

Walk on the wild side

WALKING SHOES AND A SENSE OF ADVENTURE ENABLED OUR WRITER TO EXPLORE TASMANIA'S WILD SOUTHERN COASTLINE FROM THE COMFORT OF AN EXPEDITION VESSEL.

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Like giant bundles of upright pencils the dolerite columns thrust skyward, impervious to the waves licking at their base. Sentinel-like they soar 300m, the highest sea cliffs in the Southern Hemisphere. Their irregular height columns, etched light and dark, resemble an enormous Pin Art toy of the 1980s.

Wind whips my hair and skims spray from the swell as I stand on deck mesmerised by the narrow passage between Cape Pillar, on Tasmania's Tasman Peninsula, and tiny Tasman Island.

That's the beauty of a small expedition ship – it can manoeuvre so close to shore

we can see the remains of the flying fox used to transfer lighthouse-keeping staff and supplies onto Tasman Island, the hazards of which we learnt about last night during an onboard screening of the documentary *Coast*.

Coral Expedition I's seven-night, round-trip exploratory cruise from Hobart takes in the highlights of southern Tasmania's rugged beauty, much of which is only accessible by water – think Southwest Cape, Bruny Island, Maria Island, Freycinet and Tasman peninsulas.

The 35m catamaran is the ideal size – large enough to handle Tassie's

unpredictable weather, small enough to anchor close to shore, intimate enough to get to know the staff and maximum 46 passengers, yet with a galley capable of showcasing Tasmania's bountiful local produce.

Expedition leader Denis McDowell, together with marine biologist Mike Sugden and a Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife ranger, leads daily shore excursions through National Parks and World Heritage Areas, for both active and less mobile guests, interspersed with onboard lectures. Transferring ashore is a breeze in the excursion vessel *Explorer*.



Wineglass Bay.

Exclusive tours include the Marine Discovery Centre at Woodbridge, a window into the huge diversity of Tasmania's marine life, from tiny phytoplankton viewed under the microscope to live stingrays and sharks. At Grandveve Cheeses Pauline Treillard enchants as much with her French accent and animal antics as with the award-winning sheep's milk cheeses and whey liqueur, and at Port Arthur our emotive behind-the-scenes tour culminates with a Captain's reception on the rose-perfumed balcony of the Visiting Magistrate's House.

On Bruny Island the adventurous tackle



Cape Pillar.

Fluted Cape Loop, traversing tall sea cliffs for panoramic views over Penguin Island, before visiting the Bligh Museum in Adventure Bay to ponder the maritime memorabilia.

Fishing gannets, playful dolphins, humpback whales and a cavorting seal accompany us along the Tasman Peninsula. *The Explorer* whisks within whiffing distance of seals lounging on rocks above the pounding waves, one with a visible shark-bite scar.

Tiny shells crunch underfoot at Pirates Bay as we explore the tessellated pavements daubed with yellow and orange lichen. Bull kelp surges on the seaward side as a pair of Pacific gulls brace themselves in the battering wind.

We experience the same bracing breeze on Maria Island, wandering the remains of Darlington Settlement in the company of Cape Barren geese, walking atop the Fossil Cliffs and fossicking at their base, before sailing on to Riedle Bay.

An afternoon sojourn to this pristine white beach, home to tiny black-capped plovers, turns into an epic seven kilometre walk for those who cross the narrow isthmus to Shoal Bay and continue to the desolated convict ruins of Bloodstone Point, where majestic Forrester kangaroos and waddling wombats feed in the late afternoon light.

On the Freycinet Peninsula the climb from Coles Bay, through granite boulders leads to The Saddle for a view of Wineglass Bay. As we descend to the crescent-shaped beach, named for its blood-stained waters during the whaling days, *Coral Expeditions I* sails into view, having cruised around the peninsula to meet us.

I'm eager to explore Port Davey and Bathurst Harbour in SouthWest National

Park, accessible only by plane or boat, but we're thwarted by bad weather. Disappointment looms, but no one wants to battle gale force winds and 5 – 6 metre swells – some guests are already suffering 'mal de mer'.

Instead we explore Southport's tree-lined, tannin-tinted lagoon, drifting to a symphony of bird song as white-bellied sea eagles and elegant herons watch warily from overhead branches. Cruising the Huon River takes us to Franklin and the Wooden Boat Shed dedicated to traditional timber boat building methods. I inhale the smell of fresh wood shavings while learning about 'green gold' or Huon pine, revered as the ultimate boat building timber.

There's time to wander Franklin's main street, where climbing roses tumble over front fences, antique and bric-a-brac shops invite browsing and the pub beckons with quirky signage. It's an unexpected but relaxing finale to our expedition cruise. •

Briar Jensen was a guest of Coral Expeditions. Visit Briar's blog [@] www.BriarsTravelBeat.com.au

FACT FILE

Coral Expeditions' seven-night Tasmanian coastal cruise from Hobart runs annually from mid-November to the end of February. Visit [@] www.coralexpeditions.com Stay pre- or post-cruise in Hobart at The Henry Jones Art Hotel. Visit [@] www.thehenryjones.com