

ISLE OF THE TIGER

The boys loved Tassie so much they didn't want to return home. The only reason they did was so they could come back. Oh, and to tell you guys all about it!

4WD WORDS BY JOHN ROTH PHOTOGRAPHY BY OFFROAD IMAGES

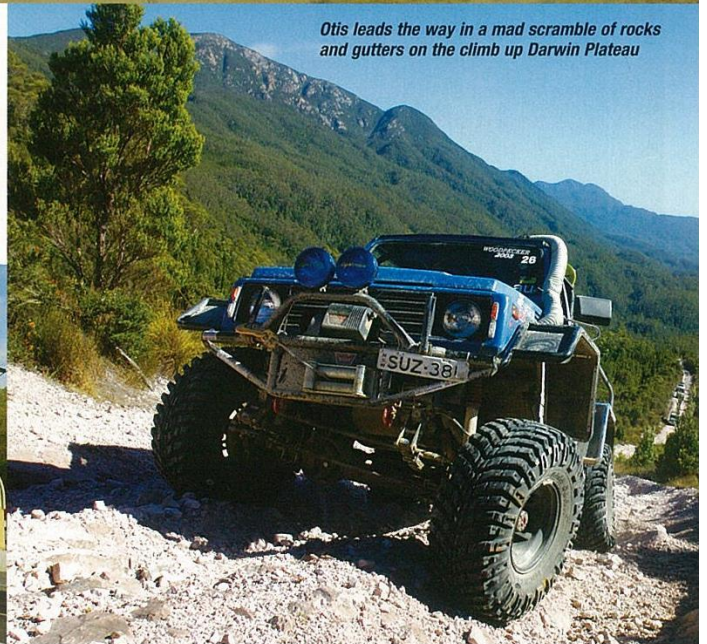




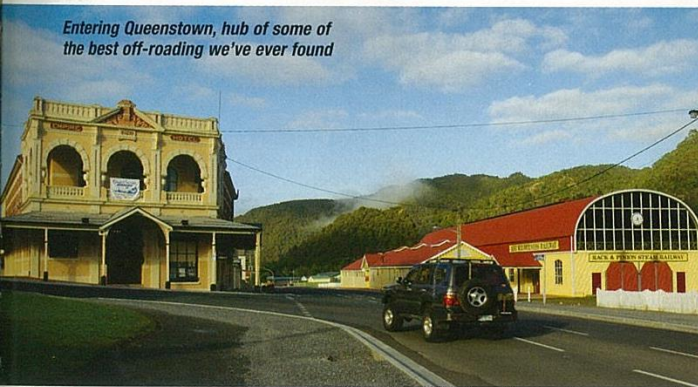


More than 150 years ago 'the fug' was a common expression adopted by our pioneering rellies to describe the warmth and cosiness caused by lots of bodies sleeping in a confined space. They knew all about that too, with kids, dogs, visitors and chooks all cramming into little one-room bark huts to get a decent night's sleep. For some of those old timers, especially down here in Tasmania, avoiding the fug wasn't an option. English bars and chains made sure of that!

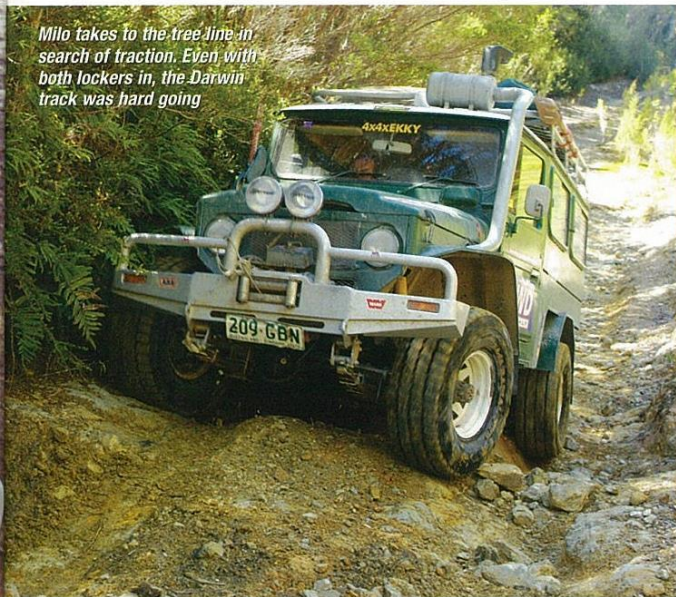
Mind you, their fug probably wasn't quite as fruity as that caused by nine men crammed into a couple of rooms after a night on the oysters and Boag's! Let me tell you, when Pat announced that we'd be taking a day off to recuperate in Strahan, my first thought was fresh air...



