

SAVING THE LOST WORLD

The Deadly Secrets of Tasmania's Hidden Coasts



Velocity

"Pssst!! Kristy!!!"

Loud, insistent whispers wake me up. I'm buried in a sleeping bag, cosy in my gently rocking bunk. Deep in the belly of the *Velocity*, the 56-foot cray-fishing surf charter boat that I, along with seven others, currently call home. All is dark and quiet...

"Kristy! Kristy!!!"

Except for that adamant voice. The voice that belongs to the Tasmanian who has begun pulling at my ankle because it's time to check the surf, and he wants a wave before we start work. So do I. Eyes open, I'm awake.

I climb up on to a damp and frigid deck chilled by Tasmanian sea air. Nature's cinema floored me last night with its rolling silhouettes of mountains under clear skies, dripping with stars and moonlight. Daylight reveals last night's anchorage at the serene New Harbour/Beer Can Bay. I swap my thermals for 4/3 wettie, hot vest, booties and hood. Skipper Dave Wyatt is preparing the dinghy with fellow Tasmanians Matt and Jimmy Dell. I'm keenly over the rail and into the dinghy.

We push away from the *Velocity* and motor through quartzite features nearby, land steep and thick with impenetrable scrub and rainforest and cool, steel grey waters, dark and deep.

What am I doing out here on a boat in remote Tasmania checking the surf before work? Because, as well as checking the surf, we are scoping the beach and its accessibility for the dinghy. I'm one of 12 volunteers on this year's Surfrider Tassie Marine Debris cleanup, a trip that ventures to the South West Coast wilderness and World Heritage Areas to collect marine debris. Such debris - the remains of rubbish disposed of in the ocean that washes onto the shore - is responsible for the death of marine life, which can often mistake the rubbish for prey. Small pieces, such as plastic, cigarette butts and loose fishing tackle are eaten by marine mammals and birds, lodging in their stomachs and



Story by | KRISTY THEISSLING

REMARKABLE LANDSCAPES ON THE VOYAGE SOUTH. WORTH KEEPING PRISTINE INSET: BING! AUTHOR KRISTY HAS AN IDEA, "STOP PUTTING YOUR LIGHTBULBS IN THE OCEAN, IT'S NOT GOOD FOR THE ENVIRONMENT!" | JAMES DELL |

throats and causing them to starve to death. Larger objects, such as loose fishing nets and ropes can also get caught around the flippers, fins and necks of larger marine mammals, causing choking and death. The South West is 16 hours by boat from Hobart, unless you have a helicopter or fancy days of bushwalking. There's no-one else here, just wilderness and us. I'm stoked.

Spain Bay

Where we anchor the boat and begin cleaning depends on the weather, which, in this part of the world, can be extremely heavy. It rains on average 250 days per year, the highest recorded wind speed is 170 km/h and it's usually below 10 degrees when you get up in the morning. Hardcore.

Today, it's overcast, with light rain and 15-25 knot winds tending west-south-westerly. It's a six foot westerly swell, and building. Best location for us in these conditions is Spain Bay, about eight hours steaming from South Cape. Dave Wyatt is a pro cray-fisherman, surfer and has 20 years experience of the Tasmanian coastlines. He knows these oceans - the remote surf spots, the safe anchorages and big waves - like no-one on the planet. The dinghy is like an extension of his body, and he safely delivers us through rocks and chunky swells to the white sands of this remote, isolated beach. On the beach, we grab a rubbish bag and start walking, looking for debris. There are 12 of us, all Tasmanians except for the two ring-ins from the surf industry. We all have one thing in common: the ocean. There's a marine campaigner, an environmental scientist, cartographer, fisherman, marine scientist, marine educator, and environmental fundraiser, an artist and an architect. In our storm-proof jackets and gummies, we scour the beaches, surrounding shrubbery and sea caves through squalls of rain, wind and occasional sunny patches.



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WHO DROPPED THIS 1984 SODIUM CHLORIDE MEDICAL BAG IN THE OCEAN? | CLEANUP CREW PHOTOS | **OPPOSITE: TOP TO BOTTOM:** SCENES FROM THE HAUL. TYLER HOLMER-CROSS DROPS HIS WALLET IN THE TASSIE SOUTH WEST. | DAVEY | AND DID WE MENTION THE AREA GETS PLENTY OF SWELL? | GIBSON |

The posse at the front score easy-to-see and large items like fuel drums, long ropes, bottles and buoys or chunks of polystyrene. The middle of the crew get to dig for things like 4x4 tarps, industrial plastic bags, fertilizer and bait bags, and metres of rope buried deep in the sand. The loners at the back, immersed in their iTunes libraries, would obsess over the thousands of pieces of small plastics, bait box straps, bottle caps, lids, cans, food containers, small pieces of rope and netting disguised in the sand. Even the smallest pieces are lethal. After several hours the dinghy returns to taxi us and our rubbish bags back to the *Velocity*. Before dinner, we throw a blue tarp on the rear of the deck and begin sorting and counting it by category, the data from which is compiled and used for research into the impact of marine debris in this area. Every person has a role. Multi-trip veterans Jimmy and Dana, cooking for all of us, observe from the cabin. Heath clears the deck, empties and rinses our rubbish bags that he lays on the tarp. Matt, in deck chair armed with clipboard, pen and a Cascade Green, would meticulously add the items that we called, Jenni, Stu, Bec, Dave, Amanda, Sophie, Leisa and I sort, piece-by-piece, the day’s haul into recyclables and rubbish. We eat, drink, drink some more and go to bed, rocked gently, and some times not so gently, to sleep.

