

Touching the Tarkine



ABOVE
Sumac, looking
at the edge of the
Tarkine with the
Arthur River in the
distance

PHOTO
TONY MCKENDRICK

LEFT
Ancient Aboriginal
petroglyph,
Sundown Point

Modern human beings evolved in Africa and existed as *Homo sapiens* – our own species – about 100,000 years ago. The great human migrations out of Africa began 60,000 years ago and by 30,000 years ago or even earlier people were living on the West Coast of what we now call Tasmania. For thousands of generations these people adapted to fluctuating climates and changing landscapes. They left beautiful enigmatic petroglyphs that pre-date the famous art of Lascaux and Altamira by many millennia. They built extremely functional dwellings and made finely crafted stone tools. This area is of huge significance in our understanding of human pre-history. The last Aboriginal people to live in the area were called the Tarkineers. It is from these people that the name Tarkine derives.

These 447,000 hectares of wilderness are delineated by the Pieman River to the south and the Arthur River to the north. The Tarkine contains Australia's largest unprotected area of temperate rainforest; there are coastal heathlands, wide button-grass plains, towering waterfalls and seemingly endless beaches pounded by the Roaring Forties. There is an abundance of wildlife due in part to the absence of the exotic species that reduced many mainland animals to the brink of extinction.

WRITER AND
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It is a place that still has a feeling of timelessness. So how to gain a meaningful appreciation of this vast, complex area? The problem was solved, in part, by my being introduced to Rob Saltmarsh. Rob has kicked around the far North-West for most of his life, trying his hand at a number of different jobs before becoming a guide. He has the deep understanding of someone who lives in the region and is married to a Tasmanian Aborigine from whom he has acquired greater knowledge about this part of Tasmania.

There is a great pub, well, more a modern accommodation complex, Tall Timbers, which operates tours to the Tarkine. It was from there that we set out to see what we could in a day. After introductions all round we were also introduced to the OKA, a very convincing all-terrain vehicle of Australian manufacture. On the way, as we drove through the beautiful and, by Tasmanian standards, very flat dairy country, Rob spoke to us at length about the area, its history, economic realities and the people who call this part of the world home.

After crossing the Arthur River we reached the Tarkine and entered the rainforest. The Arthur remains a wild, undammed river, and on the day we were there it was a torrent following recent heavy rains. From a viewing platform Rob pointed out the various densities of green that marked different stages in the maturation of the rainforest. Perhaps surprisingly, a fully mature



ABOVE
Rob Saltmarsh

RIGHT
Tall Timber's
4WD OKA at
Marawah

PHOTO
TONY MCKENDRICK

BELOW
Tarkine rainforest





ABOVE
Exploring the
Tarkine
PHOTO
TONY MCKENDRICK

LEFT
Button-grass plain

BELOW
Lunch in the
Tarkine Reserve
PHOTO
TONY MCKENDRICK



myrtle forest has very little understorey: the tree canopy closes over and less and less light reaches the ground. The forest floor is clear and frequently moss covered.

From the valley of the Arthur aboard the sturdy OKA we climbed out of the rainforest and stopped to admire a wide expanse of button grass, named after the 'buttons' at the tips of the stems. When viewed by early Europeans, the button-grass plains that cover much of Tasmania might have been suitable, it was thought, for extensive ranching – like the prairies of North America. This proved to be a very long way from the truth but they do have a wild beauty all their own. Our guide explained the changes made by Aboriginal people to the landscape – button grass is a fire climax plant and it is thought that Aborigines' fire sticks were at least in part responsible for the development of this type of ecosystem.

The ancient pre-Cambrian rocks beneath much of the landscape give rise to thin poor soils that have been leached by high rainfall for millions of years. Consequently, the nutrients that support the various ecosystems are virtually all stored in the plants themselves. Destruction of plants, particularly the forests, inevitably results in the loss of much of these nutrients. Although there is a sense of timelessness about them these Tarkine ecosystems are essentially extremely fragile.

We drove for a time through coastal heathlands ablaze with wildflowers. These were so spectacular that the ubiquitous digital cameras



were running hot and we agreed to postpone lunch. I remembered Rob had loaded various clever-looking containers into the cavern in the rear of the OKA. We finally stopped at Sundown Point and Rob was transformed from tour guide to maître d. The food had been prepared by Tall Timbers and even for Tasmanians used to the very best it was sensational, and naturally, accompanied by fine Tasmanian wines. Over lunch we spoke about conservation and the future of tourism as a major industry. It is widely accepted that wine is beneficial to health and wellbeing so a decision was taken not to indulge in high-risk abstinence, so extra bottles were opened.

Sundown Point is stunningly beautiful. We lunched on a grassy lawn kept neat and trim by a fleet of dedicated wallabies. These locals were so confident that they were wandering about in the afternoon sunlight. This marsupial lawn is by a jewel-like lagoon, adjacent to one of the seemingly endless West Coast beaches.

The sense of timelessness was complete when we were shown petroglyphs that are probably 30,000 years old. We also saw the rings that marked where the Tarkineer people had built houses and set up their villages. It is thought more and more that these people were not nomads but lived relatively settled lives. We had in fact enjoyed a picnic on land that had been continually occupied for 15 millennia before the founding of Rome.

By now the day was well advanced; it was agreed that we had all learned a great deal in such a short time. So it was back on board the OKA and we headed to the mouth of the Arthur



RIGHT
Examples of
the abundant
wildflowers of the
North-West coastal
heathlands

BELOW
Coastal heathland





ABOVE
The mouth of the
Arthur River
PHOTO: BOB IDONS

LEFT
Log tangle at the
river mouth

River. Here there is a quirky little settlement and a spectacular tangle of logs that has accumulated at the river mouth. Breathing the world's cleanest air we reflected that the next land due west is far off Patagonia.

The remainder of the return journey was back through the farmlands and rich volcanic soils of the far North-West to Tall Timbers. Some one-day experiences are extremely significant – this was one of them.

I would like to thank Tall Timbers for enabling me to see so much of the Tarkine in a single day

And Rob Saltmarsh – I can proudly say I have 'discovered' him as a storyteller. His maiden piece we are delighted to publish in this Issue: 'Tunnerminnerwait, the waterbird, calls no more', p. 29. 📷

Further information

www.talltimbershotel.com.au

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