

Life & Leisure

Life & Luxury Travel

Wild and luxe: the finer side of Tasmania's wilderness

On Board's new, six-night expedition offers a combination of exploring Port Davey on a catamaran followed by a stay at Saffire Freycinet hotel.

Jo Bainbridge [\[by/jo-bainbridge-p53754\]](#) *Photo editor*

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I consider myself an adventurer: I've weathered camping during a flood, been lost in the mountains of Hokkaido with just my snowboard for company, leapt out of planes, and walked some questionable streets in Rio de Janeiro as riot-control helicopters hovered overhead.

With these experiences under my belt, I'm surely ready for Port Davey, the most remote and untamed region in southwest Tasmania.



The view from the hike up Mount Stokes, in Tasmania's Southwest National Park. **Jo Bainbridge**

Or so I remind myself as my travel companions and I cling to the sides of a tender, plunging into the next mighty wave as we head for the aptly named Breaksea Islands, a barrier between Bathurst Harbour and the wild Southern Ocean.

“If we keep going straight ahead, we will end up in Antarctica,” says our guide, Jimmy Emms.

We draw nearer to one of the jagged isles, the inky-black sea relentless in its assault, bull kelp swirling over rocky ledges that team with abalone and rock lobsters. Above our heads, pinnacles provide shelter for shearwater chicks and white-bellied sea eagles scout for fish far below.



A low-hanging rain cloud casts a spell over Port Davey. **Jo Bainbridge**

Today's swell is considered "minimal" for this rocky, windswept coast, yet it still has enough force to surge through a blowhole. "When the swell is bigger, that cliff over there will have waves crashing right over the top of it," Emms tells us.

The cliff in question is a towering 12 metres. You would be able to discern our collective gulp if it weren't for the howling westerly. Emms grins. A veteran sailor in the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race, this is a leisurely day out on the water for him; my boating experience typically extends to Sydney's Manly Ferry.

As we enter the UNESCO world heritage area, calmer estuaries beckon, bathed in sudden shafts of sunlight. A fur seal proudly shows off its catch. The welcome aboard *Obalisque III*, our home for the first three of our six-night expedition with the Tasmanian cruising company *On Board*, could not be more friendly. The crew of the new, 24-metre catamaran greet us with wide smiles and heated blankets as our feet touch the deck, and there's the prospect of a warm dinner, prepared by head chef Courtney Drew.



The Odalisque III, On Board's 24-metre catamaran. **Jo Bainbridge**

Tonight's menu features Cape Grim hanger steak paired with East Coast southern rock lobster and saltbush capers and herb butter, served with crispy Nicola potatoes. This is followed by sticky date and apple pudding topped with honey cream and toffee sauce. The menu is both diverse and regional, down to the tiny flowers Drew picked from a friend's garden.

This is certainly no Manly ferry. The 12-berth Odalisque III exudes the ambience of a boutique hotel, with soft linen furnishings, a handcrafted Huon pine dining table, and mesmerising artworks by Mornington Peninsula artist Jennifer Riddle. The cabins are cosy, with generous windows that frame the scenery.



A comfy cabin on the Odalisque III. **Jo Bainbridge**

Obelisk III's master is Matt Shepherd, who has been exploring this coast since 2014. His goal is for guests to leave with the impression of having witnessed "something truly unique".

The next day, on an excursion in the tender along Old River, Shepherd shuts off the engine, letting us savour the moment as we glide gracefully along its glassy surface. Breathing in the forest air, surrounded by the endemic Huon pines, we search for rare orange-bellied parrots.



Putting along the Old River in Bathurst Harbour, Tasmania. **Jo Bainbridge**

“It’s a bit like Jurassic Park – some days you think a dinosaur might pop up somewhere,” Shepherd says. “Pieter [van der Woude, the founder and managing director of On Board] and the company have gone to a lot of trouble because logistically it requires great effort to come to an area like this.”

He isn’t wrong. Although Port Davey is just 100 kilometres from Hobart, the region is so remote you would have to come via foot (a seven-day hike), sail for numerous days on turbulent seas, or take a scenic flight to get here. Luckily, this trip offered the latter, a seaplane hop from Hobart. Jess Cooper, On Board’s experience co-ordinator, calls it the ‘James Bond arrival’.

The shock of waking up the next day to find a solitary yacht moored nearby is testament to the region’s solitude. Mount Rugby, at the entrance to Bathurst Harbour and the highest peak in the area at 773 metres, is our constant landmark.



The writer clutching a welcome hot-water bottle while on an excursion in Bathurst Harbour.

Life on board is bliss. Despite being cut off from the mainland, the crew manages to produce any item imaginable. Need hiking sticks, heat packs for weary limbs, a hot-water bottle for the next tender expedition? Sorted. Fancy wine and cheese while we wait for an afternoon shower to pass? Freshly baked lemon-myrtle biscuits while perusing the onboard library? It's a resounding "yes" from me and my fellow passengers.



Cape Grim hanger beef paired with southern rock lobster, saltbush capers and herb butter, prepared by onboard chef Courtney Drew. **Jo Bainbridge**

The common thread among us is a shared interest in the region and adventurous spirit, and the conversation flows effortlessly after dinner as we head to the upstairs lounge for a glass of Lark Distillery's Classic Cask single-malt, later taking to our cabins as rain starts tapping at the windows. The boat hardly stirs that night, and I'm gently lulled to a peaceful sleep.

The crew's mantra is that there are no days, only seasons. This is starting to resonate: I already feel like I've been here for weeks, in the best possible sense.



A hike to explore Australia's last tin-mining site in Melaleuca. **Jo Bainbridge**

Despite its isolation, the region is steeped stories of local characters like the “King of the Wilderness”. Charles Denison King, known as Deny, was an Australian naturalist, ornithologist and tin smelter who lived in Melaleuca, Port Davey, for half a century. He worked at what became the country's last tin smelter, and we head there on foot in our oversized ponchos as the rain continues to fall.

