

The Daily Telegraph



The other Australia

THE KIMBERLEY BY AIR
SAILING TO KANGAROO ISLAND
ON SAFARI IN THE TOP END

PLUS
MARK WEBBER'S
TASMANIA ADVENTURE
AND
BILL GRANGER'S
TRAVELLING LIFE

ultratrade

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TASMANIA



THE RACE OF MY LIFE

Formula 1 winner **Mark Webber** (left) drives all over the world, but it is to Tasmania that

On the up A participant scales the 238 steps on the spit of Bruny Island, one of the high points of the Swiss Mark Webber Tasmania Challenge



he keeps returning – to traverse it on foot, mountain bike and kayak. He explains the allure of his favourite circuit



Drag race Clockwise, from left: Mark Webber (right) with team-mate Guy Andrews; inside the Henry Jones Art Hotel; the Gordon River, near Strahan; a Tasmanian devil; fresh oysters; and Lake St Clair, near Cradle Mountain



My relationship with Tasmania really began a decade or so ago, when I was over in Britain talking to some friends about what we could do outside the gym that would get us fitter – something that would be challenging, exciting and spirit-enhancing – and also raise funds for the charities we believed in. To most people, a 1,000-kilometre race involving running, kayaking and cycling wouldn't have appealed – but as soon as I suggested doing an event like that in Tasmania, my friends warmed to the idea. Not many of them had been there, so it was a little bit different. It was an island, so there would be plenty of coastline to run along. There would be hills for us to tackle on mountain bikes, and rivers to conquer by kayak. It was a place that would provide adventure on all levels.

Although I was born in Australia, I went to Tasmania for the first time when

I was 17, inevitably for a car race. At that age, when my mind was on motorbikes and cars, the Georgian architecture didn't impress me. What did blow me away was the wilderness, the astonishing coastline and the island's remoteness. It's quite hard to explain the sheer scale of Tasmania. There are huge gorges, fast-flowing rivers and mile after mile of untouched forest and coastline. More than 40 per cent of it is protected, in national parks and World Heritage Areas. Its coastal waters are among the clearest of all temperate seas, with forests of 100ft kelp. Some of the inland caves contain Aboriginal rock art dating back 12,000 years. To me, there could be nowhere better for our race.

That, in a nutshell, is how my Charity Challenge was born, in 2003, with 15 brave (or some would say foolhardy) souls volunteering to join me in powering up, down and around the island on foot, on mountain bikes and by kayak, in order to raise money for cancer charities. To be honest, in the first year, we were a little bit ambitious and nearly killed ourselves. Everyone ended up with wounds, blisters or bleeding feet, and I had leeches on my legs and was practically hallucinating by the time the race was over; it was the hardest thing I have ever done. Only two teams actually finished – one of them, I'm proud to say, being mine.

Since then, we have adapted the race a little, and the Swisse Mark Webber Tasmania Challenge now takes place over five days, covering 350km (217 miles). It is still, without doubt, a demanding race and you need to be super-fit to try it. We cover between 50 and 55 miles a day, in pretty difficult terrain and on tracks that are often very soupy. We've also introduced some new challenges, such as orienteering and complex river crossings, so you need to be in reasonable shape to do those as well. What inspires me is that, when it all began, we were a small bunch of fairly serious athletes. Now, we have people

doing it who have never attempted anything like it before, and who amaze themselves by getting through the whole event. It's great to see them having a go – and enjoying some fairly life-changing experiences along the way.

It's also great to see how visitors react to Tasmania. Ten years ago, the island was an unknown quantity as far as tourism was concerned. If you went to Australia, you did the Sydney Opera House, the Great Barrier Reef and Uluru. But the reactions of people I've brought to Tasmania recently have been incredible. "Man, it was just awesome!" is fairly typical. I think it's because, if you live in a crowded European or North American city, the contrast couldn't be more profound. It is the sort of place that just nurtures you. The air and water are so pure; the wilderness is so vast; the sea is so clean. When I see photographs of myself, I think: how does my skin look so clear? It's because I've been outside all day, breathing that pure Tassie air, and eating well.

