

# Tasman Peninsula

## Diving the deep down under

text by Gary Myors  
photos by Karen Gowlett-Holmes

About 70 minutes drive from the Tasmanian capital city of Hobart is the Tasman Peninsula. European settlement on the peninsula commenced with the establishment of a convict timber station in 1830.

By 1840, over 2,000 prisoners and staff were accommodated at various locations on the peninsula with the main prison complex at Port Arthur.

More than 12,000 unfortunate souls were incarcerated in sometimes brutal conditions until the

cessation of transportation from England and the closure of Port Arthur as a prison in 1877. Tourism, farming, forestry and fishing support today's inhabitants, many of whom proudly claim convict ancestry.

**"Tasmania is a secret garden at the edge of the southern ocean. Every dive in Tasmania displays an exquisite combination of lyrical beauty and the wistfully bizarre."**

**-- David Doubilet**

ABOVE: Tasman Peninsula

LEFT: Fromia-polypora



# feature Tasmania

The area offers fabulous scenery; Eucalypt forests hug the massive cliffs and the few protected bays. These spectacular towering cliffs, up to 300 metres (1,000 ft.) above sea level, continue underwater and combined with the rich invertebrate life give spectacular diving attracting divers from throughout the world.

The geology of the region is primarily mudstone, sandstone, dolerite and granite that has, in some areas, been eroded to a very large degree offering huge caves, caverns and passageways.

The Tasman Peninsula, by nature of its topography, is mainly only dived by boat. Eaglehawk Dive Centre runs tours of the east coast of the peninsula from their catamaran dive boat.

Waterfall Bay is considered one of best diving areas as it is only eight minutes by boat from the jetty in Pirates Bay and offers a range of sites depending on the level of experience of the diver. One of the most popular dives for open water certified divers and above is Cathedral Cave.

Of the numerous caves that are dived, Cathedral is one of the most spectacular as it consists of a massive entrance tunnelling back into smaller caverns with many narrow tunnels and cross passages. The walls are covered with an incredible diversity of colourful invertebrates many of which are typical of deeper temperate waters. The Dive Centre provides a guide for the tour of the Cathedral Cave system.

## Cathedral Dome

The boat can be moored off the walls under Cathedral Dome allowing easy access to the start of the system. The tour leaves the surface and descends to the bottom below the magnificent Cathedral Arch. The maximum depth during the



ABOVE: Jewel anemones.



LEFT: Handfish with eggs.



Hippolyte Rock Seal Colony



Waterfall Bay

Sisters Rocks

dive is 21 metres. From the arch, the group is lead down the Aisles to the entrance of the Catacombs. This is an area of tunnels that are just big enough for one diver at time. Once inside the main chamber, the guide then leads divers through the labyrinth to what is commonly called The Back Door.

Retracing the passage to the exit point of the Catacombs, divers find sunlight streaming down into the entrance of the passage to Revelation Bend. This is one of the most awesome underwater views that most divers will ever see. Known as the Skull Cave this view is featured with other photos in David Doubilet's article, "Beneath the Tasman Sea," in National Geographic Magazine in January 1997. The narrow passage up to the bend is dark and barren with a gravel bottom. When the guide stops at the bend, he signals divers to turn off their lights and swim past. The cavern, with two huge eye holes looking out into the light beyond clouds of bull's-eyes darting to and fro, takes most divers' breath away.

At this stage of the dive, we turn away from the light and head into the Devil's Tonsils, which is a tight passage with an upward curve at its end that requires careful negotiation. This pass usually ends the tour of



Waterfall Bay Caves & Canyons

the cave system, but the dive is not over.

The walls below Cathedral Dome have some of the most spectacular displays of jewel anemones and golden zoanthids found anywhere. They give the impression of an underwater garden in full bloom. Karen Gowlett-Holmes, a local marine biologist and international award winning photographer, has been studying and photographing these impressive walls of endemic sponges, asidians, anemones and bryzoans for many years, and she is still discovering species new to science. Even if cave exploration holds little attraction for a diver, the color and diversity of the marine life in the caves and on the walls is a naturalist's and photographer's paradise.

