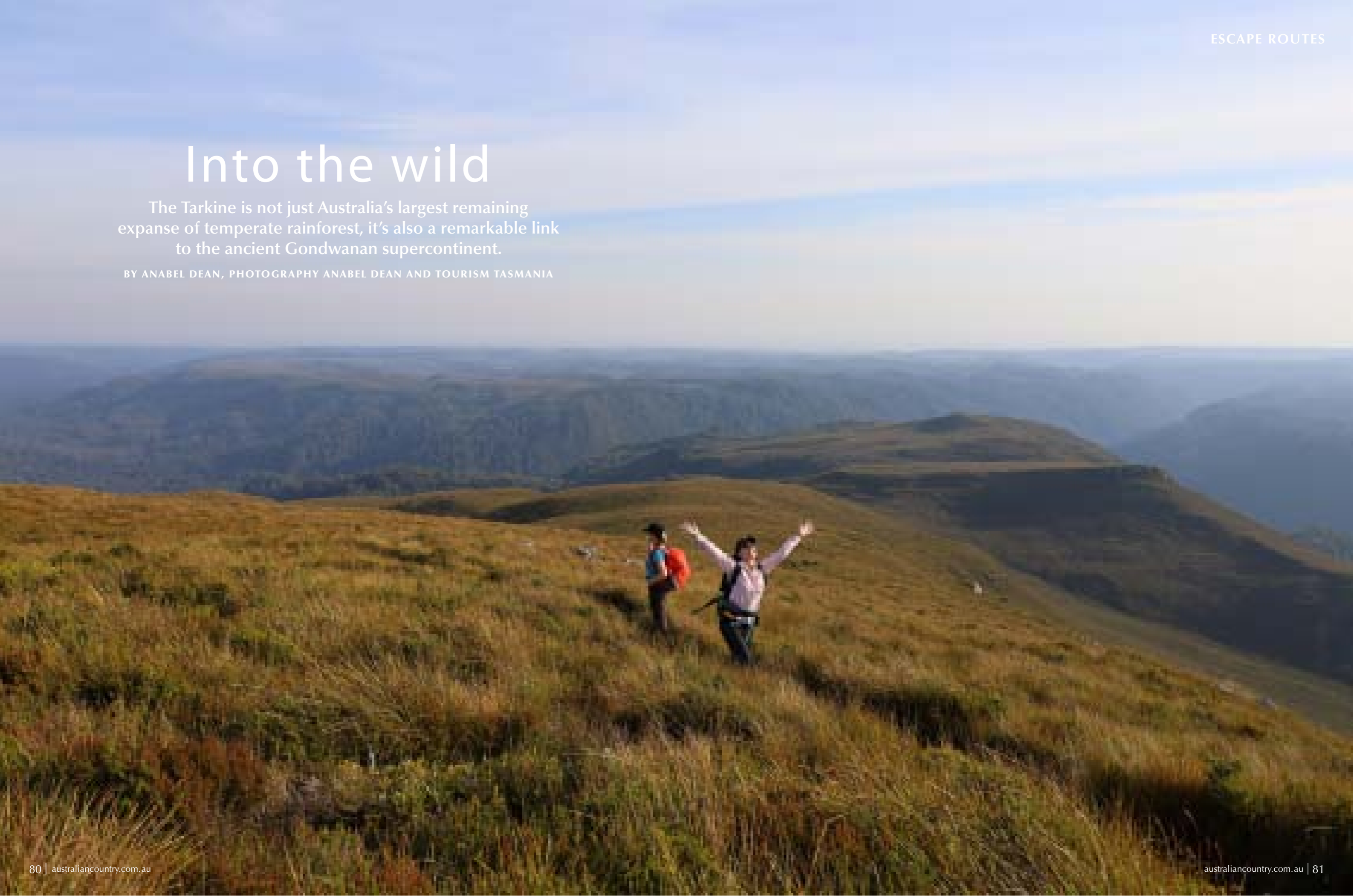


Into the wild

The Tarkine is not just Australia's largest remaining expanse of temperate rainforest, it's also a remarkable link to the ancient Gondwanan supercontinent.

BY ANABEL DEAN, PHOTOGRAPHY ANABEL DEAN AND TOURISM TASMANIA





THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) the Tarkine Hotel; on the trail of the thylacine; cabin at Tarkine Wilderness Experience; tumbling temperate rainforest.

