

On the rugged south-west coast of Tasmania, in a place barely touched by time, there's a luxurious new way to experience the wilderness.

Story by Faith Campbell

Photography by Lean Timms

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“The yellow-throated honeyeater has a call on beautiful days like this. I think it sounds like ‘all is well with the world.’” And it is. Up the Old River we go, skimming the glossy surface, disturbing wobbly reflections of tea-trees, banksias and black swans cutting across the pale autumn sky. A shower falls from the branches above as the tinnie bumps ashore. Our guide, Peter Marmion, who saw the endemic honeyeaters I could only hear, embodies the adage “great stories happen to those who can tell them”. He leads our group into the quiet bush. “You’re doing what not a lot of humans have done, scrub bash through Huon pine,” he calls over his shoulder.

In the Gondwana forest, on the ancient, unceded land of the Needwonnee peoples, cool filtered light illuminates slime-green moss and makes tannin-stained creeks glow



Guide Peter Marmion

amber. There's sassafras, leatherwood, native laurel and Smithton peppermint. I recognise the fishbone ferns that tickle my legs and my first Huon pine sighting is a delight. Its branches bend like a Christmas tree under the weight of imaginary ornaments and dewdrop fairy lights twinkle in the sun.

"Some Huon pines are 3000 years old, many are 2000," Marmion tells us. "It's all quite Tolkien-esque." I hear water rushing nearby, hear my cohort marvel at the moss ("It feels like an Axminster carpet!"), hear our muffled footfall on the soft, wet earth. By the Old River that flows to Bathurst Harbour, which narrows to the Bathurst Channel and meets the wild Southern Ocean on the south-west edge of Tasmania (lutruwita), there's no-one else around to make a sound.

From the seaplane on the one-hour flight from Hobart (nīpaluna), I watch as the built world disappears. First towns, then homes, then farms, then roads. Gradually, the landscape begins to stir: steely water ripples, wind tousles the scrub and skipper Pieter van der Woude waves from the tinnie. Our party of four climbs out of the small plane and into the small boat then we whizz across the bay to *Odalisque III*, the six-cabin, 24-metre catamaran on which we'll be cosseted from the wilds of Port Davey and Bathurst Harbour for four nights.

"There's no time in Port Davey, only seasons," says Marmion, as we sip elderflower welcome drinks and I try to memorise everyone's names (eight guests, seven crew, two Petes). From my forest-green cosy chair in the upper-deck





Wheelhouse Lounge, I might easily lose track of time and seasons if it weren't for the windows that take up most of every wall.

Alice van der Woude, Pieter's daughter and the director of experience for their family business, On Board (onboardexpeditions.com.au), balances Marmion's poetry with pragmatic guidance about what to expect on shore, rugging up for the changeable conditions and when to meet on the stern deck (there's always a straggler; Alice is always smiling). Briefings happen each evening (with cocktails and canapés) to prepare us for the next day, the crew adjusting to the whims of the weather so there's never Plan B blues; every hike, sea eagle sighting, scone break and story feels too special to miss.

I sleep with the blinds up so I don't miss any of the quiet lilac dawn. When light subsumes dark, views of Mount Rugby, russet-stained rocks and water that matches the mood of the sky compel me out of my cabin cocoon. The coffee machine becomes our water cooler, where consistent hot topics include how comfortable the beds are and chef Courtney Drew's "surf and turf" of barbecued local crayfish and Cape Grim beef. After breakfast we rush off to change out of slippers and stretchy clothes. "First time I went out, I had layers on, then the second time I added more. Now, I'm wearing everything," says Pam, who's here from Queensland with her husband, Graeme.

"It's a landscape rich with stories," Marmion tells us on one of our daily trips to shore. He shares yarns as my boots crunch over quartzite that's more than a billion years old and when we peer into caves that sheltered First Nations people long before wayward seafarers arrived. On day two we explore Melaleuca, the one settlement in the region (a gravel airstrip, a few buildings and the only other people – just two – we see).

Marmion brings to life the exploits of characters who came here in the 1930s to fish, mine for tin and survive in a place that was then only accessible on foot or by boat. At 66, the now retired school principal has been returning to the south-west wilderness for 51 years. "It's great to hear these stories from someone who was actually here," says Graeme to fellow Queenslander Phil. "It brings them alive," agrees Phil, a doctor who's travelling with his wife, Lesley. Heading back to the tinnie, all dawdling to try and capture the golden light with our phones, Marmion sets the pace: "Time to have a beer and tell a few lies."

Who knows how many lies are told on the evening of our ramble through the Gondwana forest but nobody can stop talking about it. Conversation is eased by shared interests, surprise connections (daughters who are close friends, sons who are former students) and restorative amounts of Tasmanian wine from Mapleton, Ghost Rock and Arras. Over red-wine-braised goat with polenta one night, Acqua Pazza with risotto bianco on another, chatter drifts from Tassie people to Tassie produce and how the food is so good, it's like we're dining in a floating restaurant. Chef Drew, who gets about in shorts and Crocs and somehow conjures breakfast, lunch and dinner (plus muffins, scones and canapés) in a very small kitchen, very far from the shops, is unflappable. (I hear her belting out *Bennie and the Jets* as she preps eggs Benedict.)

One drizzly morning, hot drinks, board games and Drew's cinnamon biscuits are a compelling argument for staying in. Mount Stokes looms beyond the windows and a 90-minute hike to the top seems foolhardy from where I'm standing in my socks. In the end, six of us set off and after we make the

beach landing without getting our feet wet, Marmion piggybacks us one-by-one across a creek then takes off like a mountain goat. His bright orange jacket is both a beacon and a tease and about halfway to the summit, when I do catch up (only because he stopped to take photos), I turn around to see nothing but nature in every direction. "If we were here 60 million years ago, we'd be looking at the high mountains of Antarctica," he says. At the peak, I sit on cold rock under the afternoon sun and try to map out the coves we've anchored in, the rivers we've traversed. With no evidence of the modern world in sight (*Odalisque III* is tucked away behind a bluff), the minimal impact of our expedition is obvious. Everything we arrive with, we leave with. Before setting off, I finish an apple and pocket the core.

On our last full day, we follow Marmion along a trail through scratchy heath between Spain Bay and Stephens Bay. I hear the Southern Ocean before I see it and duck out of a sheltered green bower into a cinematic swathe of pale sand, relentless sea and a towering wall of dunes, defenceless against

the elements. We wander along the beach before cutting back, away from the shore. Here, fringed by native grasses and pig face plant, sandy masses extend for hundreds of metres down the coast, scattered with small wallaby bones turned dry and white as driftwood and gleaming with pearlescent abalone shells. The site is evidence of at least 10,000 years of Aboriginal culture and its scale is striking.

Sitting on the grass eating chicken salad wraps and passing around a block of chocolate, all heads turn when two sea eagles fly low overhead. As he often does, Marmion puts into words the things I find too big to comprehend: "There might have been humans here 30,000 years ago, eating their lunch like us." Icy rain cuts short our rest and we head up the beach, pulling beanies down and zipping jackets up. Back on the muddy path we walked in on, our footsteps fall clumsily beside the neat tracks of spotted quoll and devils. "You want to walk backwards to try and take them away," says Marmion, stepping carefully. But in the wilds of south-west Tasmania, it won't be long before the weather sees to that. ↘

