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MY OWN DISCOVERY VOYAGE TOOK ME 7,200 KILOMETRES BACK AND FORTH, CRISSCROSSING AROUND THE ENTIRE ISLAND.

THE WIND BLOWS WITH EXTREME REGULARITY AND NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE, YOU'RE NEVER MORE THAN AN HOUR AWAY FROM THE OCEAN AND YOU CAN KITE ALL ROUND THE ISLAND.



CAPTION -> Lighthouse Beach, Marrawah. I was shit scared. Although the photos don't do justice to how wild it was, the ocean was pumping, there was a heavy, messy beachbreak and not another soul around. I needed ovaries of steel that day

VOYAGE TO VAN DIEMEN'S LAND

GABI STEINDL STEPS INTO THE WILD IN TASMANIA, A KITING WONDERLAND THAT TIME HAS SEEMINGLY - AND WONDERFULLY - FORGOTTEN

WORDS -> Gabi Steindl / www.kiteabik.com
PHOTOS -> Andrew Christofm, Matthew Hedgesley, Steve Johnson, Kimey Roaring, Danny O'Donnell, Gabi Steindl

A

black tiger snake dropped out of a tree and missed landing on my right shoulder by just a few centimetres. It fell to the ground just beside my right foot, and for a split second I thought 'This is it!'. I leapt backwards and the dark reptile lay there, its focus directed right at me. Inside, all I wanted to do was run away, screaming, but I didn't dare move any further. These snakes bite when they're scared and my own heart was beating so loudly I could hear it. There were just the two of us in the rainforest that

I was aware of and I somehow managed to gain some sort of sense of calm as I stood there opposite this highly poisonous, yet completely fascinating creature. All of a sudden the snake bolted into the bushes. Still trembling, thoughts rushed through my mind. I was just 45 minutes into a five hour return hike to the southern tip of this wild and remote land, seemingly at the end of the world. The next land mass is Antarctica some 2,140 miles away (3,444 kilometres). For a moment I considered turning back.

The guide book was already proving right about this World Heritage Site as being 'for those who seek the wonder of the wilderness.' It already felt like a live version of the Discovery Channel. I decided I was curious for more, so took a deep breath and continued walking.

Gazing out over the expanse of the Southern Ocean I tried to imagine the distance between where I was in South Cape Bay and Antarctica. The first European to set foot here in 1642 was the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman, and I wondered how he must have felt when he discovered this land. He had been commissioned by Governor General Anthony Van Diemen to undertake a new voyage in search of the legendary 'Southland'. Given charge of two ships, the 'Heemskerck' (Home Church) and the 'Zeehaen' (Sea Cock), Tasman sailed west from Batavia (today known as Jakarta) across the Indian Ocean to Mauritius where he turned south and headed east along the Roaring Forties, battling heavy seas, fog, hail and snow before he sighted the

rugged southwest coast of, as he would name it, 'Van Diemen's Land'. In 1856 it was officially renamed Tasmania in honour of his pioneering spirit and became a state of Australia in 1901.

Fully exposed to the South Ocean swells, Van Diemen's Land has been on my radar for some time. My own discovery voyage took me 7,200 kilometres back and forth, crisscrossing around the entire island. The island is only 180 miles (315 kilometres) north to south, and so after twice delaying the date of my return ticket, I managed to scope out a great deal of spots in this kiting wonderland. The wind blows with extreme regularity and, no matter where you are, you're never more than an hour away from the ocean and you can kite all round the island. The number of spots (for wave, freestyle or speed) are seemingly endless and with some of the cleanest air and water in the world. Far too many mentions to pack in here in their entirety, I will focus on some highlights for you in this feature.

I had been in touch with Rob and Joanna from Tassie Motor Shacks some time before my trip. Keen sailors and divers themselves, they were very supportive of my plans. Looking at my huge mountain of gear totalling 80 kilos when I arrived to pick up the van (two surfboards, three kiteboards, four kites, accessories and spare parts), Rob immediately got his drill out and quickly constructed me an additional hanging boardrack in no time, which would make my van life much more comfortable. Complete with a super cosy 'penthouse' sleeping compartment in the roof, I named my van 'Zeehaen' in memory of Abe Tasman's ship and hit the road. Armed with information on the main breaks of the South Arm of the island from Joanna's surfing son, Dusty, his words continued to ring in my mind, "The points work for miles, and we consider a break with more than six people as crowded." I had a big grin of anticipation as I pulled out of the van depot and turned onto the main street, called 'Surf Road'.

