





Thrilling. Tasmania

Jo Caird made the long journey to Tasmania to explore the island's giant kelp forests, but found a wealth of other underwater and topside attractions

Photographs by **JO CAIRD AND STEVE PRETTY**





Gearing up at the dive centre



The historic site of Port Arthur

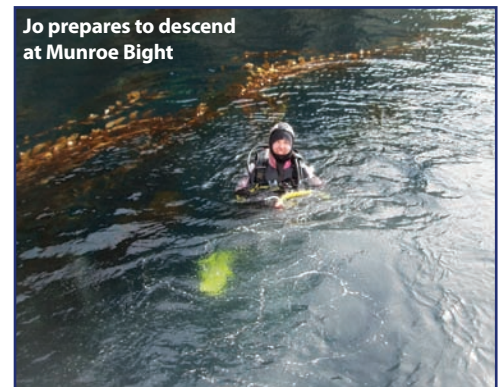
Picture yourself in a forest: fronds of sun-soaked greenery tower above you; the vegetation is so lush that you must plan your route carefully so as to avoid becoming entangled; fearless wildlife surveys you with curiosity. Then imagine that you are untroubled by gravity: that there are no limits to your exploration of this extraordinary environment. Finally, imagine silence disturbed only by the sound of your own breathing. Welcome to the giant kelp forests of eastern Tasmania.

Munroe Bight, where I found myself clad in 7mm of neoprene one chilly morning at the end of Australian summer earlier this year, is one of few areas along the coast of the Tasman Peninsula where giant kelp is still flourishing. Once common in the region, *Macrocystis pyrifera* has been badly affected by climate change and increased human activity, explained Mick Baron, co-owner of Eaglehawk Dive Centre, as he carefully manoeuvred the dive boat so as not to damage any of the fronds floating near the surface. It may not be long before the giant kelp forests are gone from the area altogether - this was my chance to try a unique underwater experience.

Eaglehawk Dive Centre is located at Eaglehawk Neck, a narrow spit of land connecting the Tasman Peninsula to the Tasmanian mainland. Despite being very conveniently located for Hobart (with its daily flights to Sydney and Melbourne), the area feels rustic and remote. In the 19th century the peninsula was home to one of the bleakest penal settlements in the British Empire and, while I found no trace of that bleakness during my stay, I could see that the area's unique geography, with the wild Southern Ocean at such close proximity, could make winters somewhat of a challenge. The bronze sculpture of a snarling dog positioned at Eaglehawk Neck is a stark reminder of the fate that awaited convicts who attempted to escape from the penal settlement at Port Arthur.



Briefing before the Cathedral Cave dive



Jo prepares to descend at Munroe Bight

“While very-experienced divers can take their pick from over 80 dive sites in the area, those with fewer dives under their weightbelt are more limited in their options”

My buddy and I put together our hired gear under the watchful gaze of a ginger tabby, some chickens and a friendly duck at Eaglehawk's idiosyncratic hill-top location. Having completed a drysuit course earlier in the year, I had been hoping to tackle the 17° degree C water with a layer of air between me and the waves, but as the centre doesn't have drysuits to hire and I don't own my own, I contented myself with neoprene and gritted teeth.

Fifteen minutes later and we were setting off from Eaglehawk Neck Jetty with Mick at the helm and Koen Alloing along as a guide on a two-dive expedition that would take us 20km from HQ, almost to the southernmost tip of the peninsula's east coast.

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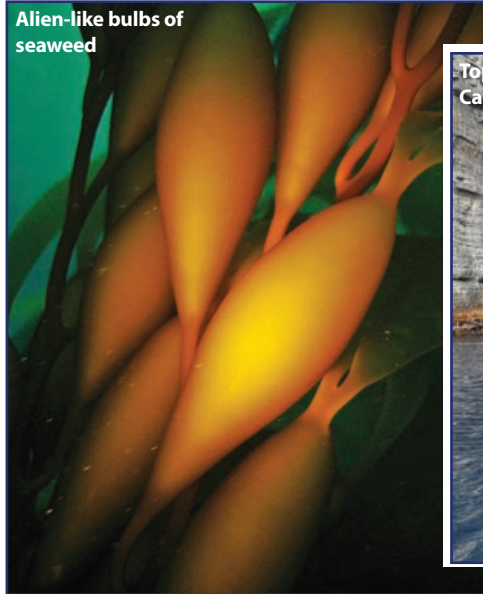
their options. Being inexperienced in cooler waters and not in possession of a Deep Diver qualification, I was advised that the wreck of the SS Nord, a 1057-tonne cargo ship that sank off the coast of the peninsula in 1915, was off-limits, as were the 'Deep Walls' dive sites, 'Sisters Rock', 'The Thumbs' and 'Deep Glen Bay - North Wall'. These ridges, pinnacles and shelves, with their spectacular sponge gardens and other extraordinary displays of marine life, will just have to wait for another time.