Otis leads the way in a mad scramble of rocks and gutters on the climb up Darwin Plateau



Entering Queenstown, hub of some of the best off-roading we've ever found

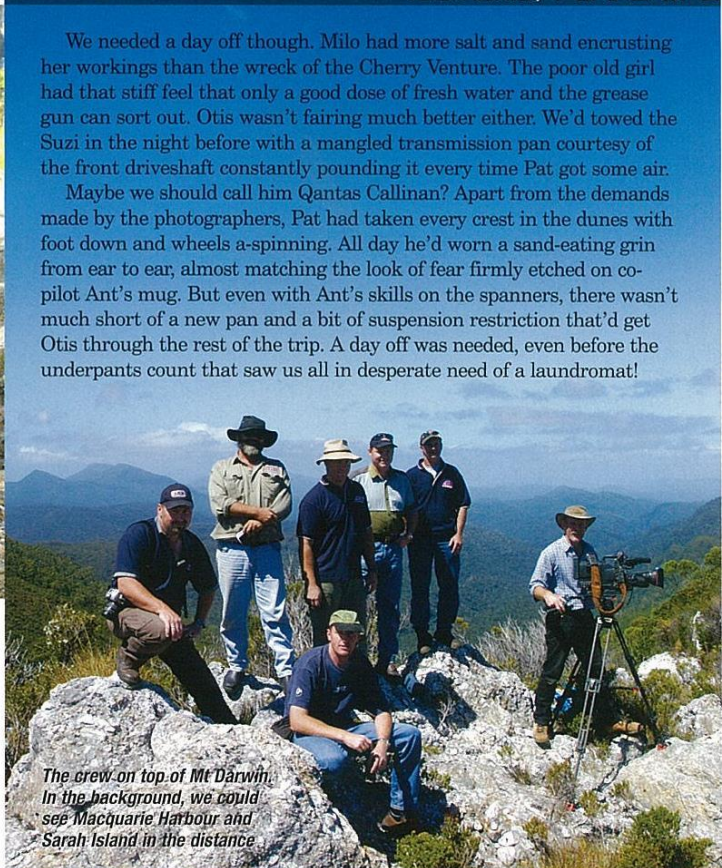


Milo takes to the tree line in search of traction. Even with both lockers in, the Darwin track was hard going



Above: An Editor's lot is not an easy one. First you have to drive your modified buggy to remote areas, then you have to snooze while the camera boys record it all on film

Above: Meanwhile Roothy's climbed onto Milo's roof-rack to get a better view of the magnificent scenery. That's if you consider beer bottle labels and lingerie catalogues as 'scenery' anyway...



The crew on top of Mt Darwin. In the background, we could see Macquarie Harbour and Sarah Island in the distance



ARB's 100 Series works up a track cut through miles of unexplored forest around the Gordon River

The 79 Series on top of the world at Mt Darwin



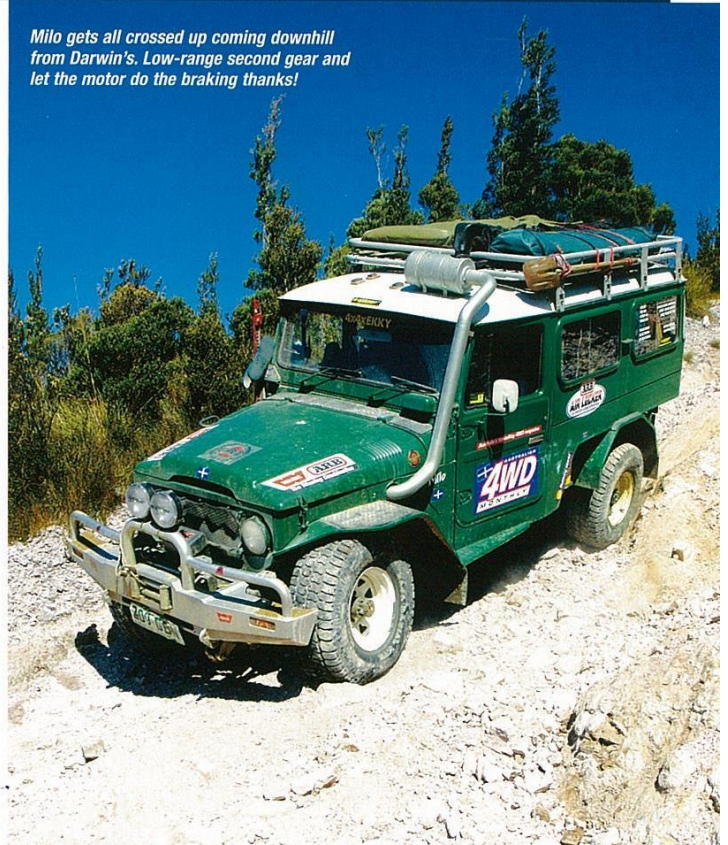
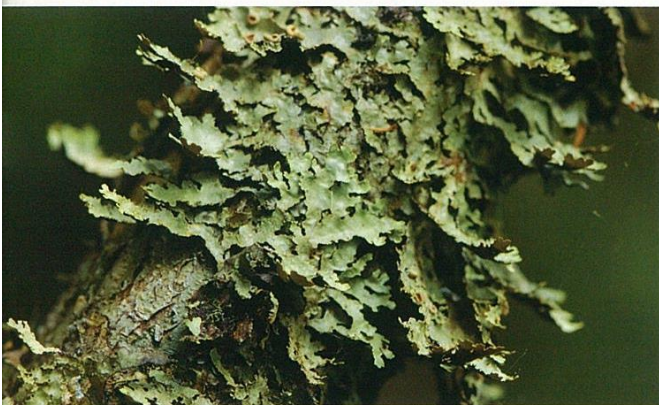
TRAVEL