I set the wheels for the Tasman Peninsula in the



CAPTION > Mindblowingly beautiful...this is Coles Bay in Freycinet National Park with 'The Hazards' as a backdrop

southeast corner, home to the most important convict heritage sites (Port Arthur being the most famous) and then Ship Stern Bluff, one of the most notorious, heavy, big-wave surf spots on the planet. There was no swell that day, but I had to check it out. Only accessible by jet-ski, boat or on foot, it was a good four hour return hike to get to the wave... and the first and last hike I'd do in flip-flops! The views spanning across the capes are stunning while the track is rugged and descends several hundred metres. The real magnitude and scale of the bluff was even more awesome when I got to the bottom and looked up at the 200-foot high face. I also walked around some of the massive boulders on the huge, flat reef shelf that is exposed at low tide. Mother Nature explodes with energy here and it was a daunting thought to consider the big swells that hit this spot.

I had my first surf in the Tasman Sea at Roaring beach the next morning before heading to Marrawah (meaning 'One' in the local Aboriginal language) in the far northwest corner via the scenic route in the Central Highlands. Jo

and Rob had advised me to always fuel up whenever I had the chance as the towns are tiny and petrol stations - like people - are scarce. That vast remoteness and small populations are two of the beauties of this place. Modern life seems to have only reached the biggest cities of the island, and venturing through the countryside areas often feels like you've gone back 30 years (in the nicest way). Kindness seems to be an instinct and the people are genuine. A large proportion of towns have only a two-digit population, many only a single figure of total residents. The 'Shack Culture' - often eccentric and at times bizarre - is another unique attribute to this magical paradise, and could easily serve as a set for an 80s surf movie. It's absolutely lovely.

Marrawah (population 400), is Tasmania's premier location for those chasing wind and waves. Also known as the 'Wild West', waves roll in uninterrupted for almost 17,000 kilometres and energised by the prevailing southwesterly winds. The Red Bull Storm Chase windsurfing event was held here last year in

mad conditions at a spot called BOL (Back of Lighthouse) that needs at least a six metre swell before it starts to work. Things can get pretty hardcore round here, but depending on conditions and locations there are spots that also suit less experienced riders.

I arrived late in the afternoon and the wind was blowing. I stretched my legs with a great kite session just before sunset at Bluff beach, a long sandy beach with some good banks. The wind switched offshore, so I could have easily headed to the east coast in the next days, but instead decided to remain in the west, exploring and surfing. Most breaks are beach breaks and Lighthouse and Kelpies became my favourites. I enjoyed many sessions completely on my own. When conditions got more serious I started to hope that someone else would show up. The offshores are strong here and I'm still



CAPTION > Boosting over the little kickers at a little spot just around the corner from Wetley's



CAPTION > Here: Packing Zeehaen after my very first kite session at Bluff Beach in Marrawah. Above: A girl and her toys! My beloved van Zeehaen was my castle for cruising, living and exploring. www.tassiemotorshacks.com.au





DUSTY'S WORDS CONTINUED TO RING IN MY MIND, "THE POINTS WORK FOR MILES, AND WE CONSIDER A BREAK WITH MORE THAN SIX PEOPLE AS CROWDED."

I HAD A BIG GRIN OF ANTICIPATION AS I PULLED OUT OF THE VAN DEPOT AND TURNED ONTO THE MAIN STREET, CALLED 'SURF ROAD'.

CAPTION > Evening session in the super blue waters of 'Friendly Beaches', an amazing stretch of coastline with white, squeaky sand and nice waves on the east coast. There's a magic little campground right on the shore where I bedded my tired kiter limbs for a couple of nights, absolutely loving life!



CAPTION > Isthmus on Bruny Island - a magic little island that features Cloudy Bay, one of Tassie's top surf spots

laughing about a comment of one local when rooster tails were flying off the back of the waves in the 35 knots winds: "C'mon mate, it's only a light Tassie breeze." Something else I had to get used to was kelp. However, as it mainly grows on reef, it can serve as a cushion when things go a bit wrong in the surf.

Fifteen kilometres south of Marrawah is Arthur River, a truly picturesque little township with a population of 50. The coast to the 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 anywhere in the world. Currents sweep unimpeded from Argentina, more than halfway around earth. Regularly lashed by the gales of the Roaring Forties and consequent South Ocean swells of 50-plus feet (some of the biggest waves ever recorded came in here), there is driftwood all along the seemingly endless beach. Not just logs, but entire trees. Hundreds and hundreds of them.