You are also surrounded, day after day, by intense beauty and the chance to engage with nature properly. You get to see all kinds of animals, from wallabies outside your bedroom to black cockatoos flying through the forest canopy. When you're out canoeing, you might pass offshore islands that are havens for wildlife, and birds soaring above fluted cliffs that tower nearly a thousand feet above the sea.

I'm making Tasmania sound pretty rugged – and it is – but there are plenty of places for self-indulgence. I love The Henry Jones Art Hotel in Hobart, the capital, and I've been lucky enough to stay at the Saffire Freycinet luxury resort, which combines wilderness with modern architecture and has amazing food and wine. In fact, the food on most of the island is wonderful. After decades in the shadow of Sydney and Melbourne, Hobart has come into its own and now has a successful Taste Festival (December 28, 2012-January 3, 2013; tastefestival.com.au). Talented young chefs are using fresh, locally sourced produce such as abalone, oysters, ocean trout, berries and organic vegetables to create a distinctive "Taswegian" cuisine. Friends rave about Monty's on Montpellier, Me Wah, Smolt and the new gourmet sensation, Garagistes, which serves unusual things such as smoked eels and fried pig's ears. You can even get a good English-style pint at Preachers, which is just up the hill from Salamanca Place.

The main attraction of Tasmania is its wilderness, but it has its fair share of culture and sport as well. Among the highlights are MONA, a world-class private art gallery in Hobart [see Coast to coast art, page 24], and a magical golf links called Barnbougle Dunes, near Bridport. Also worth seeing are some of the oldest convict ruins, at Port Arthur. Everyone loves Hobart, particularly Salamanca Place with its cobbles, pavement

IT'S A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN ENGAGE WITH NATURE, SEE WALLABIES RIGHT BY YOUR BEDROOM



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cafes, and old harbour. I know the West Coast, Cradle Mountain and Freycinet better than I do Hobart, but I joke that I've spent more time at the Royal Hobart Hospital than anywhere else [Webber broke a leg when he was hit by a car during the 2008 challenge].

Ultimately, what Tasmania offers is an antidote to my life on the motor-racing circuit. Usually, I'm performing against the clock from the moment I get out of bed in the morning. Here, I can be totally alone and surrounded by nature. I have the time and mental space to take it all in, whether I'm doing the Overland Track or hiking to Wineglass Bay. This year, our challenge will coincide with the 30th anniversary of the Western Wilderness Area being included on the World Heritage List. We'll be celebrating the joy of having protected one of the last great temperate rainforests in the southern hemisphere, containing some of the world's oldest trees and many of its most endangered animals.

We're proud of playing a role in a project like that, as well as having contributed more than \$1 million (£645,000) to charities including Save the Tasmanian Devil – a creature whose numbers have been depleted by disease – as well as TLC for Kids, Brainwave and the White Lion Foundation. In support of these causes, we've had all kinds of people taking part in the Suisse Mark Webber Challenge, from sportsmen Pat Rafter, Steve Waugh and James Cracknell to the Hollywood star Anthony Edwards.

I'm really looking forward to going back and competing in this year's challenge. Some of my friends are keen to come with me and have a proper look around. I've already piloted my plane around Tasmania, and I want to do far more of that, landing at places such as Flinders Island. I also fly helicopters, and Tasmania has some of the best terrain in the world for that – which is yet another challenge. Luckily, my partner Ann is also mad about the place, so there are plenty of options for us, and so many more things to see.

I want other people to fall in love with Tasmania the way I have, and to understand its simple but life-enhancing pleasures. Once you've been, it's a hard place to forget. My best memories are of a group of lads sitting around a fire at night. We haven't showered for four days, we're tired and hungry, and we need to collect firewood so we can cook a meal. Somehow, none of that matters, because we're surrounded by nature and are totally absorbed by it. To me, that's what Tasmania is all about. It takes your life to a new level.