Tasmania, Part 3 of 3

The garage in Strahan is one of those amazing little businesses you'll only find in the bush and only if you're very lucky! They've got a better selection of parts and accessories stacked to the roof of that little shop than most big auto barns. Better still, it's useful stuff. So, armed with grease cartridges, new bulbs, another air filter to replace the one Pat had wiped out up the Lake Cumberland Track, as well as full tanks of fuel all around, we were looking good. Things got even better when Dougie, the mechanic, showed Pat a transmission pan from a Commodore he was wrecking and offered to fit it to Otis.

With his truck out of action for the day, Pat took the photographers on the old steam train to Queenstown. While a four-wheel drive is the only way to really access this wilderness country, the views offered by a trip like this are absolute heaven for a cameraman. Anyway, there's a bar on the train and they serve cold Boag's...

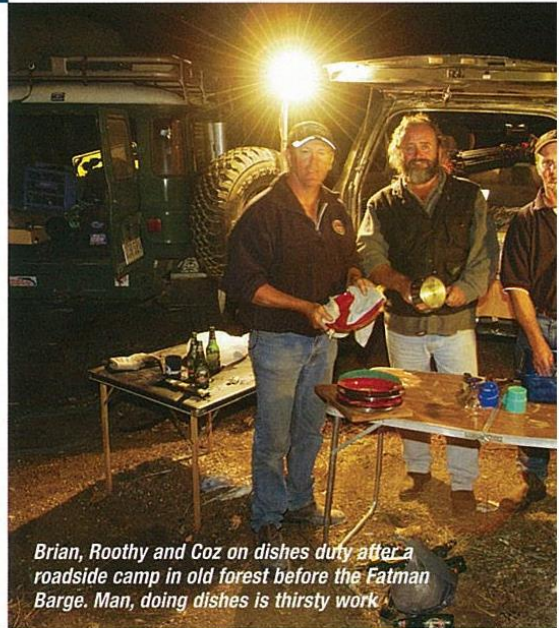
Milo gets all crossed up coming downhill from Darwin's. Low-range second gear and let the motor do the braking thanks!



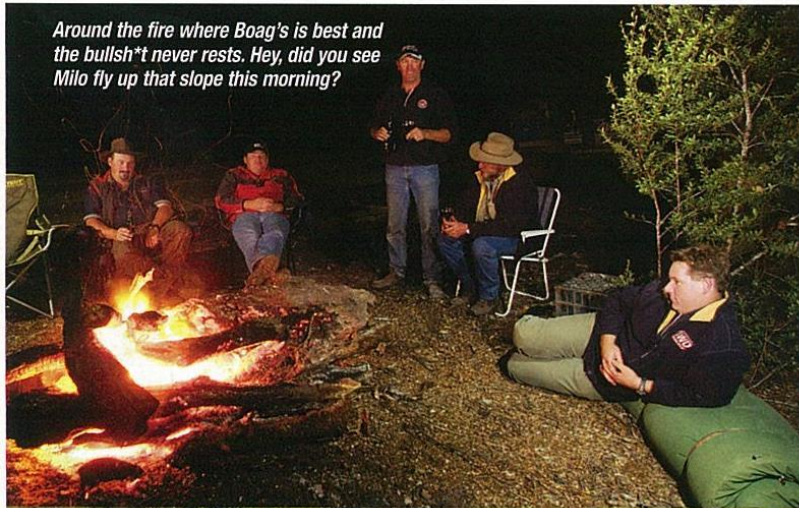
Strahan's an amazing place and loaded with history, but in summer it's become a real haven for Tassie's tourist hordes. Surrounded by foreign accents and people milling around in floppy hats and money belts, it was no surprise to find the old café was now a Brumbies outlet and the service about as average as you'd expect in a mainland city. I only mention that because one of the wonderful things about our Tassie trip was the sheer friendliness of the locals and the willingness to take time out for a chat. In Strahan in February, dollars come first.

So it was easy to leave late that afternoon, pointing our trucks towards Queenstown where we stayed in the old miner's quarters which now doubles as cheap backpackers' accommodation. Dinner at the magnificent Empire Hotel was like stepping back a century or more to a time when Queenstown was the centre of a huge copper-mining industry that along with deposits of gold and silver made it one of the richest mining towns in the country.

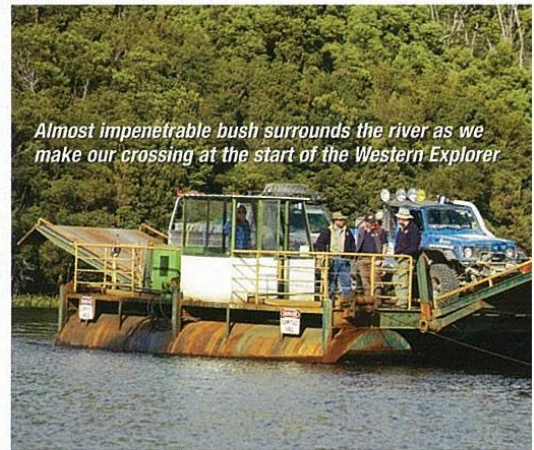
Obviously those old miners had their priorities right because they'd made the publicans the richest men in town! The Empire's panelled walls, massive timber ceilings and staircases spoke of a time when men earned big money and spent most of it on booze.