I met 'Tappo' during my days around Marrawah, a local windsurfer in his 50s, he is a bit of a local legend. He became my weather oracle as well as a good friend as I spent many evenings with him and his wife Hazel in their house overlooking Greens beach and Mount Cameron, an Aboriginal Heritage Site. Hazel works at Port Arthur's ranger station and was happy to answer my questions about the local 'Taz'. It turns out that Marrawah has

the highest number of Tasmanian Devils in the country, however, now extinct on the mainland with the spread of the dingo, devils are now limited only to Tasmania. Mostly nocturnal, they are often spotted at night scavenging on animals hit by cars. In recent years they have come under threat from an outbreak of a disease that causes disfiguring facial tumours and premature death. Scientists are studying the cause in the hope that another unique creature will not be pushed to the edge of extinction.

Tasmania in general and Marrawah in particular are incredibly rich in wildlife. 40% of the island has been set aside as national parks. Some of the world's largest tracts of World Heritage wilderness can be found here and it's very special to be able to observe so many different animals in their natural habitat, including wallabies, wombats, quolls and all sorts of other unique creatures that can only be found here.

One day Tappo borrowed his mate's 4x4 and took me off on an off-road mission into the deep south. The Balfour Track is Tassie's most hardcore four-wheel-drive track and a considerable number of cars are lost here each year to quick sand, or get bogged on the beach too close to the water with incoming tides. We checked



CAPTION > Bichenno, east coast



THE EDGE OF THE WORLD
North West Coast Tasmania

Cast my pebble onto the shore of Eternity,
To be washed by the Ocean of Time,
It has shape, form and substance,
It is me.
One day I will be no more,
But my pebble will remain here,
On the shore of Eternity,
Mute Witness for the peons,
That today I came and stood,
At the edge of the world.

Brian Under



CAPTION > Coles Bay, Freycinet Peninsula

out a couple of little fishing towns and breaks along the way, such as Temma and Jack Smith Harbour, however the howling 40 knot offshore winds saw us continuing our drive further into the vast, remote wilderness. We didn't meet a single soul all day but did have a close call, getting the car bogged in a rather dangerous position at Sandy Cape, which supposedly features the largest sand dunes in the southern hemisphere. Fortunately we were able to get out before adding to the statistics as victims of the Southern Ocean.

The following days saw swell, beautiful sunshine and winds reaching mid-20 knots. Frontal northeasterlies switch with southwesterly and southeasterly winds and are often aided by a seabreeze in Marrawah. I kited a number of different spots on both tacks. There are about 20 kick-ass wave spots in the area and, although the waves

were rather unorganised in the predominantly onshore winds, I had a blast. If you're into freestyle or speed kiting, check the tides and head to Port Sorell where low tide reveals an extensive sandbar creating a long stretch of flat water. The area around Stanley, about 50 kilometres north of Marrawah, has a huge inlet boasting great flat water kiting as well as several wave spots that are an absolute joy. Look out for 'The Nut' iconic landmark - an old volcanic plug that rises to 143 metres.

The east coast was up next. I pulled into a car-park at Binalong Bay (population 200) in pitch black and the next morning my eyes nearly popped out of my head when I stepped out of the van. The beach was snow white with incredible turquoise, crystal-clear water. Coffee cup in hand, I went for a little walk. The sand was so fine that it squeaked under foot as I wandered in awe along the shore and beside the

water that was as close to sheet glass as I've seen. Binalong Bay, with bright orange granite boulders at each end, sits at the southern end of the 'Bay of Fires' (extending to Eddystone Point in the north). Captain Tobias saw the fires of Aboriginal people on the beaches in 1773 and so named this bay, which is now famous for its stunning coastline and the orange granite (which is actually produced by lichen growing on the rocks).

The central east coast is much more developed than the west, with a number of lovely little tourist towns all along the coast, such as St. Helens, Scamander and Bicheno, all featuring a considerable number of surf breaks and guaranteeing heaps of fun to be had on a kite. Waves are generally much smaller than in the west and it takes a considerable swell to push down from mainland Australia to get the east coast breaks firing over three feet, and



THE COAST TO THE 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 ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD. CURRENTS SWEEP UNIMPEDED FROM ARGENTINA, MORE THAN HALFWAY AROUND EARTH.

