

Into the green

The Tarkine wilderness soaks into the skin and mind of *Elizabeth Claire Alberts* on a short trip to north-west Tasmania

After barreling over a gravel road for about an hour, we park up in the lee of some leatherwood trees. My pulse quickens as I leap out to gather my gear; we have officially entered the Tarkine. From here, we'll walk 40 minutes to Tiger Ridge, the basecamp for Tasmania's multi-day rainforest walk.

At the time of writing there is one open-cut iron-ore mine and around 30 exploration licences active in this mineral-rich region, which is also the world's second largest tract of temperate rainforest after that of western Canada. My imagination first wandered here while listening to Bob Brown describe the Tarkine's cathedral-like trees, pure air and endangered wildlife. Unfortunately, my

imagination didn't stretch to what to pack, and as a first-timer in Tassie I have it completely wrong. Unlike my locally born companions, I'm carrying a clean cotton shirt as instead of a quick-dry one, a windbreaker instead of a rain jacket, and neither thermals nor beanie. Then there is my extra, unnecessary daypack.

Once I step inside the rainforest, however, I forget about my bags and what I did or didn't bring. I stare amazed through layers of old-growth trees as the wind ripples the canopy carrying the calls of black currawongs. I now understand how the Tarkine tempted our guide Trevor away from a profitable landscaping business in Hobart.

We cross John Lynch Creek via a myrtle

log and hike up a steep, moss-covered hill. I quickly learn that it's best to step on the leaf litter rather than the slippery wood and rock. I'm careful to avoid the funnel-shaped mounds that mark where tiny freshwater crayfish have burrowed to the water table to munch on rotting wood.

The rainforest thickens as we walk, and the trees grow so tall that I have to crane my neck to see their tops. The blue canvas tents of Tiger Ridge materialise out of the green, along with a composting toilet and cast-iron fireplace.

The following morning, after a night of howling wind and lashing rain, I don my most waterproof apparel and borrow a trekking pole for the trip to Lonely Ridge.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The Tarkine provides habitat for around 60 rare and threatened species
- While around 80 per cent of the area is protected from logging, less than five is protected from mining
- The 154-hectare mine opened at Nelson Bay River last year is expected to provide four million tonnes of iron ore in 10 years
- At the time of writing, lobby group Save the Tarkine awaits the verdict of its February court action against the Riley Creek mine approval, which raised the question of whether the federal environment minister can legally rely on a state-managed assessment of environmental impacts without first considering conservation advice (savethetarkine.org)
- Eight members of the Responsible Runners clean-beach initiative ran 130 kilometres across the Tarkine over seven days in January, while carrying their own supplies and shooting a short film due to be screened in July (responsiblerunners.org)
- A crowdfunded documentary currently in production, entitled *Battle for the Tarkine: The Last Stand*, is capturing the beauty of the area's waterfalls, flowering fungi and elusive wildlife with the help of drone cameras (throughthetreesandtheforest.com.au)

The track to this spectacular outcrop is less than a year old, making me one of the first 30 or so people to walk it. If you veer 20 metres off the trail, it's possible you're the first human in that particular spot. Historians don't believe Aboriginal Australians inhabited this section of the Tarkine, only passing through it to reach the coastal regions.

My entire body jolts when I hear the rumble of an aircraft, which is probably a sightseeing plane but could also be miners in a metal detector-equipped helicopter. If the mining corporations had their way, 95 per cent of the Tarkine wilderness would be gashed and quarried, including the trail beneath my feet. With this in mind, every tree, every leaf and every fern frond feels precious. The rain doesn't bother me as I admire the rare myrtle beeches, sassafras and celery top pines as well as a variety of mosses, lichens and fungi. There are even 500-year-old eucalyptus trees.

The trail is not the easiest, with logs to hop and branches to duck, but the spongy duff is gentle on the knees. I find myself sinking deep into the mud more than once, but the sun makes an appearance as we reach our lunch spot at one of the area's many tannin-tinged creeks.

The threat of the wind and rain picking up again, which would put us in firing line of falling branches and increase our impact on the land around the track to an unacceptable level for our guide, put an end to the plan to reach Lonely Ridge today.

We double back the way we came but I notice completely different things this time, including a purple-colored fungus, a celery top sapling and a giant eucalypt on its side. I repeatedly ask the others if we're actually on the same track, but it's only when we reach the crest of the hill that we take an alternate route. We come to one of the motion sensor cameras set up to photograph Tassie devils, strung between two trees with a container of whiffy mutton meat dangling in front. Before these were installed, experts didn't know devils lived in the Tarkine, let alone that it is the last disease-free stronghold of the species. Come evening, the five of us warm our hands around the fire as raindrops patter the longhouse roof. We drink Tasmanian pinot noir while our guide entertains us with tales about the next track on our agenda, named after a visiting Japanese student called Kazoo. Apparently, Kazoo drank too much lambrusco and wandered deep into the rainforest to take photographs of the stars. It took two days and nights for a rescue helicopter to find him, shivering beneath a shelter of fern fronds.

As soon as I step on Kazoo's Track I understand how easy it would be to get lost,



Kazoo drank too much lambrusco and wandered deep into the rainforest to take photographs of the stars – it took two days and nights for a rescue helicopter to find him

GET A TASTE OF THE TARKINE

- Tarkine Trails runs four and six-day rainforest walks October through April, as well as specialist Tasmanian devil research trips. tarkinetrails.com.au
- Tasmanian Expeditions runs a six-day Tarkine & North Coast tour including a cruise on the Pieman River. tasmanianexpeditions.com.au
- Corinna Wilderness Experience offers solar-powered cabin accommodation and kayak hire at the southern gateway to the Tarkine. corinna.com.au
- Tarkine Wilderness Lodge in the north offers three luxurious suites as a base for guided walks and Arthur River excursions. tarkinelodge.com.au

especially at night. We wander through labyrinths of hardwood trees, ferns and vines. The rain beats at my not-so-waterproof jacket and into my fleece, but the walk is worth it. As we get closer to the Huskisson River the eucalypts thin out and giant myrtles take their place. I stop to admire a 400-year-old tree nicknamed Mother Myrtle because of a womb-like opening in its trunk that you can climb inside.

After lunch, we refill our water bottles with the river's sweet-tasting water and start the trek back to camp. Instead of walking as

one big group, we decide to spread apart to experience some one-on-one time with the rainforest. At first I'm a little worried I'll get lost, and the trail will have to be renamed Elizabeth's Track, but I relax as my feet pound a rhythm into the earth. The spicy fragrance of sassafras fills my nostrils and I listen closely to the bell-like tweets of green rosellas. I gaze at the broad trunks of the ancient trees, thinking of the centuries it took them to grow. A few times, I do find myself a few steps off the trail, but it does not take long to locate the pink ribbon markers.

It starts raining on our return to Tiger Ridge, transforming the campsite into something of a mud bath overnight. The next morning we tiptoe down the soggy trail to John Lynch Creek to find that it has become a raging river and the log we used earlier as a bridge is submerged. I shiver as I watch the others stumble waist-deep into the torrent. After a quick river survival lesson—if you fall let go of your pack and quickly raise your legs—I strip down to my underwear and step into the chilly water. The current is so strong that it doesn't even feel like we're moving as we cross in train formation, but eventually we reach the opposite bank. As we shuffle out from beneath the rainforest canopy, the sun emerges and beats down on the gravel road. The heat feels good on my soaked skin, but my heart already aches for the Tarkine. **W**

Ancient cool-climate rainforest
Photos: Elizabeth Claire Alberts