WEXAS Travel (020 7590 0614, wexas.com) is offering a 10-day self-drive luxury holiday to Tasmania from £3,214 per person, based on two people sharing. The price includes return international flights, accommodation in Hobart, Strahan, Cradle Mountain, Launceston, and the Freycinet and Tasman peninsulas, plus car hire, tours and some meals. The best time to visit Tasmania is from October to March. More information: discovertasmania.co.uk; austnalia.com

5 TASMANIAN ADVENTURE EXPERIENCES

1 THE SWISSE MARK WEBBER TASMANIA CHALLENGE

The multi-disciplined adventure race gives participants the chance to explore Tasmania's wilderness on foot, by kayak and by bike, with additional activities such as orienteering, abseiling and white-water rafting (see main story). The next 350km (218-mile) race will begin on November 28 in Launceston and take in the north-east coast, visiting the Bay of Fires, St Helens and Ben Lomond, before concluding in Hobart five days later. For the first time, prize money is being offered this year: A\$20,000 (about £12,800) for the first pair, A\$7,500 for the second and A\$2,500 for the third. Entrance costs A\$9,900 per pair. Details: markwebbertasmaniachallenge.com.

2 BRUNY ISLAND WHITE-KNUCKLE RIDE

Rob Pennicott is an adventurer, environmentalist, philanthropist and showman. He is also the genius behind Tasmania's most successful eco-tour adventure: Bruny Island Cruises (pictured, bottom). Using the kind of high-speed boats used by US Navy Seals, Pennicott and his guides take guests along a remote stretch of the Bruny Island coastline, safe and dry in waterproof clothing, to see seals, dolphins, seabirds and humpback whales in their natural habitats. This dreamy little island south-west of Hobart offers gourmet treats, too, from artisan cheeses and fresh berries to cool-climate wines and fresh oysters. Three-hour cruises cost A\$110 (£71) adult; A\$65 child. Details: 00 61 3 6293 1465, brunycruises.com.au.

3 A TREK WITH TASMANIAN DEVILS

Despite its fearsome reputation (and jaws), the Tasmanian Devil is a surprisingly affectionate, even lovable, creature. Sadly, these testy little carnivores are being decimated by a deadly facial tumour. A detailed research project is now under way in the Tarkine rainforest in north-west Tasmania, supported by the fees from guided treks run by Tarkine Trails, through one of the world's last great temperate rainforests. A range of guided tours (from three to six days) is available, with accommodation in tents or eco-cabins,

costing from A\$1,349 (about £860). Details: 00 61 405 255 537, tarkinetrails.com.au.

4 THE OVERLAND TRACK

The best-known of Tasmania's great walks is still one of the most rewarding. The six-day Overland Track adventure begins at Cradle Mountain and ends at glorious Lake St Clair, taking the walker through pristine alpine forest and raw mountain scenery. Great Walks of Tasmania (greatwalkstasmania.com) offers guided treks along this route from A\$2,800 (£1,800) per person, including accommodation. Walkers stay in cosy huts with hot showers and gourmet meals, organised by Cradle Mountain Huts (00 61 3 6392 2211, cradlehuts.com.au). Other Great Walks are around Maria Island, Freycinet and the Bay of Fires. Walking holidays can be organised from the UK by HF Holidays (0845 470 8558, hfholidays.co.uk), which has added two new Tasmanian itineraries.



5 THE WILDERNESS RAILWAY

Built in 1896, this remarkable 22-mile track links two of Tasmania's remotest settlements, Queenstown and Strahan. The nostalgic steam train (above) travels along the West Coast Wilderness Railway through some of the most rugged countryside on the island; 42 bridges were required to complete the track. Strahan is also a convenient base from which to explore the World Heritage Western Wilderness Area and Macquarie Harbour (six times the size of Sydney Harbour) and to cruise the Gordon River. Train fares start at A\$107 (about £70), one-way. Details: 00 61 3 6471 4300, westcoastwildernessrailway.com.au.

