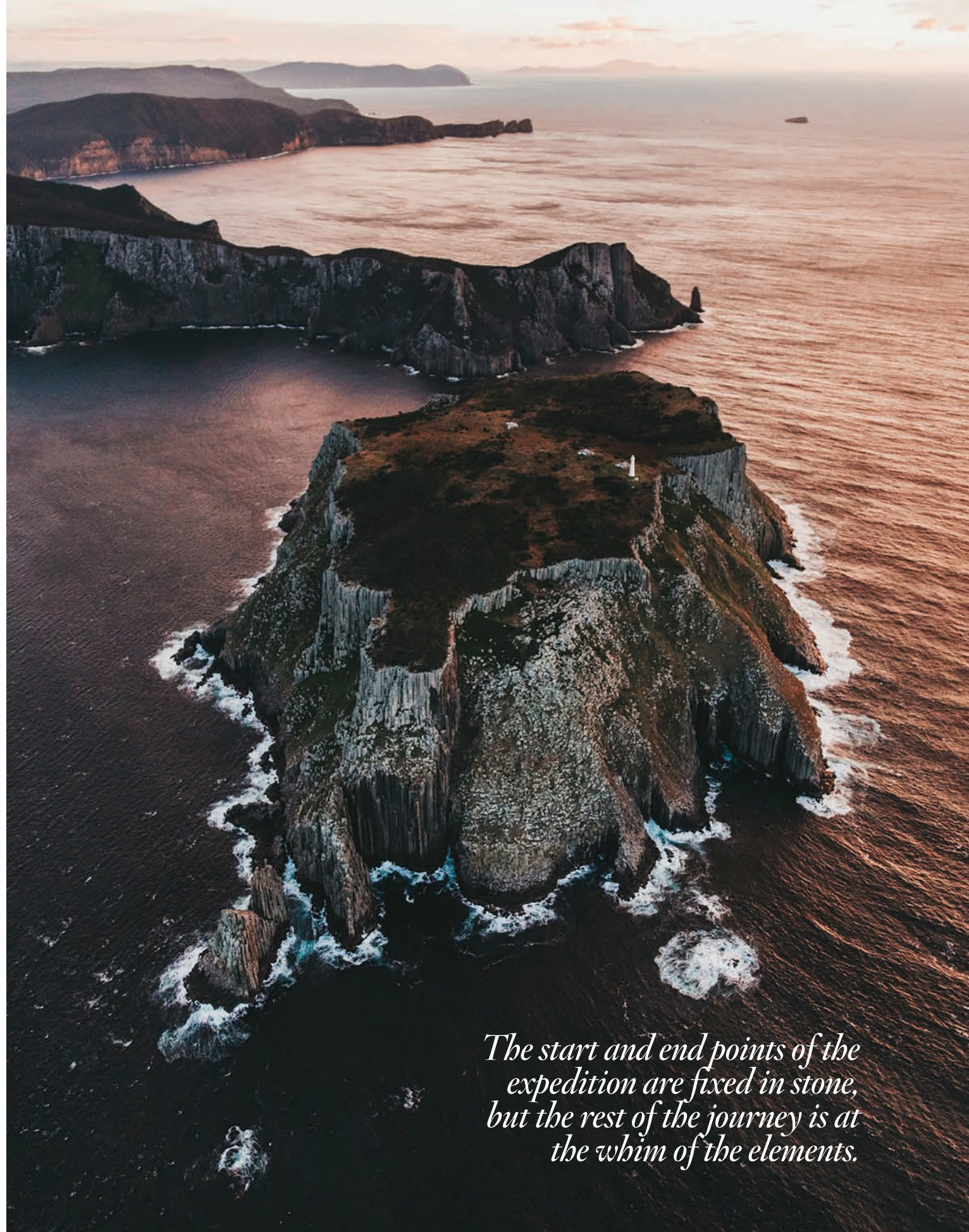
Hikers on the Three Capes Track regularly cite Cape Pillar as one of the highlights of the walk and, from the top of the tallest sea cliffs in the southern hemisphere, it's easy to feel as if you're on the edge of the world. About 300 metres below them, at sea level, it's as if we've slipped into our own private universe.