### Waterfall Bay

Two of the main diving areas in Waterfall Bay, including the caves, are listed for consideration in a marine reserve, and they have already been zoned as net free areas. This has helped the fish life in the area increase in both size and numbers over the last few years. Hopefully, they will be completely protected in a marine park in the not too distant future.

In addition to cave diving, there are also possibilities



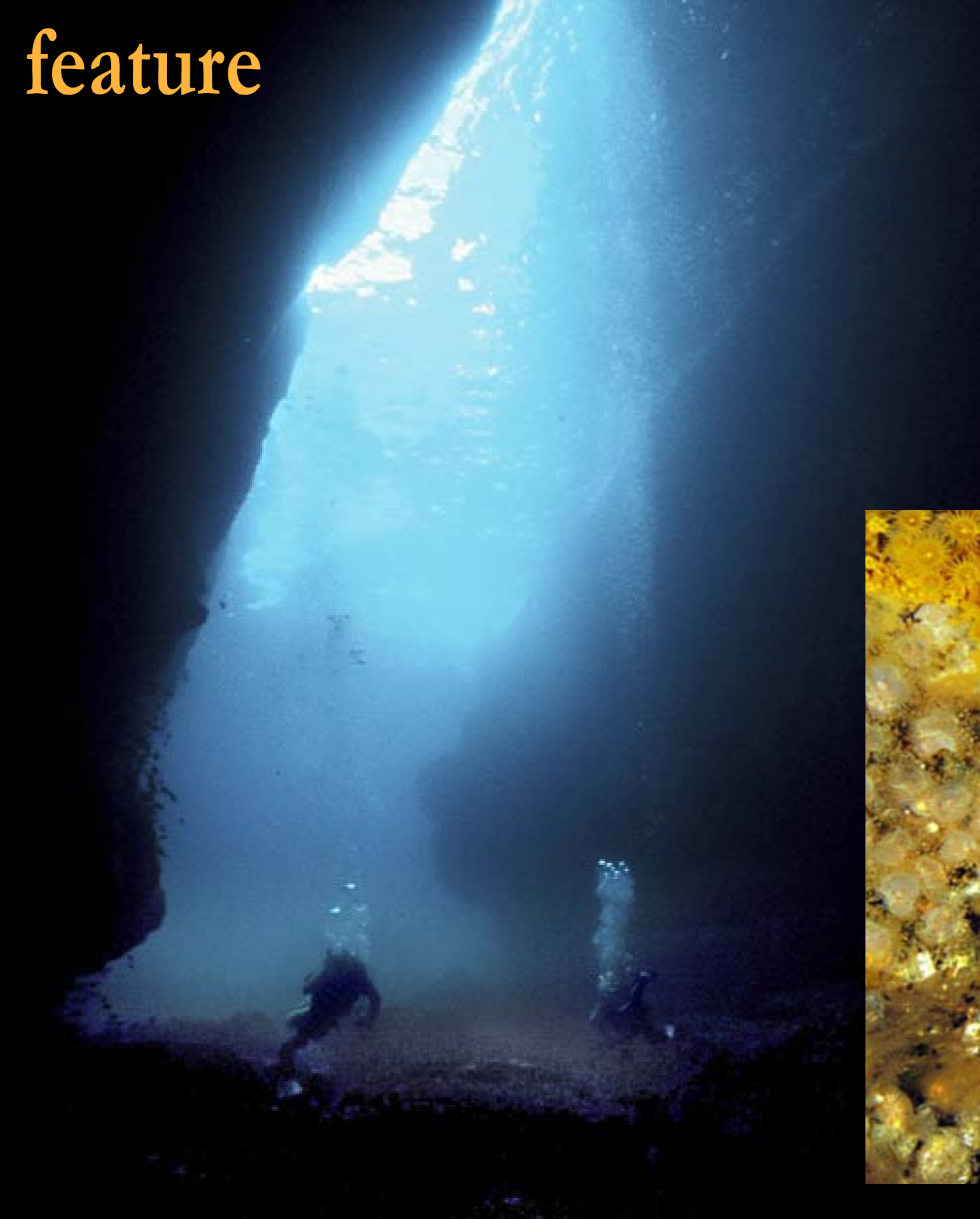
Wreck of the S. S. Nord

Click on the image to see videos courtesy of Eaglehawk Dive Centre. [www.eaglehawkdive.com.au](http://www.eaglehawkdive.com.au)



Giant kelp forests





Rays of sun pierce a narrow chamber of the Bay Caves.

