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Kiting at the end of the world

Tasmania is remote and storm-lashed: the perfect playground for later-day explorers with a passion for big waves and epic winds

Story by Gabi Steindl



PHOTO: ANDREW CHISHOLM



WHEN THE BLACK TIGER SNAKE DROPPED OUT OF THE TREE, narrowly missing my shoulder to land beside my right foot, for a split second I thought, “that’s it”. I leapt backwards but the snake just lay there. The last thing I wanted was to scare it: that’s how people get bitten. Part of me wanted to run away, but I calmed down and just watched this deadly poisonous, yet fascinating creature. Then it turned and slid into the bushes. I was 45 minutes into the five-hour return hike to the southernmost tip of an island at the end of the world. The next land mass was Antarctica, some 3500km away. For a moment I considered turning around. My guide book had been right about this World Heritage Area: it really was, “. . . for those who seek the wonder of the wilderness”. I took a deep breath and continued walking.

Tasmania is all about that wonder, a wonder that has inspired explorers for centuries. Reaching South Cape Bay, I gazed out over the Southern Ocean, wondering how the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman, the first European to set foot here in 1642, must have felt. Commissioned by Governor-General Anthony Van Diemen to find the legendary Southland, he took two ships, the *Heemskerck* (Home Church) and the *Zeehaen* (Sea Cock) and sailed west

DON'T GET BITTEN HERE
The interior of Tasmania is no less wild – and potentially dangerous – than its storm-wracked coastline.

from Batavia (today’s Jakarta) across the Indian Ocean to Mauritius, before turning south and then back east, battling heavy seas, fog, hail and snow. He named the rugged land he found Van Diemen’s Land, but in 1856 it was officially renamed Tasmania in honour of its founder’s pioneering spirit.

Sat in the Roaring Forties, a band of

PHOTO: ANDREW CHISHOLM; STEVE JOHNSON (SNAKE)

Southern Hemisphere westerlies, the island is fully exposed to the brunt of Southern Ocean swells so as a keen kiter, it had been on my radar for a while. The wind is almost always blowing somewhere and as you are never more than an hour’s drive from the ocean, the island is a waveriding wonderland.

My adventure started in Hobart in late January where I was warmly welcomed by Joanna and Rob, owners of Tassie Motor Shacks. Both great ocean-lovers themselves (she a keen sailor and he a professional abalone diver), they were super supportive of my mission to chase the kiting conditions all around the island and my flash four-person camper van, with its cosy sleeping compartment on top (‘the penthouse’), promised to be the perfect vehicle. I named it *Zeehaen* in memory of Tasman’s ship. Looking at my huge mountain of gear (80kg including two surfboards, three kiteboards and four kites), Rob immediately got the drill out and in no time I had an additional hanging boardrack that would make my life in the van a whole lot more comfortable.

The van was ideal for taking advantage of whatever weather blew my way and, emulating Van Diemen’s pioneering spirit, I was to clock up 7,200km during my voyage of discovery: not bad considering the island is only 315km (180 miles) from west to east and 286km (175 miles) north to south.

Before I hit the road though, Dusty, Joanna’s son and a passionate surfer, wanted to show me the breaks of South Arm, the playground of choice for Hobart’s ocean-lovers, where pretty beaches often have only a handful of surfers in the line-up.

“Mainly during winter, when massive swell hits the coast, the points work for miles. That’s really the only time the breaks around here get busy. We consider a break with more than six people as crowded,” he said.

“Are you serious?? Half a dozen people, that’s basically heaven!” I glanced at him with a big grin of anticipation.

I set *Zeehaen*’s wheels for the Tasman Peninsula, in the southeast corner, home to the country’s most important convict heritage sites and Ship Stern Bluff, one of the most infamous and heaviest big-wave spots on the planet. Although there was no swell that day, I simply had to check it out myself.

Only accessible by jet-ski, boat or on foot, I set out on the hike under gorgeous blue skies with temperatures in the high twenties so I decided to walk in my flip flops. It would be my first and last hike without proper shoes.

Already the view from the lookout of Ship Stern and nearby capes, about 45 minutes into the walk, was stunning. The track was rugged and soon began a descent of several hundred metres. I was praying for my flip flops not to break. The scale of the bluff once I was at the bottom was utterly awe inspiring. Almost 200m of crags loomed over me as I walked around massive scattered boulders on the flat reef shelf that extends from the shore at low tide. Mother Nature explodes with energy here: the cliffs, the boulders, the waves, everything was on an epic scale. Being here for a big swell was a daunting thought.

I meditated for a while before beginning the steep climb back. Meeting a group of hikers, all clad head-to-toe in weatherproof gear, I learned that attempting such a trek in flip flops risks more than ‘only’ having to walk back barefoot...