The Tarkine is the rarest rainforest on planet earth and the last known habitat of the Tasmanian tiger. The last authenticated capture of the thylacine was almost a century ago in wilderness clasped like an emerald necklace around the tiny settlement of Corinna in north-west Tasmania.

The historic mining settlement remains virtually the same as it was when gold prospectors arrived in the late-1800s. Nearly all the creeks north of the Pieman River carried payable alluvial gold but isolation meant fortunes were hard won. Many prospectors came, looked, and left without trying their luck, but those who stayed digging through wet undergrowth in abysmal cold probably deserved to find gold. The largest nugget ever found in Tasmania was unearthed at nearby Rocky River but what, one wonders, was the incentive for postmistress Jessie Devlyn who rowed her husband back and forth every night to the hotel on the other side of the river in between sorting the mail and looking after her five children.

There's only one pub at Corinna now, the log-lined Tarkine Hotel, and it's the Fatman - a cable-driven barge - that transports visitors across the river after driving an unsealed road from Strahan. The gold rush didn't last long and the settlement soon slipped into disrepair. It wasn't until 2007 that the outpost was catapulted back into consciousness by a group of environmentally conscious entrepreneurs who built 14 cabins to blend with the rough-hewn originals. Corinna Wilderness Experience provides an accessible starting point to connect with the many elements of wilderness. There are a range of fully equipped eco-cabins and three original buildings (the old pub, the butcher's shop and a cottage) set within a network of walking trails.



ESCAPE ROUTES



THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from left) cruising the Pieman River, Pieman Heads; kayaking on the Pieman; fungi sprouting; Corinna Wilderness Experience cabins.

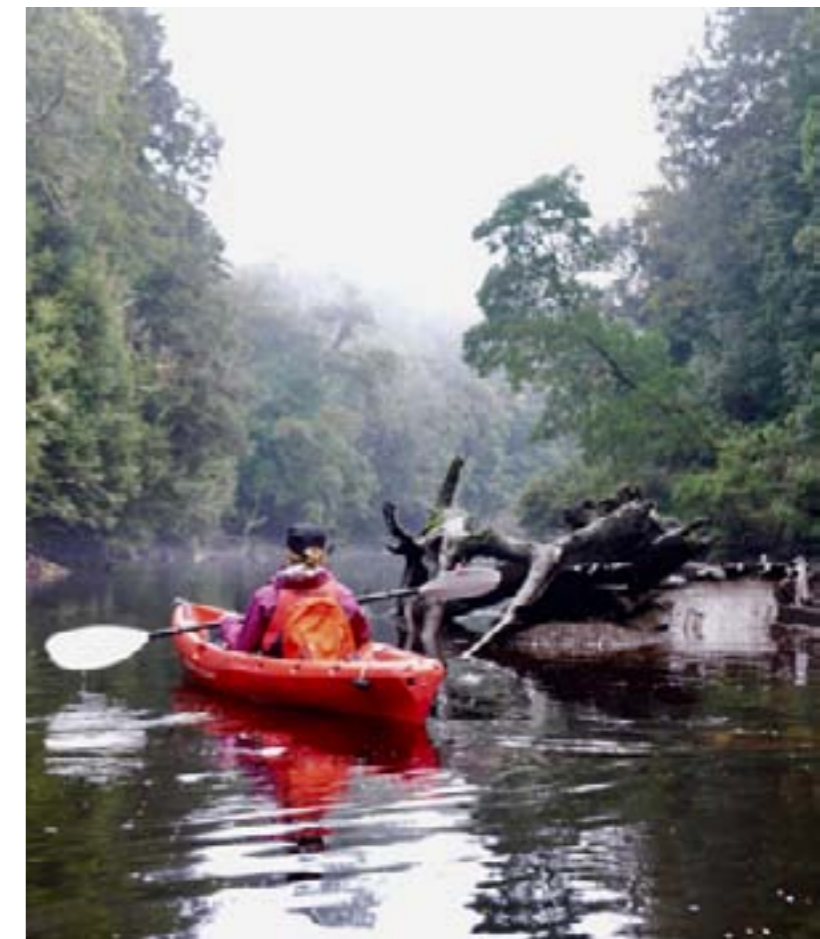
Rob Purves is one of the activist shareholders behind Corinna. Much of his considerable business fortune - and his efforts as a former president of WWF Australia (World Wide Fund for Nature) - have been directed into environmental protection. "I love the Tarkine," he says. "Tasmania has a history of trashing beautiful things. The threat of 'Dad and Dave in a bulldozer' is very real but you can't just get places like this back again."

