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WILD WATERS

Jocelyn Pride discovers the untamed wilderness of Tasmania’s southwest on a luxurious one-of-a-kind boutique catamaran.

“Those who drink the buttongrass water always return,” is a saying anyone who ventures to one of the wildest, most remote corners of the planet hears. It works. Five years between drinks, I’m back with the crew at On Board Tasmanian Expedition Cruises. However, this time, there’s a twist. After a 50-minute flight from Hobart, the seaplane skims across glassy water, and I catch sight of skipper Pieter van der Woude standing on the deck of his gleaming new catamaran bathed in autumnal sunshine. Five years earlier, Van der Woude had chatted to me about how he was going to create something “uniquely Tasmanian”. Arriving by seaplane is only the first part of Pieter’s dream-turned-reality.

With a flagpole flying the Red Ensign, used by ships registered in Australia, intricate Indigenous art on the hull and nipaluna/Hobart painted on the stern, not only was *Odalisque III* clearly built locally, but connection to place is woven into every part of this classy vessel. “We want to highlight local artisans and producers,” Van der Woude says proudly – he hung up his flippers and snorkel as an abalone diver to start small-scale tourism operations.

Stepping on board the 12-guest, six-crew vessel sparks curiosity. From picture windows in the cabins framing the wilderness like a pop-up gallery, to soft furnishings featuring the critically endangered giant kelp forests, striking art installations, organic toiletries

made from the oil of Tasmanian trees, and handmade sea-green coloured crockery, it has a luxury wilderness lodge vibe – on water. So much so, the *Odalisque III* is already a member of the prestigious Luxury Hotels of Australia and partnered with Saffire Freycinet retreat for an ultimate coast-to-coast experience.

Adventure abounds

Stretching over an area three times the size of Sydney Harbour, as part of Tasmania’s Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA), Port Davey together with Bathurst Harbour is home to myriad of natural treasures waiting for us to explore. And with two tinnies (tenders) at the ready, five glorious days with

guides Peter Marmion (aka WikiPete for his encyclopedic knowledge of the area), local landscape photographer Jimmy Emms, and the best sea dog in the biz, Van der Woude himself, our group of 11 is spoilt for choice.

On the first afternoon, Van der Woude is keen to share one of his favourite places. “We don’t see many days as calm as this.”

Gliding over steely water, we venture toward a chain of jagged isles, rising from the sea like sentinels. Gazing up at the 12-metre quartzite walls, where history is etched into the sculptured lines and craggy overhangs, it’s easy to see why they’re aptly named the Breaksea Islands. Edging closer to the rock face, the sea swirls around us. Tangled straps of bull kelp laced with frothy white foam pulsate to the rhythm of the swell. We pause at the entrance to a crevice. “Wanna do it?” There are nods all round and we plunge into darkness, as Van der Woude expertly squeezes the hull through the narrowest of margins before we emerge into the sunlight a couple of exhilarating minutes later.

The good life

Every day brings a new adventure. Fire-red sunrises greet our mornings, the sinking sun paints the sky pink and orange. There are no roads. Apart from light aircraft, the only way in is by boat or a seven-day hike. Cocooned in nature, the outside world ceases to exist. Devices fall silent, replaced by the art of conversation.

We tread softly, creeping through forests dwarfed by sassafras, celery top and rare Huon pines; meandering along narrow tannin-stained waterways where reflections challenge orientation; hiking up lofty peaks trying to achieve the impossible – capturing the magnitude of the landscape through our camera lenses. And when we return, sweet smells drift across the back deck where chef Courtney Drew is waiting to tempt us with irresistible goodies like hot blueberry muffins or gooey chocolate brownies.

In keeping with the *Odalisque III*’s Tasmanian-esque mantra, food miles are low. From backstraps of Doo Town

venison and platters of crayfish plucked by divers in nearby waters, to heirloom vegetables grown in the Huon Valley, dishes are a feast for our eyes as much as palates – and of course each is paired with fine Tasmanian wines, beers, ciders or spirits.

Bay of plenty

Sunshine makes it feel more like we’re on a tropical island, rather than at the bottom of Australia in April.

“We often have weather like this during autumn,” WikiPete says from the helm of the tinny. His enthusiasm for the area is infectious. “I first came down here when I was 16 and got hooked.” Returning every summer/ autumn season for the last 51 years, he’s still discovering. “I’ve still only seen a fraction of what’s here.”

After mooring at Spain Bay, we trek over rolling hills of peat scrub draped with buttongrass towards Stephens Bay. Nearing the beach, the tea-tree track lined with pink mountain berry bushes creates a welcoming tunnel, seven black cockatoos fly overhead and the scent of the ocean fills our nostrils. With icing sugary sand squeaking underfoot as we amble along the pristine shoreline, WikiPete explains why this is one of

Tasmania’s most significant Aboriginal cultural living sites. “Every part of this beach has a story.”

Embraced by the presence of the Needwonnee people who lived here for tens of thousands of years, WikiPete stops near the end of the beach, where sand dunes gently fold into each other like works of art. “This is a precious site where Aboriginal people gathered to cook and eat together.”

We step carefully around the dunes, speckled with fragments of shells, tools, grinding stones and seal bones sparkling in the light, each of us locked in our own thoughts. I try to visualise the sights and sounds of people living here in harmony with nature. Kneeling beside the creek winding through the dunes, I fill my drink bottle with buttongrass water. ♦

01 The grandeur of Spain Bay © Jimmy Emms
02 Traversing the labyrinth of sea caves in one of the tender boats
03 Moorings are carefully selected to minimise the impact on the environment © Jocelyn Pride
04 Every meal showcases fine Tasmanian produce
05 A wall of glass in each cabin brings the outside in 04 & 05 © Brad Harris



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