After my first surf in the Tasman Sea at Roaring Beach the next morning,

FAITHFUL CHARIOT
Christened after one of Abel Tasman’s craft, the good ship *Zeehaen* was the perfect home-on-wheels for a roving wave-chaser.



PHOTO: GABI STEINDL



AWED AND ALONE
Whether in Marrawah – Mt Cameron (above), Lighthouse Beach (right) – or on the east coast at Coles Bay (bottom right), Steindl was most often entirely alone.

I hit the road to Marrawah in the far northwest, about as far away a spot as it was possible to find. Despite the long drive in prospect, I decided on the scenic route via the Central Highlands. This taught me why I had been briefed to always fuel up when you get chance:

there was hardly anybody on the roads, or any people to be seen.

That emptiness is one of the beauties of this place. The digital age seems to have only reached the biggest cities of the island and travelling through the countryside you often feel set back 30 years in time. The people are genuine, their kindness an instinct. A large proportion of towns have a two-digit population, many only single-digit! The 'shack culture' – the often eccentric mode of everyday Tasmanian architecture – is another unique attribute. All-in-all, long stretches of the coast could serve as believable sets for an 1980s surf movie.

For those chasing wind and waves, Marrawah (teeming with 400 people) is Tasmania's premier location. A super remote and rugged corner, the coast stretching south from here of coast is known as the 'Wild West' for good reason. Waves roll in after an uninterrupted journey of almost 17,000km, energised by prevailing southwesterlies. Conditions can get extreme here. The 2015 Red Bull Storm Chase was held in absolute mad conditions at one of the top spots here: Back of Lighthouse (BOL), a fickle place that needs six-metre swells just to work.

Arriving in the late afternoon, I got a great little kite session just before sunset at Bluff Beach, a long sandy strand with some good banks. The next two days the wind turned offshore and I could have headed to the east coast for good conditions there but I decided to chill out and explore the west coast more first. Most breaks there are beachies and Lighthouse and Kelpies became my favourite spots. Crowds simply don't exist and I enjoyed a fair number of sessions completely alone. Normally when kiting I can't wait for the crowd to leave, but here, on days when the surf got more serious, I found myself hoping at least one other person would show up! The offshores are regularly rather strong in this corner of the world as I learned from the comment of a local surfer one morning in response to my facial expression when I rocked up at my new favourite break to find it trailing massive rooster tails in a howling 35 knots.

"C'mon mate," he said casually, "that's only a light Tassie breeze".

Something else that took me a little time to get used to was the kelp. In Tasmania, it is giant-sized and even a bit scary at first, like some massive, enveloping sea-monster. I got used to it though and even found it useful: as it mainly grows on the reef, it serves as a cushion when things go a bit awry in the surf.

Cruising south next, about 15km from Marrawah, I found Arthur River (population 50), a truly picturesque little township. The coast south of here is called 'The Edge of the World' and it's pretty obvious why. The sea to the west is the longest uninterrupted expanse of ocean on the globe. From Argentina, the currents sweep unimpeded more than halfway around the

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« **Balfour Track is Tassie's most hardcore driveable track and a considerable number of cars are lost here each year to quicksand or getting bogged on the beach.** »

planet. Regularly lashed by gales and consequent Southern Ocean swells of 15m or more – some of the biggest waves ever were recorded here – there was driftwood piled the length of the seemingly endless beach. And not just some logs but entire trees, hundreds and hundreds of them.

During those days in Marrawah I met Tappo, a local windsurfer in his 50s, who is a legend up there. Knowing the area and its winds like the back of his own hand, he became my weather oracle and a dear friend. I spent

many evenings together with him and his wife Hazel in their house that overlooks Greens Beach and Mt Cameron, an Aboriginal Heritage Site.

KITING CENTRAL

Marrawah is a honeypot for kites. Here Steindl works the waves at Quentin's Reef (below), and takes on some scary swells off Lighthouse Beach (right).

Working at Port Arthur's Ranger Station, Hazel knows everything about the local wildlife and told me that Marrawah has the island's highest

number of Tasmanian Devils. This ferocious little creature has it hard these days. Extinct on the mainland with the spread of the dingo, devils are limited to Tasmania today. Mostly nocturnal, they are often spotted at night scavenging on animals hit by cars. In recent years, they have come under threat from a disease that causes disfiguring facial tumours and premature death. Scientists are studying the cause in the hope that it will not become the latest of Tasmania's unique animals to slip into oblivion.

One day Tappo borrowed a 4WD off a mate and took me on an off-road mission into the deep south. The infamous Balfour Track is Tassie's most hardcore driveable track and a considerable number of cars are lost here each year to quicksand or getting bogged on the beach too close to the water with an incoming tide.