Pete Marmion, the spry 64-year-old former headmaster beside me, describes the strait dubbed the 'hole in the wall' by sailors as "the most beautiful 500 metres of the Tasmanian coast". A passionate outdoorsman who has hiked every track on the island (and done plenty of bush-bashing besides), he's earned the right to make such a lofty claim about this rugged stretch of coastline between Cape Pillar and Tasman Island. Now he shares his hard-earned wisdom as one of the guides aboard *Odalisque*, a custom-built 20-metre expedition cruise vessel that will be my home for the next five days.

At the helm is Pieter van der Woude, a former police officer who spent a quarter of a century diving for abalone and is as familiar with Tasmania's landscape below the surface as Pete is above. Out here, beyond the southern isle's east coast, where the only company we have are gannets with honey-coloured heads bobbing on the water, dolphins surfing the ship's wake and the occasional whale, these two Petes in a pod are as happy as can be.

There's room for six guests (and four staff) onboard the boat and we have plenty of space to spread out in the roomy, open-plan →





The start and end points of the expedition are fixed in stone, but the rest of the journey is at the whim of the elements.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Wander through the atmospheric ruins of Port Arthur; Odalisque skipper Pieter van der Woude pours a Moo Brew for his guests; See seals bask in the Tassie sun and toboggan into the water below. OPPOSITE: A bird's-eye view over the craggy, dramatic coastline of Tasman Island and Cape Pillar, which the catamaran loops around.



PHOTOGRAPHY: JARRAD SENG (AERIAL VIEW OF TASMAN ISLAND AND CAPE PILLAR); ALASTAIR BETT (HISTORIC PORT ARTHUR); PETER MARMION (SEALS, DETAIL)

lounge where onboard chef Ashi Balasuriya serves up feasts like whole-baked trout with charred crayfish and oysters alongside local chardonnay. But despite regular flourishes of luxury, On Board's four-night East Coast Expedition from nipaluna/Hobart to the Freycinet Peninsula is not so much a pleasure cruise as a secret pass to some of Tasmania's most secluded beauty spots in the company of people who are passionate about preserving this environment.

The start and end points of the expedition are fixed in stone, but the rest of the journey is at the whim of the elements and our skipper freestyles an itinerary each morning according to the wind and waves. It's a good thing, too, because the weather is as varied as the landscapes we encounter, from squalls that turn distant ridges into Rorschach inkblots to pale beaches ringed by greenery and framed by the perfect arc of a rainbow.

Despite the diversity we encounter, each day falls into a nice routine: a lazy breakfast followed by a morning sail, then a walk onshore with Pete. In the afternoons we have a little leisure time before setting sail again to find a sheltered anchorage where the boat can gently rock us to sleep. And, at each new port, Pete shows off his gift for languages, faithfully repeating the rapid trill of a yellow-throated honeyeater, the piercing cry of a swift parrot and the harmonising, rolling carolling of butcherbirds.

Daily shore excursions see us wandering through the atmospheric ruins of Port Arthur and walking alongside dancing wombats on Maria Island. But the real highlights lie further off the beaten track, in places that appear less frequently in tourist brochures. We wake up

in Fortescue Bay on day two, a sheltered cove where the air is laden with eucalyptus oil exuding from a forest of stringybark and white gums that stand on the edges of the jade-coloured water.

As we head up the coast, the greenery rises above us until the treetops are wreathed in plumes of mist. And then, suddenly, a waterfall comes surging out of the trees. It thunders down a rock face striped with aeons of history, multiple streams splitting and converging before the rush of white water plunges into the rolling sea. It's a jaw-dropping sight, and no weather could keep me from heading to the top deck to take in the views, my enthusiasm enhanced by the fact that we may well be the only people to witness this natural wonder all day.

Further north, we leave our floating home to discover both ends of hourglass-shaped Maria Island, starting at a narrow isthmus where endless lines of boomers break onto a lonely, windswept beach. Ducking inland, we follow a track through chest-high bracken, flowering banksias and trees draped with furry lichen as thick as Spanish moss.