Brian, Roothy and Coz on dishes duty after a roadside camp in old forest before the Fatman Barge. Man, doing dishes is thirsty work



*Around the fire where Boag's is best and the bullsh*t never rests. Hey, did you see Milo fly up that slope this morning?*



Almost impenetrable bush surrounds the river as we make our crossing at the start of the Western Explorer



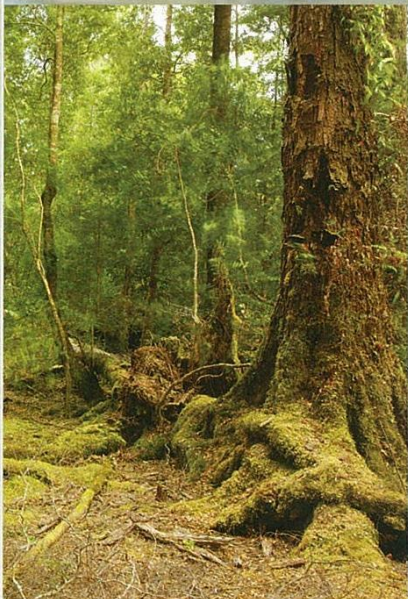
Pat washes some of the salt off Otis in a beachside freshwater creek north of Sandy Cape



Constant smelting over the years has stripped the surrounding hills of growth and the river through town is still as dead as they come. When they finally stopped smelting in 1968, people said that Queenstown's environment would take a thousand years to recover. That's just like the greenies isn't it? They've got no faith in Mother Nature and rarely get close enough to her to learn the truth. Forty years later the biggest problem facing Queenstown is regrowth on those bald hills threatening a tourist industry built around looking at man-made damage!

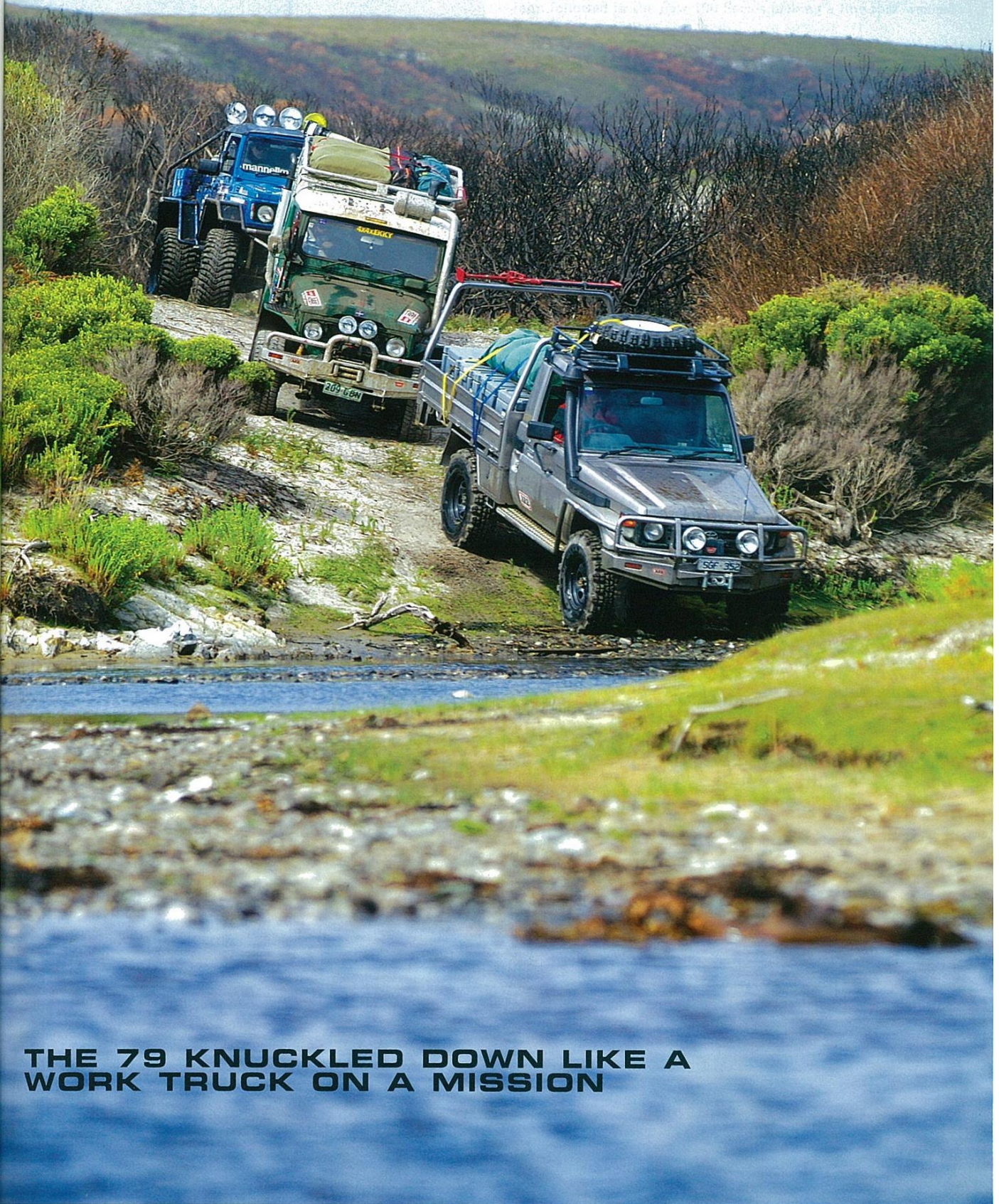
Fuelled-up again, we left Queenstown next morning, heading south towards Lake Burbury and the head of the Gordon River. It was a chilly morning and in between shivers in Milo's cabin I felt for Ant and Pat who were braving the breeze in Otis's open cockpit. The country grows wild here, huge trees on steep slopes that plunge down into rocky rivers. Once past the dam we turned right on to a rutted track that led to the peak of Mt Darwin. But first, at Brian's insistence, we dropped our tyre pressures to beach spec again.