I had all my gear in the back of the pick-up and we checked out a couple of breaks along the way, close to Temma and Jack Smith Harbour, but screaming 40-knot offshores were not the best conditions in which to venture out. So we continued into the wilderness, not meeting another soul all day. At Sandy Cape, a seemingly endless beach attributed with having the largest sand dunes in the southern hemisphere, we bogged the car in a dangerous position but luckily managed to get it out before it turned into another victim of the Southern Ocean.

The following days were blessed with a little swell, beautiful sunshine and wind in the mid-20s. I found around 20 kick-ass wave spots in the area and although the waves were rather unorganised due to predominantly onshore winds, I had an absolute blast. At Port Sorell, low tide revealed an extensive sandbar creating a long stretch of flat water behind it perfect for

PHOTO (CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT): MATTHEW TILDESLEY; DANNY O'DONNELL; ANDREW CHISHOLM



FLOAT ON
Freestyle fun in the perfect flat-water playground of the river mouth of Swanwick, near Freycinet National Park.

freestyle or speed kiting. The area around Stanley, about 50km north of Marrawah, where an old volcanic plug called 'The Nut' rises to 143m, a huge inlet boasts great flatwater kiting as well as several really joyous wave spots.

Although I had fallen in love with the solitude of the Wild West, I decided it was high time I checked out the east coast. Waking up at a carpark at Binalong Bay (population 200) that I had pulled into in the pitch dark the night before, my eyes nearly popped out of my skull when I stepped outside onto a snow-white beach with the most turquoise, crystalline water. Coffee mug still in hand, I went for a walk. The sand was so fine, it squeaked underneath my feet and I wandered in silent awe. The water was a sheet of glass. Either end was marked by a tumble of granite boulders clad in vivid orange lichen. Binalong is the southern end of the Bay of Fires (extending to Eddystone Point in the north). The bay was given its name in 1773 by Captain Tobias Furneaux, who saw the fires of Aboriginal people on the beaches but the name fits just as well to describe those blazing boulders.

The central east coast is much more developed than the west with a number of lovely tourist towns such as St Helens, Scamander and Bicheno, all of them boasting surf breaks. Waves are generally much smaller than in the west and a large swell needs to push down from mainland Australia in order to get the east coast breaks firing over a metre, which only very rarely happens in summer.

Just out of St.Helens I ate my first Tassie oysters. The mollusc is a staple here and I was in heaven being able to buy them super fresh directly from farms, a plastic bag of a dozen going for around AUSS\$9. Needless to say, I ate more oysters in my time in Tassie than in the rest of my life combined!

Abalone is another commonly found delicacy and like so many other



day, pulling freestyle moves on the flatwater playground closeby Swanwick rivermouth. Likewise, riding in the deep blue of the Tasman Sea at Friendly Beaches, 15km north of Coles Bay, later in the afternoon, after which I watched the full moon rise out of the sea as I stowed my kiting gear, will stay in my kiter-heart forever.

A swell alert for the following day prompted me to race back to the northwest, anticipating another hardcore Tassie experience. It wasn't the epic kiting day I expected though. With the winds at gale force, I could only watch nature's spectacle through the windows of my van, parked up at my favourite spot Lighthouse. It felt like my camper would be blown over any moment and wanting to step out to empty my bladder at one point, I couldn't open the door. The wind was blowing so hard against the side that I had to climb into the driver's seat, re-park Zeehaen and get out from the front. Kiting would have been suicidal but while I was out, I decided to struggle over to the Edge of the World,

to see Mother Nature going wild. I nearly had to crawl on all fours out to the viewing platform and didn't even last a minute there. Never in my life was I so close to becoming airborne without my kite.

The next day, the wind was manageable enough for me to go kiting at Lighthouse. I normally enjoy riding larger waves, but a Southern Ocean beach break in the Wild West of Tassie is not to be messed with. Around Marrawah, once it gets pretty big, the banks turn into industrial-sized washing machines. Still, I enjoyed the challenge of the conditions, made edgier still by the thought I was likely the only soul in the water for miles.

PHOTO (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): MATTHEW TILDESLEY; GABI STEINDL x2

TALE OF TWO COASTS

At play in Coles Bay off the east coast's Freycinet Peninsula (top); day's end at Trial Harbour on the west coast (above).

things in Tassie, come in 'XL' here.

A tourist staple of the east coast is Coles Bay in Freycinet National Park. Here The Hazards, a stunning granite mountain chain that sparkles with light pink due a particular feldspar, and Wineglass Bay that forms half of a narrow-waisted headland, are one of Tasmania's top attractions.