Chew-and-Spew and Hannants Inlet

Everyone has their sea legs now, except for me. It’s the worst when we are steaming, especially today as we made our way around South West Cape. In the early 1900s, the South West Coast was a popular place to get ship wrecked, owing to reef strike or rock walls or giant storms. The large swells tend to cross up around the cape, causing the boat to buck and swirl. With the smell of diesel wafting around the deck, it’s an assault on the senses for the uninitiated. An indicator: I’m about 15-20 away from puking my guts up. The Tasmanian Detox/Core Body Strengthening/Weight Loss Program, we called it. Seasickness ... avoidable, right? Pull over, calmer water, then you’re sweet, yeah? And if those options aren’t there... Seasickness pills, Kwells and some ginger, and you’re good to go? Not if you keep spewing them up. Not if there’s no escape from the lurching deck. But... it’s all in your mind, right? Bull. Shit. When I hit stomach lining and considered how many days of steaming lay ahead, I wondered how much the human body could vomit. Time for the 15-minute Chew ‘N’ Spew program. Eat crackers and drink ginger beer for five - sleep for five - spew for five. And repeat. This. Lasted. For. Hours. When we finally reach anchorage, I’m first in the dinghy. Hannants Inlet. On the beach and kissing the sand. Whoever Hannant is I want to marry him and have a million of his children. We are inside the prehistoric Port Davey, which quickly makes up for my recent experience: granite features all round, snow-capped mountains, sloping tree lines merging with pristine, calm waters, sheltered from the winds outside the port. Hannants gave us 2,147 pieces of rubbish. We are days from civilisation. I’m amazed at how I can find a plastic bottle made, packaged and sold in NSW on the shore at my feet. Stuck under a log of ancient Huon pine, nestled in a sea cave, wedged in the tea-tree.

The Tasmanians

The weather is madness today with rolling, 15 to 20-foot swells. We are having a rest and recreation day, tucked up high inside Port Davey. We spend the day surfing rock-bottom points, water thick and dull brown with bull kelp, eating and enjoying boat life. Ocean banter fills the deck. These Tassie folk are very impressive. The fishermen of the *Velocity*, Pinto, Chieftain G and the Miss Carmen chaperoned us into some of the wildest locations in the country. They have more brains and experience than any biology

lecturer or Bronze instructor I’ve ever known. Combined with the intellect of the crew of volunteers, all from environmental professions, this turned into an eight-day trip of marine education. I was taught about picking wave heights from behind, driving the dinghy in the surf zone, coping with sea-sickness in massive swells, quick-fixes to injury when you’re a helicopter flight from help, and about capturing a live cray, eating a dead one and everything in between. I was shown how to negotiate reef bottom point breaks, deep sand bottom channels and giant blankets of slimy bull kelp trying to take you under. Others explained the intricacies of an octopode neurological system, an Albatross’s flight path and the prehistoric south-western Seven Gilled Shark - a sand-coloured, placid gigantor that feeds in the shallows of shore-breaks. Eep. The surfing is like nothing I’ve ever experienced. Except for the bits of bait strap and plastic I collect during the day, the south-west seems more untouched than anywhere I’ve ever been. Sitting out the back of a rock bottom point break, water dark and thick with bull kelp, three-foot waves rolling in. Other girl surfers on this trip, we all giggle... Dewed aromas fill my lungs and I’m enveloped by Jurassic, mammoth mountains. I feel drunk and out-of-body in this surreal, hidden world. I take slow, deep breaths and try to trap all the aromas and wildness inside of me. It’s intoxicating.

Cox’s and Trumpeters

It’s the second last day. I don’t want it to end. We cleaned Cox’s Beach and Big Trumpeter Beach today. There wasn’t much rubbish there, only a few hundred pieces on each beach. But we still managed to find some weird shit: a pre-1984 Sodium Chloride medical drip bag at Cox’s, and a yellow roadwork warning light at Trumpeters. Other weird stuff we found earlier in the trip included a children’s potty and a Letter in a Bottle, or, as Matt called it, Polluter in a Bottle. What losers put this stuff in the ocean? Tragic romantics, I guess. Letter guy left his name, number and home address - maybe I’ll give him a call and tell him to grow a brain.

Tonne of Rubbish

By the trip’s end we had 9,500 pieces of rubbish; a small crane had to lift 1.4 tonnes of rubbish off the back of the *Velocity*. There were 2174 pieces of plastic, 1981 pieces of small rope, 1131 bait box straps. The list goes on. The most horrific item we found were the 10-gill nets, some inside the World Heritage area. It’s a fine filament net, about 20 to 50 metres long and two-metres deep. It takes all species and sizes of marine life in its path - fish, birds, sharks, everything. If the nets lose their anchoring, it continues to drift around catching marine life, until (if) they wash up. Matt was telling me that Tassie is the only state where the recreational use of gill nets is legal.

Home

I return home to my city humbled by the South West. It’s a place with no boundaries of time or space, a place where each individual is equal with the earth, and therefore at the mercy of its waters, its vegetation, its inhabitants, its diverse, unannounced weather, its unforgiving seas, and all of its natural elements. Yes, I came home a total hippy. And to be honest, I also came home a little cranky. Cranky that even in the most far away, wild areas, humankind has still managed to leave their shit behind. But I’m stoked that there are ways to give something back. *Take action by visiting surfrider.org.au and participating in the Surfrider Foundation & Tangaroa Blue Marine Debris National Initiative. Dave Wyatt from Southern Ocean Adventures donates his time, expertise and his boats for the Tassie cleanups. southernoceanadventures.com. Surfrider’s Matt Dell voluntarily manages, plans and participates in the cleanup initiative each year.* ■