Within minutes I found out why, as Milo barked and scrambled up a slippery scree-covered slope that saw her tumbling backwards almost as fast. Brian had said we'd be needing winches here, and he wasn't wrong - he did. The ARB trucks and our old girls had the advantage of lockers both ends, but even so, it took me three goes to get an approach that saw Milo up and over the worst of it. Those Mickey Thompsons are getting tired now, and even at 15psi they've lost their bite for terrain like this.



The 100 takes a trip on the barge - a case of the Fatman taking the Fatlady for a spin?

Crossing creeks and rivers along the coast is something you seem to be constantly doing. No worries, fresh water helps keep the rust out!



**THE 79 KNUCKLED DOWN LIKE A
WORK TRUCK ON A MISSION**



Pat plays off-road 'tassie' style – right next to the road!

Not so the Simex-equipped ARB trucks. Locked up at both ends, the 79 knuckled down like a work truck on a mission and climbed up with a lot of rock tossing and scrabbling. Chinese John followed in the new 100 Series picking a line that was as neat as a row of pegs.

The rest of the track was just as good too, with a constant need to work the wheels over the ruts and find traction wherever you could. Plenty of three-point turns, lots of wheel-hanging ditches and huge sump-crushing rocks rolling down as each truck worked hard to maintain progress. With those big tyres and plenty of power, Otis was walking where the rest of us crawled, but even Pat was scrabbling for traction. Behind us the dam dropped away as we crawled up a ridge with breathtaking views all around. If heaven's up in the sky, no wonder Darwin Peak is so close!

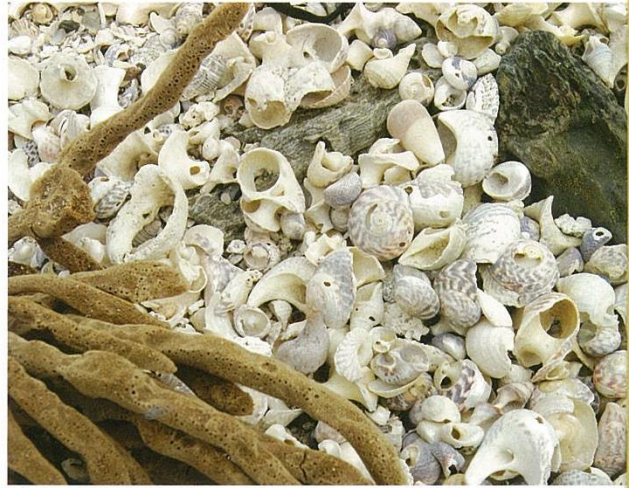


Climbing the Balfour track. We're less than a couple of hundred metres off the main road and already the 100's got both lockers in! Tassie's awesome!