I will never forget kiting in front of the Hazards on an absolutely perfect

Shortly before my scheduled departure from Tasmania, I received a phone call from Tappo who told me: "Gabi, Back of Lighthouse might be working on Thursday. You should come up and bring the best photographer you can get". It didn't take much to convince me. The issue was convincing a top local surf photographer to make the six-hour drive up from Hobart with me.

I succeeded with Andrew Chisholm aka Chiza, photographer to multiple Big Wave Award winners. I also managed to organise two jet-skis which would secure us different angles from the water and also provide a measure of safety should anything go wrong for the strong rips around BOL are extremely dangerous.

The night before the swell was due, Chiza and I drove up to the Wild West and next morning, the weather hit as predicted, with the Bureau of Meteorology's swell buoy reading 8-12m. But there was also heavy rain and it only got worse. The rain increased, the wind increased to more than 50 knots according to the government's website and to top it all off there was some hail. The day was a washout. I was down to say the least. To brighten the mood, Tappo, Chiza and I did the sensible thing and went to the Marrawah Tavern for a beer. It was Thursday, which is 'Farmers Night' in these parts – an experience in itself, especially as I was the only girl there.

Next morning it was still raining and the swell that was meant to hang around had already disappeared. That's typical Tassie: the weather is often unpredictable, even for the most knowledgeable locals. But the skies cleared

up in the afternoon and for the next two days, Chiza and I enjoyed some fun sessions at a number of spots in beautiful sunshine and consistent wind.

Then Chiza received a phone call from Tassie's big wave posse. Ship Stern Bluff looked like it might break big for the first time in nearly a year and they needed him to shoot so we packed up and trundled all the way back south again.

This time the forecast came through perfectly and I got to sit on the shoreline boulders and watch one of the best big wave shows of my life. All the local chargers were there: Marti Paradisi, the infamous brothers Tyler and James Hollmer-Cross (Tyler has won the Big Wave Awards several times), Danny Griffith, James McKean. Seeing them towed into the maw of the beast and flying over its gnarly steps before pulling into the heaviest barrels was a rare privilege.

I spent my last night at the end of Australia's southernmost road, in Cockle Creek (population three). Sat on the edge of Tasmania's World Heritage Area, in a gorgeous bay with the most tranquil setting, I celebrated this trip of a lifetime in Tassie-style with a bonfire and some fresh oysters I collected out of the creek which were nearly the size of my feet!

I had fallen head-over-heels for this island paradise and it was a wrench to finally leave (only after changing my departure date twice). I'd found surfing and kiting playgrounds aplenty but had left many more spots to other budding Abel Tasmans. Now it's up to you to fall under its spell. **AA**

PRACTICALITIES

When to go

The weather can change several times a day at any time of the year, with summer (December-February) temperatures ranging anywhere from 15-30°C and winter (June-August) falling to 4-12°C. Water temperatures peak around 18-20°C in summer and fall to a head-numbing 10-13°C in winter, a time best avoided unless you like things stormy and wet.

How to get there

Several airlines link Hobart and Launceston to the Australian mainland and there are ferries too from Melbourne to Devonport in the north. Cathay Pacific will begin direct flights from Asia to Hobart later in 2016.

What to take

Summer brings the most reliable wind, though you could be using a 10sqm kite at least as often as a 5sqm. With such unpredictable weather, you need many layers of clothing whatever the time of year, including thermal underwear, gloves, hoodie and a rain jacket.

If you plan to visit Tasmania's 19 National Parks, you'll need a Parks Pass which you can buy at any tourist travel information centre or online at www.parks.tas.gov.au

How to get around

A campervan (Tassie Motor Shacks, www.tassiemotorshacks.com.au is one option for rentals) is ideal, using powered campsites or the countless beautiful roadside spots. Most national parks have campgrounds too.

Tasmania has many gravel road sections but most don't require a 4WD. They are narrow though, leaving little room for error, and the abundant wildlife is a potential hazard too.



Food

Tassie is a foodie's paradise. Salmon, abalone, scallops, octopus, wild trout and rock lobster from Tasmania are served in the best eateries around the world and here you can get those delicacies fresher than anywhere else. Cheeses, cool-climate wines and some of Australia's leading boutique beers and whiskies are produced here too. Delis selling locally grown goodies are found in many places making it easy to indulge!

Snakes

Unlike the mainland, Tasmania is home to only three species of snake: the Tiger Snake, Copperhead and White-lipped Whip Snake. They are all venomous but as with any snakes, they usually slither away out of sight well before you come close. Only if a snake feels trapped or threatened will it become aggressive, in which case solid footwear and long trousers help protect against a bite.