Fortunately, there are plenty of excellent dives available in the area at shallower depths, including of course, the giant kelp forest, the main reason for my trip. Visibility at Munroe Bight that day was around 20 metres, meaning I had a fantastic view of the 'canopy' of the kelp forest up at the surface while swimming close to the sea floor, and vice versa. I can't even imagine what it





Kelp



Alien-like bulbs of seaweed



Topside at Cathedral Cave



Crayfish

must be like to dive there in the autumn when vis can extend up to 45 metres.

Large boulders littered the seabed, some of them so covered by the anchors, or 'holdfasts', of individual kelp plants that they were barely visible. As I was descending I caught sight of an octopus sheltering in the nook of a large rock. A column of kelp drifted into the way before I was able to get a good enough look to be able to identify it (the one downside to diving in kelp, I discovered), but it was an auspicious start to a dive unlike any I'd done before.

What made the experience so affecting was the sense of truly inhabiting three dimensions. I've had an approximation of this feeling on other dives - hovering in the midst of a large shoal of fish or swimming along a deep wall, for example - but this was nothing compared to drifting through the kelp forest on a gentle current that morning at Munroe Bight. Shoals of banded and jackass morwong, wrasse and petite butterfly perch made their way past, while a long-snouted boarfish nosed around. No sign of the weedy sea dragon on this 40-minute dive unfortunately, but Mick assured me that I would meet this rare relative of the seahorse later in the day. He knew where one lived and would take me to it, he said.

Protected from the worst of the wind chill by a heavy-duty waterproof jacket provided by the dive centre, I spent the journey to Waterfall Bay, the second of the day's dive sites, gazing up at the Jurassic dolerite and sandstone cliffs glowering over the

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Swimming in the kelp

ESSENTIAL INFO

Maui Motorhomes (maui.com.au) offer two-, four- and six-berth vehicles. The two-berth Ultima starts from A\$151 per day and includes a king-sized bed, shower, toilet, apartment-style kitchen and a slide-out gas barbecue. For more information about Tasmania, visit discovertasmania.com Standard admission to the Port Arthur Historic Site (portarthur.org.au) is A\$32 (A\$16 child). The three-hour Wilderness Cruise with Tasman Island Cruises (tasmancruises.com.au) is A\$110.

calm waters of the Tasman Sea. The coastline here has been shaped by the elements into extraordinary formations - the Candlestick and Totem Pole are both popular with climbers, while features such as the Tessellated Pavement and the Devil's Kitchen attract tourists on daytrips from Hobart. Australian fur seals and their smaller cousins, the New Zealand fur seals, basked on the rocks, the sassier individuals among them baring their teeth angrily before plopping into the water at the approach of the dive boat.



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

Tasmania



How to get there

Jetstar (jetstar.com) and Virgin Australia (virginaustralia.com) fly to Hobart from Melbourne (45 minutes) and Sydney (90 minutes), with several flights daily. A large number of international carriers operate between the UK and Australia.

When to go

You can dive at Eaglehawk all year round, but the main season - when visibility is best - runs from April to July. Tasmania's climate is similar to the UK's.

"As I swept my torch beam through the darkness, luminous sponges and tiny crustaceans appeared in a blaze of colour"

Entry requirements

British passport holders require a visa to enter Australia. For visa information, visit: immi.gov.au



Currency

Australian dollar (£1 = A\$1.47).