## Tasmania

for wreck diving.

The "SS NORD" sunk in 1915 without loss of life after the officer of the watch failed to follow the captain's orders to stay outside the Hippolyte Rocks. Charts had not been upgraded since the needle rock that lies hidden beneath the surface between the two rocks had claimed the "SS TASMAN" in 1883. The "TASMAN" was only rediscovered in 1998 lying in 72 metres of water. The "TASMAN" has only been dived successfully on four occasions as the site is exposed and subject to fierce currents and mixed gas diver certification is required.

The "NORD" is a popular dive for holders of Deep

PHOTO BY RICHARD BENNETT

PHOTO BY RICHARD BENNETT



Divers explore the Bay Caves.



Coral growth blanket the cave walls.





A seadragon hangs suspended among towering fronds of giant kelp.





Diver certification as she sits upright on a coarse sandy bottom in 41 metres of water. Some of the stern section is still intact and the boilers and triple expansion steam engine are accessible in the mid ship section. The fish life on the wreck is quite spectacular with large schools of endemic *Mendesoma* darting and weaving about the divers bubbles. Sections of the hull and the rudder offer



colourful displays of golden zoanths and sponges. It is not uncommon to see opened basketstars at this depth. Divers have had regular encounters with a resident Sunfish Artefacts such as brass fittings and china crockery can still be seen about the site. As the artifacts are protected under the Australian Historic Ship Wreck Legislation, divers are encouraged just to look, not touch.



CLOCK-WISE FROM LEFT: Pink jelly-fish; red hermit crab; pycnogonid.





Basket stars on sponge.



Nearby in the back of Fortescue Bay is the small wreck of the “WILLIAM PITT,” which is suitable for divers with limited experience. Fortescue Bay also boasts substantial kelp forests of *Macrocystis pyrifera*, which are home to seadragons and sea horses.

Seadragons are only found in southern Australia and are remarkable animals that are usually only found after careful searching. Their color and shape have them often mistaken for a piece of floating kelp. It is only when a beam of a light hits them that the spectacular colors of the animal bring the piece of flotsam to life as a fish.

*Macrocystis* is the second fastest growing plant in the world, and in winter when it is at its' healthiest, it grows at an incredible 40 cm per day. It was once found colonizing the full length of the east coast of Tasmania growing from depths up to 25 metres, but it is now only found in the quiet bays of the southeast. It is assumed that the plant's disappearance is due to global warming.

There are many more sites to challenge divers of all levels. Information about sites and diver operators can be found on [www.divetasmania.com](http://www.divetasmania.com). World famous underwater photographer David Doubilet, with over 60 articles published in National Geographic Magazine, rates Tasmania



Golden zoanthids







## Tasmania

LEFT: The Tasmanian capital city of Hobart is home to 195,500 people.

BOTTOM: View overlooking Pirate's Bay.



as his No. 2 favorite dive destination in the January 2004 issue. David has visited Tasmania four times and hopes to return again in the not too distant future.

The Tasman Peninsula offers something for everybody. It is the prime tourist destination in Tasmania with its Port Arthur Historic site, Tasmanian Devil Park, Bush Mill and Pioneer village, golf courses, bush walking tracks, sea kayaking, float plane flights, game fishing, horseback riding, restaurants, and kilometres and kilometres of natural beauty. Additional information about the region can be found on the Port Arthur Regional Marketing web site, [www.portarthur-region.com.au](http://www.portarthur-region.com.au).