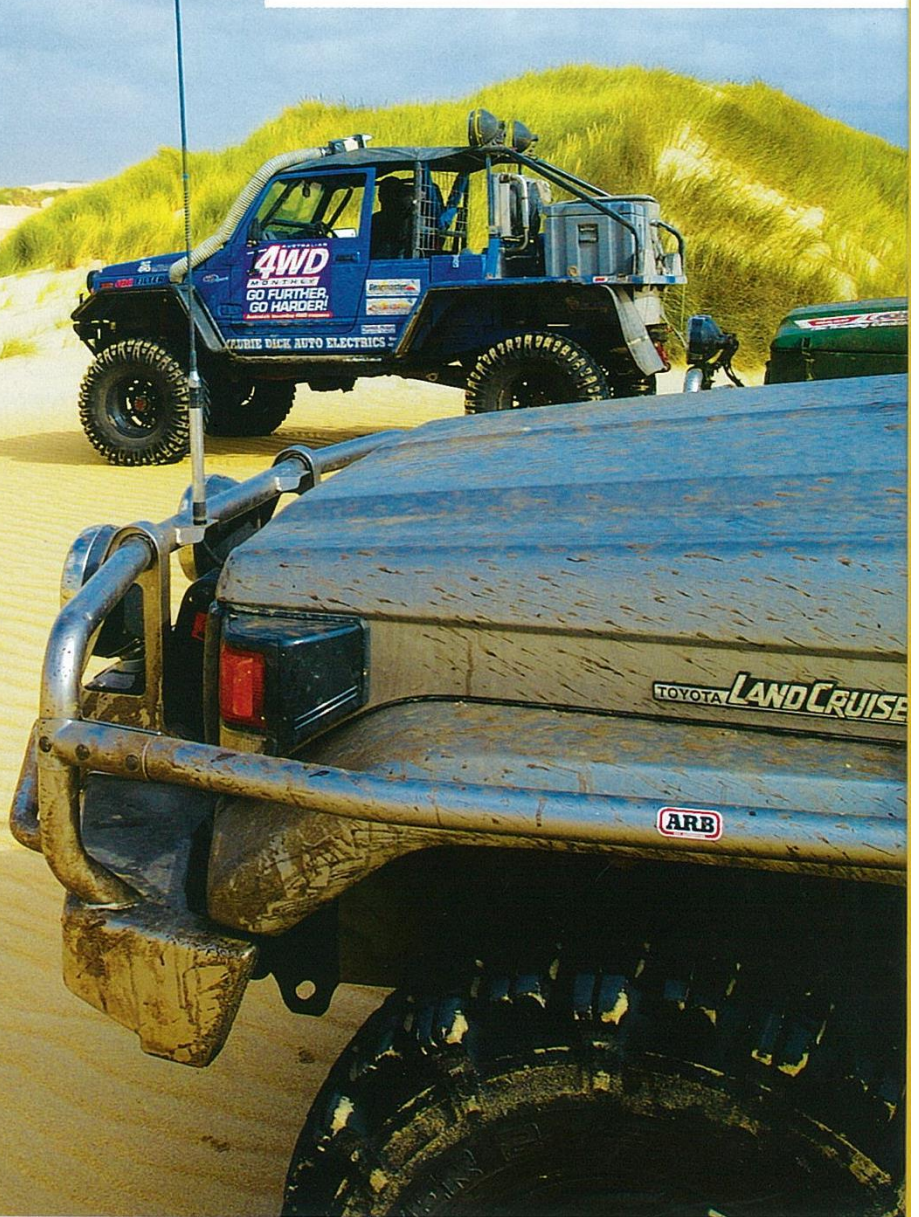
From the peak, we could see right across Macquarie Harbour and the old penal settlement of Sarah Island. I'd bought a book on convict life on the island while Coz and I were trolling the shops in Strahan and it didn't take much to imagine the mental state of the inmates. Stuck on a little island, surrounded by shark-infested water and huge mountains covered with impenetrable bush on one of the wildest, most remote coastlines in the world, Sarah Island truly was hell on earth.

Not unlike the cold sausage sandwiches we dug out of the tucker box for lunch. Phew, no wonder nobody wanted to travel in Milo's cab that afternoon, the fog had returned...

With the plateau climbed, we drove up the highway through the back of the Frankland River country before finding a spot just off the track to camp for the night. In the midst of tall old-growth forest, the lads baited a trap for the Tassie devils and set it close enough to Ellem's swag for him to get it on film. As hungry as they were, the devils copped one whiff of the Mike Man's socks and high-tailed it in the direction of New Zealand. Score one for man against Mother Nature!



