



FLIGHT *of fancy*

Tasmania's wilderness is glorious at ground level. But as Susan Elliott writes, an air safari delivers an extraordinary bird's-eye view of the landscape.



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From a distance, Freycinet's crushed-rock runway looks a tad narrow. Trees framing the clearing loom like overgrown giants from the Jurassic age. And, I'm told the field slopes to the west. But I'm *not* the pilot and trust that with a name like Friendly Beaches Airfield, there is nothing ahead but a happy landing.

Touchdown is a thrill. We cheer like kids – the five metres proves easily wide enough for our Grand Caravan aircraft. The Outback by Air Cessna will fly eight of us around Tasmania for the next nine days.

I'm already in a relaxed mood. No need for ID, or ticket, no tedious check-in or airport security and, best, the freedom to stroll to the hangar and our private plane. On board, sinking into a seat swathed in sheepskin, I could have curled up with a book and stayed put.

But Tasmania beckons. Landmarks fly by: Canberra, Mt Kosciuszko and Wilson's Promontory before we farewell the mainland to cross Bass Strait. This treacherous body of water is the nemesis of many Sydney-to-Hobart race boats and the curse of landlubbers on the 24-hour *Spirit of Tasmania* ferry crossing. At 10,000 feet, high seas are not our concern. Bass Strait is calm and windless.

In good company

My flight companions are a mixed lot. Dennis and Jill Conway are cattle graziers from Taroom, Queensland: "My number one place in the whole world," says Dennis at a dinner-table quiz on our favourite destinations. Liane, from the NSW Southern Highlands, recites her 2022 travel itinerary. It's exhausting. Margaret, from Parkes, is that singular guest who makes you chuckle. At 150 centimetres, full stretch, Marg's the only passenger who can walk the length of the Cessna Caravan cabin standing upright, and she's thrilled about it. "For once it's an advantage," she laughs. Marg is happy about everything.

Crossing Bass Strait there's no laughter, however. Faces are pressed to cabin windows and hands cradle cameras and phones, so as not to miss a photo. It's hypnotic watching the cloud shadows swirl across the mirror of ocean below. Pockets of rock break the surface – tiny granite islands that I've never heard of, like West Moncoeur Island, Curtis, Cone, Judgement Rocks, Skull Rock, Hogan and Deal Island. Flinders Island, the giant of this waterway, is glimpsed in the distance.

Taxiing to park at Friendly Beaches Airfield we agree the quirky location is a big reason we're on this trip. Phil Hines, the co-owner of Outback By Air and one of two pilots on every flight, can't shake his smile.

"The buzz of flying into a bush strip is the thrill of an air safari," says Phil. "Plus, we're about to see more of Tasmania in a week than you could see in a month by road."

Coastal calling

Half an hour later, I'm neck deep in my spa bath at Freycinet Lodge, sipping complimentary whiskey, devouring house-made chocolates and considering whether the rest of Tasmania *really* is worth seeing.

But sunset is a siren, calling all. We come running and snag stools at the deck bar for decadent cocktails, freshly-shucked Melshell oysters and sautéed Stanley octopus. We hug like lifelong mates, for photos. Toes are dipped in the cool water of Richardson's Beach with promises made to swim there in the morning. Then we dine at The Bay Restaurant where I'm finally introduced to a juicy Cape Grim eye fillet. Its entourage of creamed greens, peas, sugar snaps, fried fermented potato and *jus* make quite the show. The pretty orange flower garnish is the first bite.

Freycinet is the most popular National Park in Tasmania. Its towering pink granite





01 Flying over Wineglass Bay © Luke Tscharke/Tourism Tasmania 02 Outback by Air pilots © Susan Elliott 03 Gourmet treats at Cabbage Tree Hill winery © Susan Elliott 04 Tasmania's stunning coastline © Susan Elliott 05 Wildlife awaits © Artush/Shutterstock

mountain range, The Hazards, could be a green-screen backdrop for any movie. But on this set, it's the understudy. Wineglass Bay is the star, a crescent of white sand filled with clear waters that has the celebrity status title bottled – and corked.

We visit it on a four-hour expedition with Pennicott Wilderness Journeys. Flying high once again, we are top deck passengers in the catamaran's Sky Lounge where plump oysters, salmon, smoked meats, breads and cheeses keep us company for a voyage past Schouten Island into the Tasman Sea to Wineglass Bay, which sparkles as if the paparazzi of the world are watching.

Star treatment

The following day, *we* are the stars. I certainly feel like one on the balcony of my waterfront room at Hobart's MACq 01 Hotel on Constitution Dock. It is dress circle accommodation on one of Australia's prettiest harbours, with a city reality show playing on demand. Cray fishermen unload their precious catch, tenders come and go, tourists amble by and Mt Wellington is this theatre's towering backdrop.

Then, a totally wild day. We're with Pennicott Wilderness Journeys again for a jet-boat ride that takes us along one of the most remarkable coastlines in the world. Between Port Arthur and Eaglehawk Neck, giant dolerite sea columns, 300 metres high, stretch for the sky – the hexagonal monoliths believed to have formed 180 million years ago.

The boat reverses into one of the massive sea caves (for a hasty escape I wonder?) then we skirt the shores of Tasman Island, which is nose-to-flipper with Australian fur seals snoozing, sunning, swimming and squabbling along the shoreline. Has David Attenborough put out a call? The local wildlife must think it's a documentary audition – in the air, albatrosses, gannets, terns, sea eagles and petrels abound, while in the water, bottlenose dolphins and sunfish make a cameo appearance.

Daily diversions

The days are packed, but the pace is just right. "I don't want to get up at 5am to have breakfast at 6am and be nice to someone at 7am." Marg's just delivered our first smile for the day.

It's 10am and we're at Sullivan's Cove Distillery to taste its award-winning whiskies. It's never too early for a wee dram. There's wine tasting in the Tamar Valley, cheese at Coal River Farm and, with kilos of extra freight in the cargo hold, we fly to Strahan where Dennis is determined to taste a scallop pie. Tasmania's unofficial signature dish – 10 scallops in a creamy curry sauce encased in a flaky pastry crust – is scoffed in seconds. He'd go another but the *Spirit of the Wild* has blasted its horn, the final call for our journey up the Gordon River, into the precious World Heritage-listed wilderness area.

Later, King Island's famous cheeses are upstaged by little penguins. On Grassy Penguin Island, we brave a howling wind to watch them waddle from the sea to their burrows. On Flinders Island, 'herds' of cape barren geese are as common as cattle in the paddocks.

There's one last happy landing, in Bankstown where the journey began. Nine days, eight destinations and 3,200 kilometres later our bags and bodies may be heavier, but our hearts are wonderfully lighter. ◆

Travel file

Outback by Air's nine-day 'Tasmanian Experience' includes accommodation, meals, transportation and excursions.
outbackbyair.com.au