CAPTION > The flat water river-mouth playground of Swanwick



CAPTION > Here and left: Jacob's Ladder, Ben Lomond, on the way to the second highest point in Tasmania, a premier ski resort in winter and one of the scariest roads I've ever driven. "Ha ha, hardcore Tassie!" I thought to myself as we crawled uphill in first gear. With no railings, there's no way this road would be publicly accessible in Europe!

happens only rarely in summer.

Just outside of St. Helens, however, I had another big experience - my first Tassie oysters. The oyster industry is a vibrant marine farming sector here and this delicious delicacy is grown all around the Apple Isle. I personally love the slimy, tasty little mollusc and was in heaven being able to buy them super fresh directly from the farms in dozens for about AUD\$9. Needless to say I ate more oysters in my time in Tassie than in my entire life combined. Tasmania's seafood is beautiful, and like so many things in Tassie, comes in 'XL'.

A swell alert prompted me back to Marrawah (via a very sketchy drive up Ben Lomond), however, my anticipation for an epic day of kiting in big waves was trashed as the wind was blowing with such a gale force. I watched the spectacle through the van windows. Parked up at my favourite spot,

Lighthouse, it felt like Zeehaen would be blown over at any moment. I needed to answer my own call of nature but couldn't physically open the side door without moving the van to a different angle to the wind. Kiting would have been suicidal so I navigated my way to 'The Edge of the World' wanting to see Mother Nature going wild down there. I crawled on all fours to the viewing platform and didn't even last a minute, never having been so close to becoming airborne (without my kite!).

The next day was more manageable and I got out at Lighthouse. I normally enjoy riding bigger waves, however I can't deny it's a completely different story to take on a pumping reef break at one of the spots back home in WA compared to a South Ocean beach break in the Wild West of Tassie. Once it gets big around Marrawah, the banks turn into heavy washing machines with westerly swells

that are often huge and completely out of control. Perfection can seem elusive, but that's all part of the Tassie experience and you won't forget the magic of the Wild West. If you seek and get a little bit of luck all the elements can line up and I truly enjoyed the challenge of tackling the conditions as the only person in the water for miles and miles.

Trial Harbour on the central west coast was my absolute favourite place in Tassie, not just because of the fantastic surf. Home to only 14 permanent residents, surrounded by steep, green mountains and an idyllic little camp ground right at the water's edge, it was incredibly hard to leave this magic little shack town after a few unforgettable days.

Shortly before my scheduled flight I got a phone call from Tappo: "Gabi, Back of Lighthouse might be working on Thursday. You should come up and bring the best photographer you can." I didn't need any

I NAVIGATED MY WAY TO 'THE EDGE OF THE WORLD' WANTING TO SEE MOTHER NATURE GOING WILD DOWN THERE. I CRAWLED ON ALL FOURS TO THE VIEWING PLATFORM AND DIDN'T EVEN LAST A MINUTE, NEVER HAVING BEEN SO CLOSE TO BECOMING AIRBORNE (WITHOUT MY KITE!).

CAPTION > Nettley's Bay, MarraWay. The rain had cleared, though unfortunately the swell dropped after chasing it all the way north. Regardless of the small waves, I loved kiting at this stunning spot!

more convincing, but the issue was convincing one of the top local surf photographers to take the strenuous six hour drive from Hobart with me. I succeeded with Andrew 'Chiza' Chisholm, a winner of multiple photo awards at the Big Wave Awards and also managed to organise two jet-skis for the days in prospect, which would secure different shooting angles and safety cover in case something went wrong as the waters around BOL can contain very strong rips.

The night before the swell was forecast to arrive, Chiza and I set Zeehaen's course for the Wild West. The weather had hit by next morning and the swell buoy of the Bureau of Meteorology read 8 - 12 metres. Staring out of the window into the heaviest rain I had seen in all my time in Tasmania was devastating. It got worse instead of better as the day went on, with the rain increasing and the wind reading over 50 knots, all topped off with hale stones. To brighten the mood Tappo, Chiza and I headed to the Marrawah Tavern for a beer. It was Thursday night and thus 'Farmers' Night', which was an experience in itself, especially as I was the only girl there!