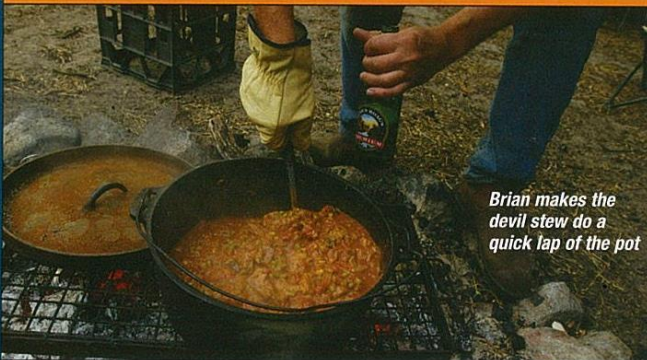
**A DECISION
TO RESTRICT
VEHICLE
ACCESS HERE
WOULD BE
COMPLETELY
RIDICULOUS**



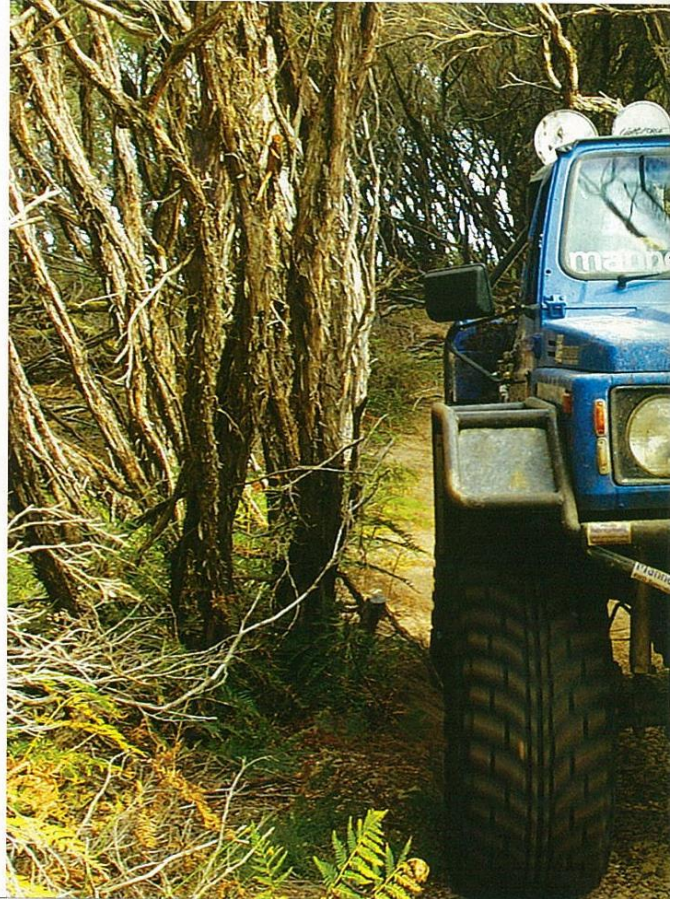
RED DEVIL STEW

Brian Imlach's Red Devil Stew is a real favourite down Tassie way where the chilly nights need something more than a good fire to keep the cold at bay. It's simple, tasty and filling – and best cooked and eaten while drinking Boag's Premium!

- Dice some rump steak; flour the cubes and brown them in a hot pan or camp oven over the fire.
- Cut up some onions and mushrooms and add them to the stew while the pot's hot.
- Add carrots, beans and sliced tomatoes or other veggies if you've got them.
- Add some mixed herbs and a bottle of herb and garlic tomato-based pasta sauce.
- Add a good shake of soy sauce.
- Thicken with a tablespoon or two of Gravox and let stand for at least six beers.
- Eat with bread and Boag's close at hand!



Brian makes the devil stew do a quick lap of the pot



TRAVEL

Tasmania, Part 3 of 3

Our destination was the Western Explorer, a dirt road that's been cut up through the north-east wilderness to open up this stretch of country. Next morning we queued up for the Fatman barge across the river – see, no 'fairies' in Tasmania either; it must just be you Noo Sarth Welsh blokes who like to ride on fairies, huh? And to the chug of a one-lung diesel our next adventure began.

Well-graded, the track soon broke from tall timber country to show off the rolling plains and bald hills of the west coast that'd been singed by recent bushfires. Along the way we turned off the track to climb Mount Balfour. There's some great driving around here, including the old tramline from Balfour through to Temma we took. Apparently it was never used for ore despite the Balfour mine producing some of the richest copper ore on earth.

Once again it was double locker country and we were having a ball within a few hundred metres of the main track! Wow, seriously off-road in Tasmania is as easy as engaging low-range!



With the hills crossed we were soon back on the coast beach. This section sees 4WD use 'under review', which means our precious government is wasting thousands of our dollars trying to make a decision on whether or not Australians will be allowed to access their own land. As remote as it is and with Mother Nature holding all the cards anyway, a decision to restrict vehicle access here would be completely ridiculous. You'd better get down for a drive before they do then...

Our objective for the night was one of the bush camps on the Pedder River down at Sandy Cape established by the Devonport 4WD Club. Brian and Coz have been coming here forever, bringing their families and teaching them camping and bushcraft. The kids

learnt to handle vehicles here, learnt to fish, played with native animals and learnt to love the bush and the beach in a healthy and respectful manner. The fact that bureaucrats sitting in offices in cities can actually threaten a way of life that Tasmanians – and Australians – have enjoyed for generations shows how ridiculous the whole environmental lobby has become.

Even more so when you see the sheer strength of nature here at Sandy Cape. Apart from the fairy penguins being blown out of the sea by the constant howling wind, the beach and bush was chockers with small kangaroos, the rocks patrolled by lizards and the sea teeming with cray. That night our photographers found themselves

**THIS IS THE SORT OF PLACE WHERE YOUR
TEETH WILL RUST IF YOU SMILE FOR TOO LONG!**



surrounded by Tassie devils anxious for a portrait sitting too. Maybe it was the smell of Brian's fantastic Red Devil stew slow-cooking on the fire, maybe they thought there was a free Boag's with every picture. Whatever the reason, we were surrounded.

Out of interest, the only positive work on behalf of the environment (apart from the signpost technology our bureaucrats excel at) I saw being done was by four-wheel drivers. Members of the Braddon club have extensive dune preservation work going on and the Devonport lads have built a couple of pit toilets to help tidy things up.

The dune country around the Cape was as soft as it comes and Milo's old Mickey T boots were dropped to less than 10psi so we could struggle up the top for some silhouette shots next morning. All around the bare dunes there's plenty of Manuka scrub, which often drapes over tracks to form a vehicle-hiding canopy. Once again I was surprised to find that even though we weren't far from anywhere on the map, we were light years away in terms of remoteness. Tassie's like that!