"This is old man's beard," Pete tells us. "It can't stand any air pollution so you'll only see it growing in the purest air." It's a reminder to fill my lungs as we walk past unfurling fiddleheads of fern, a bed of she-oak needles dampening the sound of our footfall so that all we can hear is the ocean's roar coming through the trees. →



The east coast is generally the sunniest and driest part of Tasmania, and Maria Island gained a reputation during the convict era as a place of ease and pleasure due to the exceptional weather. So it seems appropriate when the sun finally emerges and the scene transforms from *Twin Peaks* to tropical island in an instant. By the time we venture onto Maria's more frequently visited northern half, a new palette of white beaches flanked by radiant green forest, turquoise shallows and cobalt depths has emerged from the gloom. But, like many visitors, I only have eyes for the wombats, which are covered in a thick, golden fur that shines like straw in the sun (it's this that distinguishes them from their mainland counterparts). They maintain their plump figures by waddling happily through the open spaces around Maria's convict ruins, all but oblivious to our presence.

With morning and afternoon teas joining the increasingly extravagant meals coming out of the galley, I'm worried that my own gait is beginning to turn into a waddle. But there's one meal I'm happy to skip: seal soup. At least, that's what Pieter called the water off the Ile des Phoques, a largely barren slab of rock that's home to thousands of seals. As our boat approaches under a dreamy blue sky, the furry blubber balls come to life and toboggan down the steep slope, careening off the rocks until there are hundreds bobbing in the water around us. Their slick skin glistens in the sunlight,

but the overwhelming fishy odour emanating from the island discourages us from getting too close.

Fortunately there are no olfactory issues at our final anchorage, where sparkling slopes of pink granite overlook a gorgeous turquoise bay ringed by a beach of coarse white quartz sand. When we jump onshore, the scene is enhanced by granite boulders covered in fiery orange lichen and a creek of sweet tea-coloured water trickling into the bay. On the opposite beach, shells bleached by the sun speak of many generations of human presence here.

Schouten Island lies just south of the Freycinet Peninsula and the thickly forested slopes beneath exposed boulders of pink granite bear more than a passing resemblance to The Hazards, the mountain range located in the Freycinet National Park. Unlike the guests at a nearby luxury lodge, however, we have these million-dollar views all to ourselves.

"This entire coast once had giant kelp forests that have almost completely disappeared, and places that were once tiny fishing towns are now full of huge holiday homes," Pete tells us. "I used to come here after my uni exams to relax before the results came in, to take in the natural beauty and sleep under the stars. Because it's a little bit harder to get to, it hasn't changed too much since then. I hope it never does." 🍷

PHOTOGRAPHY: SAM GRAUDINS PHOTOGRAPHY (AT ANCHOR ON MARIA ISLAND, ONBOARD BARBEQUE); STU GIBSON (WOMBAT ON MARIA ISLAND); TOURISM TASMANIA & KATHRYN LEAHY (FORTESCUE BAY)



GETAWAYS | East Coast Tasmania



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Tranquil Fortescue Bay is fringed by eucalypts. Step onto Odalisque's viewing deck; The onboard chef serves up a spot of scenic dining; See the golden-toned wombats of Maria Island.* OPPOSITE (from top): *Pieter van der Woude (second from left) and Pete Marmion (far right) with the On Board team; Drop anchor near to secluded turquoise bays and beaches.*

A traveller's checklist

ON BOARD offers year-round departures for its expedition cruises and private charters. There will be a brand-new Tasmanian-built 24-metre expedition catamaran joining the fleet in 2023 (catering for up to 12 guests). onboardexpeditions.com.au

Getting there

The **EAST COAST EXPEDITION** cruise travels from nipaluna/Hobart to Coles Bay on the Freycinet Peninsula (and in reverse) and includes land transfers.

Staying there

Spend the night before you embark at **MÖVENPICK HOTEL HOBART**, located just metres from Constitution Dock. movenpick.com

Eating there

All meals and drinks are included.

Playing there

All entry fees to historic sites and parks are included, and the guides can customise shore trips depending on your interests.

Conscious traveller

Odalisque allows guests to access remote islands without damaging the fragile, natural environment. And, to minimise fuel consumption, the boat takes on a fresh set of passengers for the return journey when the tour alights in Coles Bay.

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