On another excursion, we look at the graves of local whalers and explorer Critchley Parker, an Australian publisher who envisioned founding a Jewish homeland in Tasmania during the 1930s, when Jews were desperate to flee Europe. Parker died, aged just 31, during a solo hike to find a suitable location in the state's southwest wilderness.

Another, standout hike takes us to Mount Stokes via rarely trodden tracks beneath golden-brown buttongrass. We clamber over tea-stained tributaries before climbing up to a vantage point where quartzite boulders cradle clumps of wildflowers.

Below, the true expanse of the area unfolds dramatically: flowing mountain ranges on one side of Southwest National Park, and the Southern Ocean on the other. At the end of the hike my reward is a feast of northeast scallops

in honey, pepperberry and wakame salt, along with a glass of Arras sparkling, served on the sands of Bramble Cove. A peachy sunset caps off an idyllic afternoon.



The stunning location of Saffire Freycinet luxury lodge on the Freycinet Peninsula.

A brief seaplane journey the next day, and we arrive at Saffire Freycinet hotel on Tasmania's east coast. The grand entrance leads to floor-to-ceiling windows, revealing breathtaking views of The Hazards mountain range. The main building, shaped like a sting ray, pays homage to its surrounds, the hotel's colour palette taking its cue from the pink granite of the Hazards, the white sandy beaches and the sapphire-blue water.

Sunrises here can be viewed without leaving your luxuriously appointed suite (there are 20). It's opulent yet zen-like, and the super king-sized bed is so comfortable, I'm tempted to stay there.

Executive chef Paddy Prenter has helmed Palate since 2018. Fresh produce is supplied by regional farms and the ocean, resulting in a constantly evolving à la carte and degustation menu. But it's the kitchen garden on site that gives him the most joy. "We have incredible zucchinis and tomatoes, along with some beautiful natives including pepperberry, warrigal greens and kunzea," Prenter explains. "Paired with raw honey from our Saffire hives, this [garden] is something I'm really proud of."



Oysters to savour at Freycinet Marine Farm, one of the experiences offered by Saffire Freycinet.

A casual conversation about potato scallops results in them gracing Palate's menu the next day – though these are hardly the potato scallops of childhood memory. Instead, they arrive coated in tempura batter, topped with crème fraîche and caviar, and paired with a 2018 Jansz Vintage Cuvée. As if that weren't enough, further temptations include Pacific oysters from Melshell Oyster Shack, blood orange kosho, and Robbins Island wagu beef tartare with Parmesan cream.

The drawcard of this all-inclusive hotel is its "signature experiences", which focus on connecting guests with the environment. One morning, I'm in waders, savouring freshly shucked oysters at Freycinet Marine Farm, a glass of Tasmania's finest sparkling in hand; the next I have a front-row seat at the Tasmania Devil Experience for a close-up encounter with the iconic creatures.



Beekeeper and horticulturist Rob Parker with guests. **Jo Bainbridge**

Next up is a 'beekeeping experience' with spirited horticulturist and beekeeper Rob Parker, who also specialises in bee-related puns. Parker's passion extends to the whole landscape; he pauses mid-conversation to remark on the sounds of distant frogs or black cockatoos circling overhead, predicting rain within the next 12 hours.

I don't hear a thing; despite wearing full-body apiarist's armour, I'm worried a stray bee might find its way into my white gum boots. To my surprise, after five minutes around the hives, the bees' gentle buzzing lulls me into a more relaxed state.

For me, it's the surrounding Freycinet Peninsula that makes Saffire Freycinet so special. On a perfect summer's day, a hike up to Wineglass Bay Lookout reveals an inquisitive flame robin plus mesmerising views across one of the oldest national parks in Tasmania.

No one has a better appreciation for the land and its resources than First Nations guide Mick Quilliam. His 'Connection to Country' guided tour is highly recommended for his incredible knowledge of how the land served its first inhabitants, the Lagoon people. "This is a Man fern. Break this prong here, crush it up on a grinding stone, and it turns into a brown paste that you can put on your leg like Betadine; or break off the big fronds and use them as a mattress – they are water-repellent."



A walk around Coles Bay (with the Hazards mountains in the background), led by Indigenous guide Mick Quilliam. **Jo Bainbridge**

As he leads us down to Great Oyster Bay, we are greeted by a kaleidoscope of brilliant colours: orange lichen-encrusted rocks, purple mussel shells poking out from sparkling white sand, turquoise water lapping at our feet. A calamari fisherman passing by in his boat waves as Quilliam picks some native cherries to share with us. There's a smorgasbord of edible treats around us, including black peppermint gum leaves, coastal mustard plants, native plums and mountain pepper berries. Kelp here is easily plucked from the sea, as well as mussels, crabs and rays.

Heading back to my room, the rugged scenery is visible from the windows, urging me to return. But how will I ever go back to my previous travelling ways? This newfound luxury approach will be a hard act to follow.

The writer travelled as a guest of On Board and Saffire Freycinet.

Need to know

- ◆ On Board Coast-to-Coast Luxury expedition | Includes three nights aboard the Odalisque III; three nights at Saffire Freycinet in a Signature Suite; seaplane round trip flights from Hobart; and all experiences, meals and beverages.
- ◆ Departures | March 24, May 4 and December 7.
- ◆ Price | From \$27,000 a couple; maximum 12 people.

- ◆ For more and to book | Go to onboardexpeditions.com.au
[\[https://onboardexpeditions.com.au/\]](https://onboardexpeditions.com.au/) or call 0477 100 119.

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Jo Bainbridge is a photo editor for The Australian Financial Review.