This is the sort of place where you'll get to hear all the stories sooner or later because there just aren't enough people to lose the thread. Tales of lost vehicles abound, stories of young boys who had to rescue their fathers or families who got lost. Names, places, old adventures – they all serve to remind us that nothing can be taken for granted off the sealed road in Tasmania. Sandy Cape is about as close to heaven on earth as a camping site can be, but Mother Nature rules here. Getting cut off is as simple as a big sea and a wild night.

There's no way to avoid the constant salt but I kept Milo's grease nipples packed to at least slow it down. With so many fresh water crossings on the beach, even the locals use them to wash their trucks every chance they get. No wonder really, this is the sort of place where your teeth rust if you smile for too long!

And we were doing plenty of smiling. Ask what four-wheel driving means to you and somewhere, buried under the challenges of unbogging and driving impossible places, lies a simple truth. For most of us it's the chance to get right away from civilisation, to get back to the bush where people have to rely on themselves and each other. A place where Mother Nature rules and common sense is the best road map you can have. Life might be more dangerous here but it's simpler too, a world away from the digitally generated 'happiness' of a modern city that's failed so many of Australia's youth.

Here in Tasmania we'd found some of the best tracks leading to some of the best places we've ever explored in our 4WD Monthly adventures. The company was superb – thanks to Brian and Coz and all the other off-roaders we met – and the country so breathtaking that even now I'm pining to go back.



**FOR MOST OF US IT'S THE CHANCE TO
GET RIGHT AWAY FROM CIVILISATION**



The 100 Series chews through some of the soft Sandy Cape dunes. Our tyres were down to 10psi by now



So it's a good thing we only managed to drive some of the west-coast tracks because that leaves a whole side of Tasmania we haven't even looked at yet! In fact, I reckon you could spend a lifetime driving Tassie and not see it all.

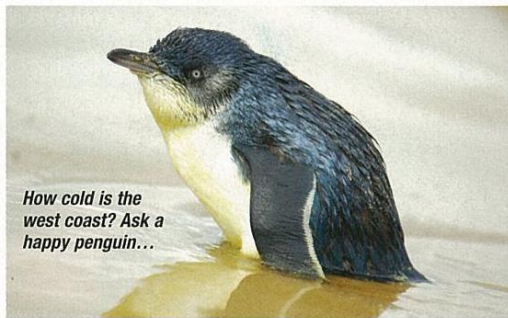
The trip home on the big barge (no fairies here mate!) slipped by as quickly as a deep sleep would allow. The whole team was exhausted, and mixed in with the happiness of accomplishment was a feeling that we were sailing away from the best place on earth to own an off-road vehicle.



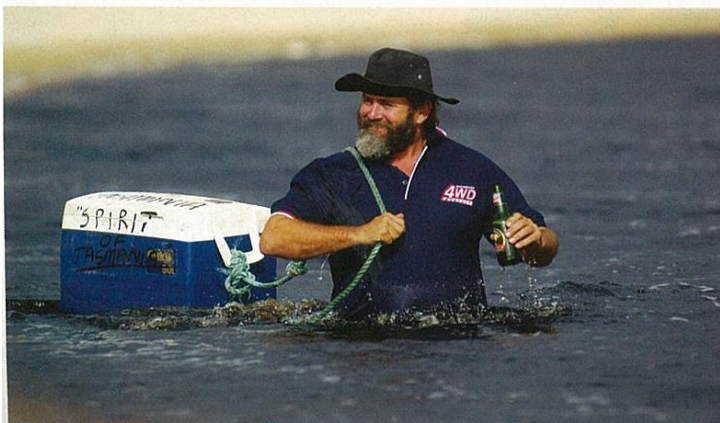


Pat and I didn't talk much as Milo worked her way up the Hume with Otis trailered on the back. Tired for sure, but mostly just reliving memories of great tracks and wild views. We'd been on the adventure of a lifetime, survived and were heading home where life would no doubt still be going on as it had before. Even now, as I sit here tapping out these words and waiting for Chalky to drop by so we can head up for a counter lunch, I can hear that wild west-coast wind and taste the freshest air in the world.

We'll be back! **4WD**



How cold is the west coast? Ask a happy penguin...



THANKS TO

- Brian Imlach and Peter Coz, from Devonport 4WD Club, for sharing their favourite tracks and camping sites with us.
- The Spirit of Tasmania. If you'd like more details on fares, or want to make a booking, visit their excellent website: www.spiritoftasmania.com.au.
- Chris Boden's fantastic book, 4WD tracks in Tasmania. Email roving@southcom.com.au for more information.
- Boag's Premium – beer that tastes so good you know it's made in the freshest air in Australia. Burp... When in Launceston, visit the Boag's Centre For Beer Lovers. Housed in the fully restored Tamar Hotel, a historically important Georgian building, the centre gives an insight into the Boag legend. The centre is open Monday to Friday with regular tours daily. Admission is \$16 for adults, \$12 for kids (10–17).