The threat of forestry, famously likened by writer Bill Bryson as equal in immorality to the fire-bombing of Dresden, still hangs like a gloomy cloud over the Tarkine. Conflict continues to rage between mining companies, tree fellers and conservationists, but it's a noiseless battle being waged at Corinna. Conversion to the cause is pretty well guaranteed by its very existence.

In the old days, pioneers travelled as pitiable scavengers through wilderness, equipped with little more than a blanket, a gun, flour, tobacco and tea. Today's visitors to Corinna are gently absorbed into nature with a flick-switch fire and a soft mattress in a cosy cottage. There's a cooktop, a fridge, a friendly bar and restaurant with good pub grub.

"The flowers are picked from the garden," admits the chef, placing a birthday cake jewelled with little pansies on the table in the restaurant one night. It's a sweet delight, but the real treat is the outside, where old-growth rainforest survives, still untouched and untrammelled, in our well-trodden world.

Visitors can take a kayak down the Pieman and up the Savage River where the wreck of the SS *Croydon* pokes through the water. Legend has it that it was sunk on purpose as the skipper and his crew were too fearful to face the river mouth again for the passage back to Launceston. Kayaking is also one of the best ways to explore the spellbinding area between the Savage and the Whyte River. The soft splash of paddles pushes bows through misty waters black as lacquer. It's an easy hour paddling upriver in the gentle current to a landing pontoon where craft are tied for later recovery by Corinna staff. This is the starting point for an uphill trail through white blossoming leatherwood trees, busy luring bees to the Tarkine, creating some of the most delicately flavoured honey on earth. The myrtles and eucalypts that rise to 90 metres were saplings when Queen Elizabeth I ascended the English throne. They cast soft shadows on floors tangled with moss and fern, vivid puce and white fungi sprouting like sea creatures on damp timbers. Gelatinous slime moulds inch forwards as if commanded by one brain. All is silent but for the drip-dripping of a passing rain shower, but be





WHERE TO STAY:

- Corinna Wilderness Experience, Corinna corinna.com.au
- The Ship Inn, Stanley shipinnstanley.com.au



warned, enchantment like this has a sting in its tail. Wander five minutes off track in any direction and, more than likely, you'll be the first person to stand on that spot. Get lost and you may never be found.

The spectre of the thylacine, an Alsatian-sized carnivorous marsupial with chocolate bands along its haunches and a long stiff tail, still haunts these glades. Mystery merges with imagination at the edge of humanity and shadows lurk behind locking walls of ancient Huon Pine. Look, over there! A glimpse. Gone. Species vanished. There's another flicker just after dawn up the Pieman River. Something is skulking, paws padding noiselessly over logs encrusted with fungus and fern, snarled boughs curtained in silvery-green lichen. What's that? A scurry. A scat. A thylacine?

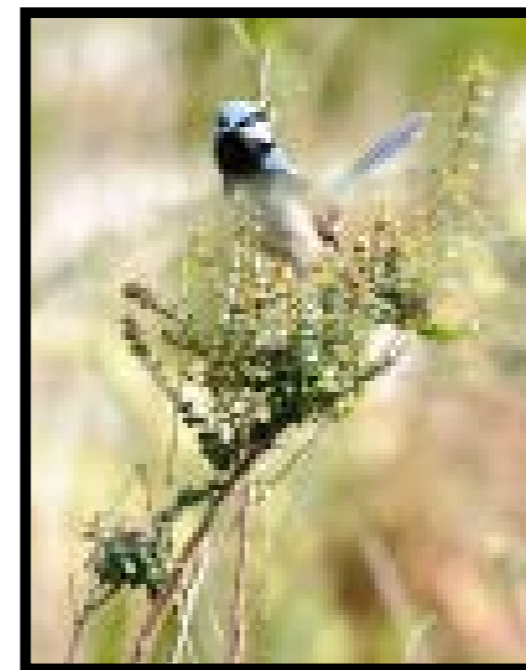
Biologist Nick Mooney listens a little jadedly to anecdotes about sightings. "It's Groundhog Day," he sighs, unconvinced. "It's highly likely it's either a pademelon – an endemic wallaby - a Tasmanian devil or another medium sized animal." Nick is a conservationist who began evaluating reports of Tasmanian tiger sightings decades ago. "If it still existed, we'd probably know it by now with all the wildlife cameras out there," he says. "There are fewer devils and more wallabies than when Europeans invaded Tasmania so, with still more than enough secure den sites, thylacines should be reasonably common."

