

# THE WILD SIDE



They call it “wilderness” for a reason—on a journey into Tasmania’s Southwest National Park, **Jo McKay** finds the untamed side of the Apple Isle. Photography by Chris Crerar.



## PORT DAVEY

Tasmania



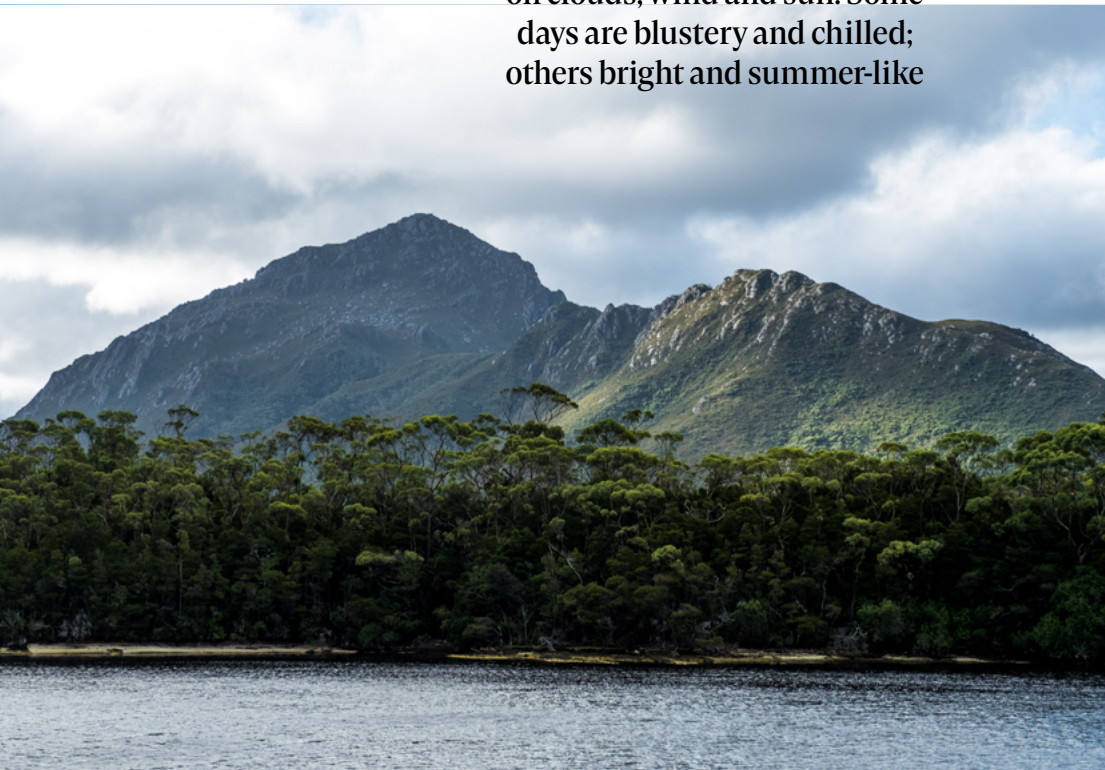
**A**s the 10-seat Britten-Norman Islander banks over Hobart and beyond Mount Wellington, the landscape transitions from cityscape to pastureland. A few blinks and it’s forest plantations. Before long we’re given a glimpse of what we came for: a wilderness so rugged it’s hard to believe that a mere 50 minutes ago we left the buzz of the state’s East Coast behind. The wineries, cheesemakers, restaurants and bars – that Tasmania has been discovered. The one we’re about to see is only just coming into focus.

There are no roads to where we’re going and all the ways in require commitment. You can go on foot, a six-to-eight-day walk along the South Coast Track from Cockle Creek near Recherche Bay at the southernmost tip of Tassie. You could sail from Hobart, a two-day, highly weather-dependent journey. Or there’s this, a 50-minute light-plane transfer from Hobart. It’s how Tasmanian Boat Charters ([tasmanianboatcharters.com.au](http://tasmanianboatcharters.com.au)) takes guests to the launch point of their four-day cruising and walking expeditions deep in the state’s Southwest National Park, some 600,000 hectares of pristine bush in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. It is, according to the company’s owner, Pieter van der Woude, “one of the last places on earth that’s untouched.”

Our group is small, just four guests—a well-travelled septuagenarian couple, a photographer and me. We soar between the Arthur Ranges and descend over a few snaking rivers that converge on a smooth, dark bay: Bathurst Harbour. Touching down at Melaleuca, on a shimmering quartzite airstrip about 100 kilometres south-west of Hobart, we’re surrounded by rugged peaks, rolling hills and dense green bush. Then we clamber into a jet tender docked at the nearby inlet, which ferries us to the *Odalisque* – our floating home for the next three nights.



The rhythm of our trip is based on clouds, wind and sun. Some days are blustery and chilled; others bright and summer-like



The 20-metre vessel can host up to six guests in its three berths (or 10 on a private charter). There's a large kitchen upstairs, an open-plan lounge/dining area with 360-degree windows, plus outdoor decks for when the weather plays ball. Skipper Pieter is much like his purpose-built boat: practical and no-nonsense. From January to May the *Odalisque* moves through the Port Davey Marine Reserve – a waterway that includes Bathurst Harbour, Bathurst Channel and Port Davey. A former abalone diver and fisherman, Pieter has come here for more than 25 years. "It's a solitude paradise," he says.