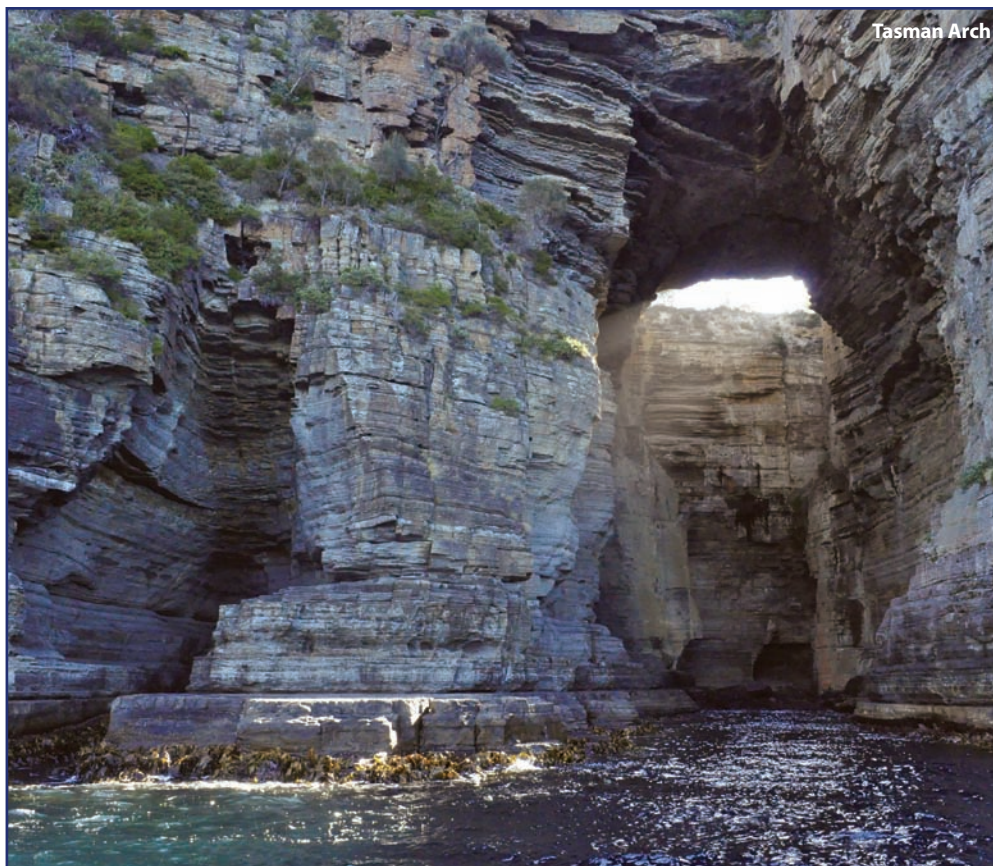


Diving

A two-dive standard package at Eaglehawk Dive Centre (eaglehawkdive.com.au) costs A\$105 per person, or A\$200 including full gear hire.



Tasmania offers a wealth of underwater delights for experienced divers, though anyone can enjoy exploring the giant kelp forests. Topside, Tasmania is great for those who love the outdoors.



Tasman Arch

Mick's running commentary, as we warmed up with cup-a-soup and snack-sized chocolate bars between dives, was an excellent taster for the Tasman Island Cruise, a longer boat trip that I took the following day. Departing from near the Port Arthur Historic Site, the best-preserved convict site in Australia (itself well worth a visit), the cruise takes you out into the choppy Southern Ocean and circumnavigates Tasman Island before exploring the eastern coastline. Small custom-designed vessels let you get up really close enough to the cliffs, making this a very full-on experience.

Not quite as full-on, however, as the dive at Cathedral Cave, in Waterfall Bay. One of the largest sea cave systems in Australia, Cathedral Cave comprises a huge entrance with a maximum depth of 21m and a network of tunnels and narrow passages that criss-cross the cliff. Any nervousness I felt at attempting this daunting site was assuaged by Mick's highly detailed dive briefing. It was clear he knew every nook and cranny of the cave system - I'd be in very safe hands.

Aside from the draughtboard shark that greeted us as we descended, Cathedral Cave consisted entirely of more-compact treasures. As I swept my torch beam through the darkness, luminous sponges and tiny crustaceans appeared in a blaze of colour. A yellow and purple nudibranch made its slow way along the edge of a shelf. A lone dragonet seemed to hover above the rocky bottom of a narrow tunnel.

The weedy sea dragon proved allusive here too - "it was here last week, I promise," said Mick

- but I've no regrets. The moment when I emerged into the chamber known as 'Skull Cave' to see the sunlight streaming through its massive eye holes; the glimpse of a clutch of cuttlefish eggs clinging to the ceiling of a low passage; the powerful tug of the swell as I exited the tunnel ready to ascend for a safety stop in front of a lush wall of invertebrates - the dive was one high after another.

Back on dry land that afternoon, we took in the quirky delights of Doo Town, a village of 1930s buildings whose names all include the word 'doo', before parking up our hired camper van at the viewing point overlooking Tasman Arch. A geological feature created by the falling in of a sea cave centuries ago, it's a popular tourist site. After nightfall, however, when all the daytrippers had returned to Hobart, we had the place entirely to ourselves; the only soundtrack to our starlit barbecue was the rush of the sea through the ancient archway.

The following morning we were well into a pre-breakfast bush walk before the first tourists arrived. Heading south through the temperate rainforest that tops some of the highest sea cliffs in Australia, we eventually arrived at Waterfall Bay. As the bright early morning sunshine twinkled on a completely flat sea, we looked down on where we had been diving the previous day. There was no indication of the magic that lay beneath, just a crayfishing boat pulling up traps left overnight and a shy albatross wheeling over the water in the distance. ■

For a comprehensive list of tour operators, check out: www.sportdiver.co.uk/operators