The theatre of this landscape reaches a different conclusion at Mount Donaldson. Here the adventure begins (about 10 minutes' drive from Corinna) on a zig-zagging trail that spools over a white quartz crust through button grass and lilac-headed heath – not unlike the Scottish Highlands - to a height of 420 metres. A godlike view at the summit stretches over the moody Western Tiers to the horizon, where two things appear in abundance. Wonder. And solitude. You can see the Pieman River snaking along the valley floor until it jags on the scarified dirt of the Savage River magnetite mine. It's a palette knife scrape of white on khaki canvas.

Best look away, towards the Southern Ocean, and the small coastal town of Stanley. The boisterous sting of the sea rules the main street of Stanley (a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Corinna). The roaring forties blow unimpeded from Cape Horn and smack full tilt at this coast so the result – well documented – is pure air and pure water. And pure joy. Oh yes, a giant red lobster on a rooftop.

Arriving in Stanley is like stepping into a historic novel, with red fishing boats bobbing at harbour edge, and shrieking gulls wheeling over shipwrecks. It could almost be a salt-crusted Cornish village, chipped from white-painted stone and hewn from timber, artsy cafes adding extra colour and modern comforts. History bequeaths shades of melancholy across a curving beach on the opposite headland. Highfield House is perched on high ground as a Georgian monument to the resilient efforts of the first Europeans who came to settle this remote north-west corner of Tasmania.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) view of the Pieman River from Mount Donaldson; avian observer; ocean drifts at Pieman Heads; nightcap at The Ship Inn; the Ship Inn framed by Stanley's basalt cliffs.



ESCAPE ROUTES



THIS PAGE: Highfield House and the Nut are Stanley landmarks (above) while Cuppa, Cake and Collectables in the Sisters Creek Hall offers a different lens on north-western Tasmania.



The story of endeavour, opportunism and ignorance begins with the Van Dieman's Land Company, a group of London based merchants and politicians granted 250,000 acres of land in 1826, and its attempts to make a fortune from fine Merino wool. The plan failed miserably and the company set about the systematic annihilation of the local Palawa people. The land was sold and Stanley was established. Highfield House is now under management of the Parks and Wildlife Tasmania.

A very different immersion in the past can be discovered at the Ship Inn. It's an 1849 port in a storm, built by the grandfather of former prime minister Joseph Lyons (whose humble birthplace is just down the road), now a pleasurable cocoon of bespoke finery for travellers. Eight stylish suites - downy beds dressed in soft-rumpled linens - tell stories drawn from a perfectly preserved past.

In the billiard room, once a roller-skating rink, there's a round window that refocuses gaze on the outside world. Through the window looms the Nut, a basalt bluff above Stanley, rising like an immense Christmas cake. The 12-million-year-old volcanic plug surges spectacularly 143 metres straight out of the sea. A steep path (or a chairlift) leads up the ramparts onto a circuit with views to Bass Strait or back towards the farmlands that fan out from town.

Detachment from the lived world like this cannot last forever, but the road leading out of Stanley, towards Burnie, allows one last chance to step back in time. Cuppa, Cake, and Collectables in the Sisters Creek hall draws crowds of knit-wearing locals to devour homemade custard donuts and vividly challenging jelly slices at tables covered in white, crocheted tablecloths. Sepia photographs of those who served for king and country decorate the walls and there's a hall filled with paraphernalia (from Victorian England to Aussie '80s kitsch). It will take hours of close examination. The pit-stop is a salve for weary travellers and a reminder that, even in this remote corner of the world, the British Empire leaves its mark. But nothing, not even a perfect cup of tea, erases the lingering sense of defiance left by an impenetrable 65-million-year-old remnant of Gondwanaland. **AC**