**R**ugged up in wet-weather gear and life jackets, we jump in the tinny for our first adventure and bump across the swell to explore the base of the Breaksea Islands that shelter the Bathurst Channel from the robust Southern Ocean. We navigate along rocky coves thick with bull kelp and vertiginous white cliffs then motor back through the entrance of Bathurst Channel, past an old whaling station on Turnbull Island used in the 1800s. This excursion isn't "planned" per se; instead our guide Peter Mooney is led by Mother Nature – it's too damp to hike, too bright to stay indoors. As he says in our first briefing, "There's no set or standard run. Everything is shaped around the weather."

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(Clockwise from above)  
Mount ???; Breaksea  
Islands??; skipper Pieter  
van der Woude??

summer-like, with green ridges and white outcrops crisp against a periwinkle-blue sky. When the weather allows, we traverse ridges and button-grass plains. We comb deserted beaches, the pale sand littered with shells and driftwood and pocked with wombat tracks. We view Aboriginal middens at Stephens Bay and manoeuvre around the cliff to rock pools, where Mooney ditches his shirt and clambers – boots and all – into the tidal pools for a sea-life show-and-tell. It's a wonderful, Bear Grylls moment, south-west Tassie-style.

We explore Melaleuca, too. There's an Aboriginal walk and a tin-mining history and it's one of the breeding zones for the rare and endangered orange-bellied parrot. We happen upon the bird hide at feeding time and see around 15 of the juvenile green fliers gorging on the provided seed. We cruise Bathurst Channel and Harbour, where the ink-stained water (from the tannins in button grass) reflects clouds, sky and overhanging trees. We see black swans, oystercatchers, cormorants and sea eagles. We mosey into rivers to gaze at still-standing



Huon pine, black peppermint gum, celery top pine, sassafras and more. We walk where it's unlikely more than 20 others have set foot in a hundred years. I catch myself in these moments, stunned at the isolation: it's thrilling, but, to be honest, a little confronting – and I'm glad I'm in the safe hands of the Tasmanian Boat Charters crew.

Although it's an isolated area, we do cross paths with hardy hikers and kayakers on long camping trips. Sometimes we moor next to a crayfishing boat and a yacht skippered by a sun-ravaged mariner. We come across a couple in a Zodiac – turns out he's Scott Laughlin, former skipper of Antarctic supply ship *Aurora Australis*. He and partner Kylie have their inflatable piled high for their 30-day sojourn on the water.

Still, the *Odalisque* does a fine job of marrying the rugged with the refined. Onboard chef Adrian Matthews serves top-notch breakfasts, lunches and dinners. He bakes every morning so we'll have treats for afternoon tea; he plies us with nightly canapés, cheeses and desserts. The food is outstanding – but it's hard to compete with that scenery.

The vast remoteness hits me on our final morning as we take a sunrise hike up Mount Milner, taking in the expansive ocean, the serene and empty channel and seemingly endless mossy green mountains with imposing quartzite breaking through. In every direction, it's raw, rugged and wild. It might take a little effort to get here, but a little effort is worth it. ●

Button grass and low scrub carpet the valleys; trees cling to the tops of quartzite cliffs



**You'll need at least one night in Hobart to allow for possible weather delays getting to and from Melaleuca. Here's your playlist for Tassie's capital...**

#### ↓ Eat

Start the day with pastries at Daci & Daci Bakers ([dacianddacibakers.com.au](http://dacianddacibakers.com.au)). Come lunchtime, head to Suzie Lucks ([suzielucks.com.au](http://suzielucks.com.au)) for pan-Asian fusion. For dinner, choose between the seasonal, locally led menu at Peacock & Jones ([peacockandjones.com.au](http://peacockandjones.com.au)), and European share-style fare at Ettie's ([etties.com.au](http://etties.com.au)).

#### ↓ Stay

Salamanca Inn ([salamancainn.com.au](http://salamancainn.com.au)) has comfortable, spacious rooms, each with a kitchenette and seating area. Or opt for next-level luxury at The Henry Jones Art Hotel ([www.thehenryjones.com](http://www.thehenryjones.com)), where all the rooms have had a sophisticated overhaul.

#### ↓ Play

For culture it's got to be MONA ([mona.net.au](http://mona.net.au)), where intriguing (sometimes outrageous) art awaits, as well as a cellar door and several restaurants and bars. Take MONA's fast ferry from the Brook Street Pier. Those who prefer the great outdoors should head up Mount Wellington. Local buses will take you as far as Fern Tree, where you can hike to the 1271-metre summit. Allow four to six hours return. For a more relaxed option, Hobart Shuttle Bus Company ([hobartshuttlebus.com](http://hobartshuttlebus.com)) offers tours to the summit and its surrounds, taking about two hours. Check [hobartcity.com.au](http://hobartcity.com.au) for updates on any road closures due to snow.