It was still raining the next morning, Zeehaen had a puncture and the swell that was supposed to be hanging around had disappeared. Well, Tassie's weather is often unpredictable, even for the most knowledgeable locals and often proves totally contrary to the actual forecast. The skies cleared in the afternoon though and for the next two days Chiza and I enjoyed some very fun sessions at a number of spots in beautiful sunshine and consistent wind. Chiza received a phone call arranging another appointment with Mother Nature, this time from Tassie's big wave posse who were eyeing up the chances of Ship Stern Bluff breaking for the first time in nearly a year. I went with him and this time the forecast came through perfectly. Sitting on the big boulders and watching one of the best big wave surfing shows that I'll probably ever see was the perfect end to my time here. All the big local chargers were there,



amongst them Marti Paradisi, the infamous Tyler brothers, James Hollmer-Cross (who won the Big Wave Awards in 2013 on top of other awards), Danny Griffith and James McKean. Seeing them tow this evil mutant beast and flying over its gnarly steps before pulling into the heaviest barrels was a privilege.

Driving Zeehaen to the end of Australia's southernmost road, to Cockle Creek (population three) for our two last nights, was the final little present that I took away from my adventure in Van Diemen's Land. Set on the edge of Tasmania's World Heritage Site, it is a gorgeous bay in the most tranquil and peaceful setting. I celebrated this trip of a lifetime in pure Tassie-style with a bonfire and some fresh pacific oysters that I collected out of the creek, which were nearly the size of my feet!

I fell in love with this truly unique kite-paradise-island and can't deny that Tassie has totally gotten me under its spell. The memory of its natural beauty and empty waves will live with me forever. There are plenty of virgin surfing and kiting spots awaiting discovery by generations of adventurers to come.

It's up to you to make it your turn. ☺

I CELEBRATED THIS TRIP OF A LIFETIME IN PURE TASSIE-STYLE WITH A BONFIRE AND SOME FRESH PACIFIC OYSTERS THAT I COLLECTED OUT OF THE CREEK, WHICH WERE NEARLY THE SIZE OF MY FEET!

CAPTION > Greens Beach, Marrawah, the most mellow spot in the area. When it's three feet at Greens, it's six foot everywhere else along the coast



CAPTION > Beach shack, Cockle Creek

DOING VAN DIEMEN'S

GETTING THERE

There are no direct international flights to/ from Tasmania, but regular flights run from all major cities via Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. Alternatively many travel to Tasmania from Melbourne by sea on the Spirit of Tasmania. Travellers entering Australia on a foreign passport will need a visa.

GETTING AROUND

Gabi recommends traveling in a campervan. She used Tassie Motor Shacks who will pick you up at the airport and have a fleet of 60 vans for all travelers' needs and budgets, located seven kilometres from Hobart airport. www.tassiemotorshacks.com.au

Air temperatures range from 15 – 30°C / 59 – 86°F in summer (December – February) and 4 – 12°C / 39 – 54°F in winter. January and February are the most reliable months for wind (and any strength is possible!). Winter tends to be stormy, wet and overcast most of the time. The spring (September – November) is stormy and unreliable, but very often windy and with the most rainfall.

Water temperatures peak around 18 – 20°C / 64 – 68°F in the summer and 10 – 13°C / 50 – 55°F.

FOOD

Tassie is a food paradise. Atlantic salmon, abalone, scallops, octopus, wild trout and rock lobster from Tasmania are world renowned. Prime cheeses, cool-climate wines and some of Australia's leading boutique beers and whiskeys are produced here and there are lots of delicatessens selling locally grown goods.

SNAKES

Tasmania is home to three breeds of snake – the Tiger, Copperhead and White-lipped snakes, all of which are venomous. Snakes are just as wary of you as you are of them, so with a little knowledge the chances of being bitten are low. They will usually slither away before you come near if you tread heavily. Solid footwear and jeans are a good idea when walking. The last person to die from a snake bite in Tasmania was a snake handler in 1977, and the last person in the bush was 1966. Venomous snakes deserve respect, but you're more likely to die from bee stings or spouses!

WHERE TO STAY

Most National Parks have campgrounds that are free or charge only a nominal fee – but you will need a Parks Pass for the 19 National Parks, which you can purchase at any visitor or travel information centre, or online at: www.parks.tas.gov.au There are many free camping areas outside parks as well.

CLIMATE

There's a saying on the island: "If you don't like the weather, come back in half-an-hour." Due to its location in the Roaring Forties, the weather in Tasmania can change several times a day at any time of year, so bring many layers of clothing, some warm thermals, gloves, hoodie and rain jacket.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST

MONA, the \$75m Museum of Old and New Art opened in Hobart in January 2011 to global acclaim and is a must-see. Based around nudity, art, sex and death it's an outstandingly innovative institution, described by its eccentric philanthropist owner David Walsh as a 'subversive adult Disneyland'. Woo hoo!