Becca Saunders's new book "Top Australian Dive Sites" features two Tasmanian destinations. This book has a place in every serious diver's library. Here is what she and Mark Spencer had to say about diving the Tasman Peninsula:

"Without doubt, one of our very favorite diving destinations in Australia, providing wonderful surprises every time, is the Tasman Peninsula. The Eaglehawk Dive Centre has made all our trips there most enjoyable." ❧

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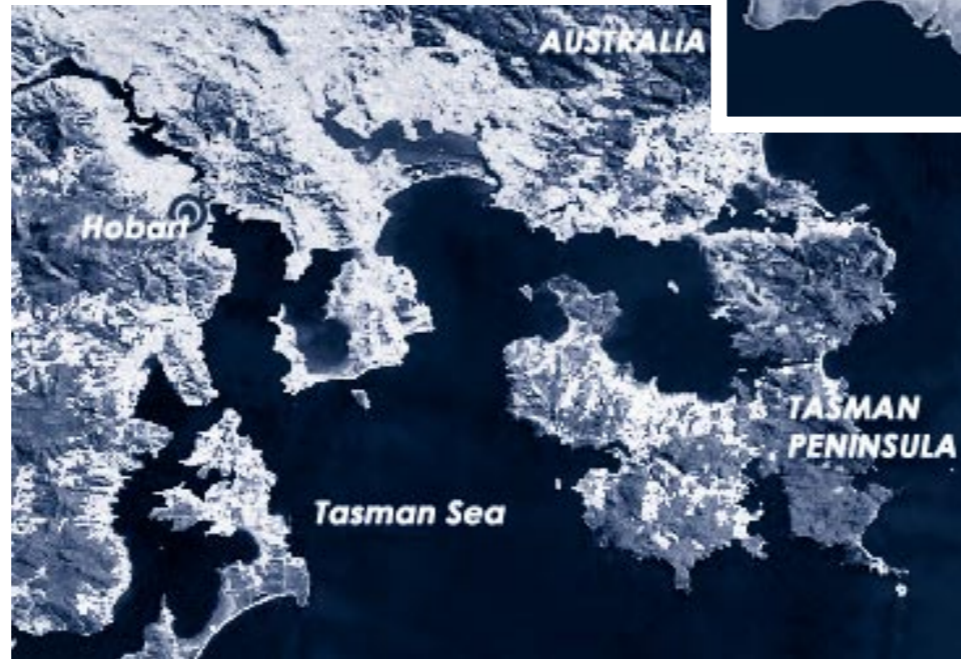
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An advertisement for Special Fins. It features a pair of blue and black fins against a dark background. The fins are shown from a top-down perspective. The text "Special" is written in a stylized font at the top, with "SPECIALFINS.COM" underneath. Below the fins, the text "Custom-made fins for superb performance!" is written in a bold, yellow font with a black outline. At the bottom, the website "specialfins.com" is written in a white font.

# fact file

## Tasman Peninsula



**Geography** Tasmania covers a land area of 68,332 sq km (26,383 sq. miles). Its terrain ranges from mountains, lakes, rivers and waterfalls to dense rain forest. Tasmania has over 2000 km of walking tracks and 18 national parks. The Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area covers 1.38 million hectares.

**Climate** Of all the Australian capital cities, Hobart has the nation's second-lowest rainfall (626 mm or 24 inches). The average summer temperature is 21°C (70°F). Winter's average is 12°C (52° F).

**Population** The population of Tasmania is 472,000. Main centers are Hobart (the capital city with 195,500 people) Launceston (98,500) Burnie (18,000) and Devonport (25,000).

**Currency** Australian Dollar (AUD\$)

**Language** English

**Diving** Colorful sponges, anemones, lots of seaweed including giant kelp forests. Dive comfortably all year in a 7mm wet suit.



**Electricity** 220-240V AC, 50 Hz. Plugs have three flat pins. A socket converter can be bought for approximately \$8-10 AUD.

### Web sites

Tasmania Tourism  
[www.discovertasmania.com.au](http://www.discovertasmania.com.au)  
 Port Arthur Region  
[www.portarthur-region.com.au](http://www.portarthur-region.com.au)

### Dive Operators

Eaglehawk Dive Centre  
[www.eaglehawkdive.com.au](http://www.eaglehawkdive.com.au)

