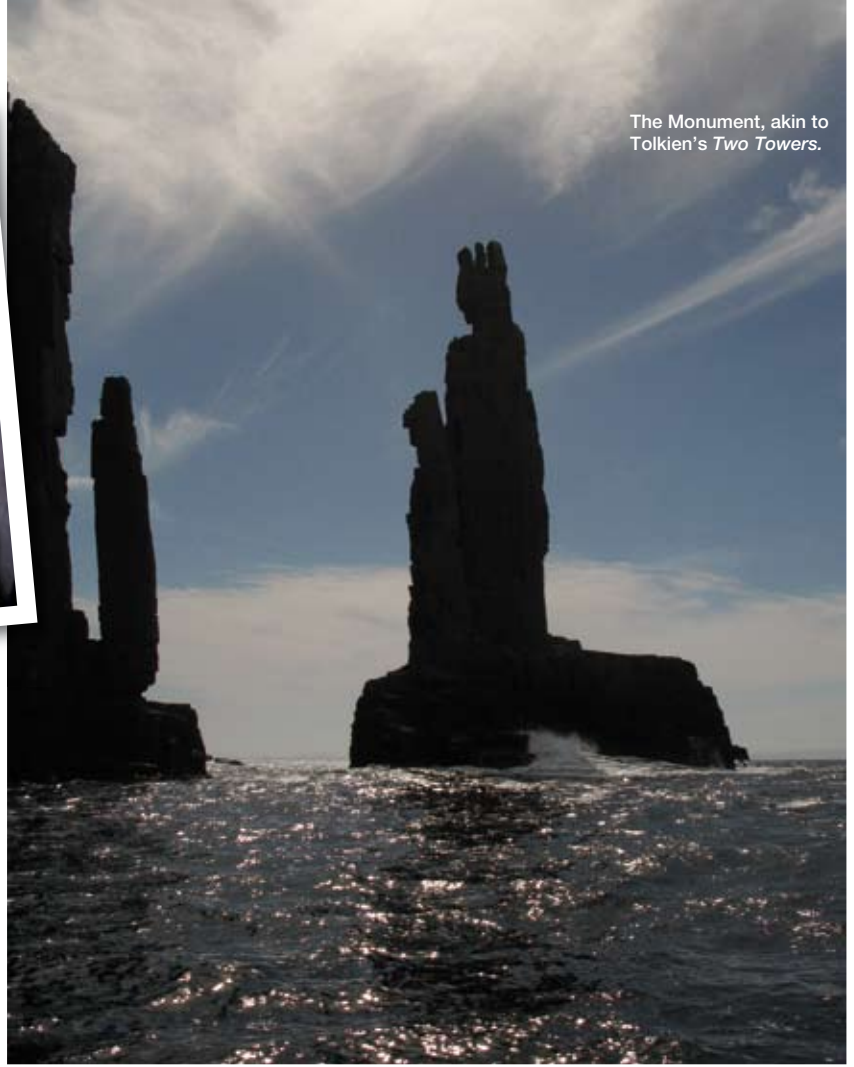


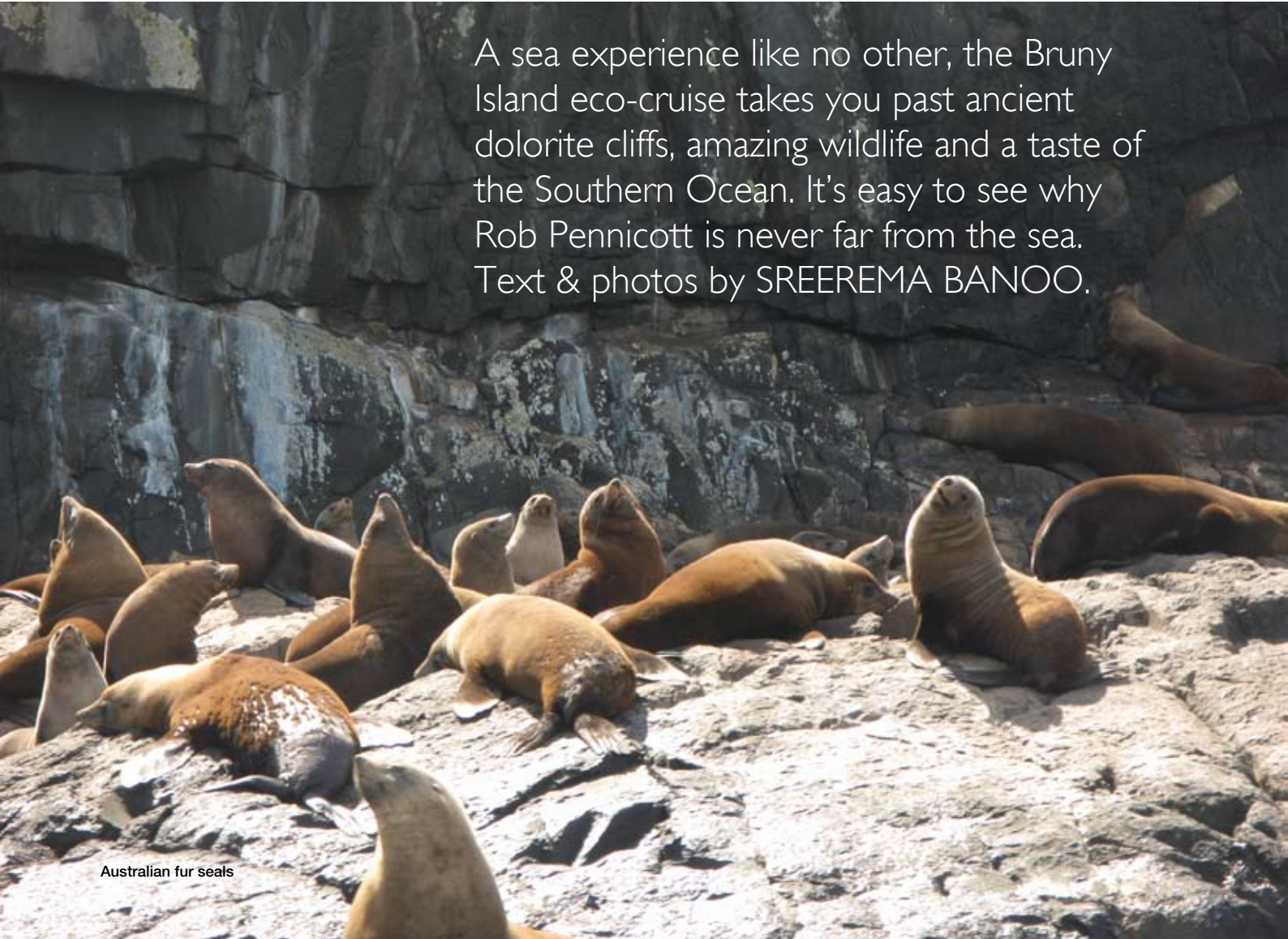


The Monument, akin to Tolkien's *Two Towers*.

# THE MAN AND THE SEA



A sea experience like no other, the Bruny Island eco-cruise takes you past ancient dolorite cliffs, amazing wildlife and a taste of the Southern Ocean. It's easy to see why Rob Pennicott is never far from the sea. Text & photos by SREEREMA BANOO.



Australian fur seals

**R**ob Pennicott's love affair with the sea began when he was just three years old. Originally from South Australia, Rob and his family moved to Tasmania when he was just a child and it's here, on this isle that has inspired many before him, that his life-long love affair with the deep blue began. "I love all activities associated with the sea – swimming, diving, fishing, windsurfing, sailing – and have done them all heaps of times," says the experienced sailor.

Rob bought his first boat when he was just 12 years old, through an A\$3,000 loan from his father, thus embarking on a lucrative, though illegal, career as a fisherman. Given his age, he didn't have a licence to fish. While other boys his age were on football fields, Rob spent every moment of his school holidays at sea on his boat, netting crayfish, trevally and even sharks. So lucrative was the fishing that he managed to repay his father in just six weeks! "There's nowhere that I'd prefer to be... every spare minute I have I'll be on the water, I'm terribly hooked," admits the 44-year-old sheepishly.

Ten years ago, Rob, who lives on South Bruny with his wife Michaye and children Mia and Noah, decided to share his passion for the sea with local Tasmanians and travellers. "As a fisherman, I used to take people out fishing and they would love the experience. So it got me thinking that if people who are fairly used to the sea love the experience, what about those who've never been out to sea?" Thus began Bruny Island Charters. For the first three years, Rob operated a 12-seater boat and in the beginning only received one or two guests but it was only a matter of time before word got out and passenger numbers began to swell. Guide with Tourism Tasmania, Di Hollister, remembers the early years: "Back then, Rob would take people out on a small boat and he'd lower us to the surface until we were up close with the dolphins."

To cater for the rise in numbers, four years ago Rob commissioned the building of three new vessels that his team have dubbed "4WDs of the sea". Each of the 12.5-metre boats is powered by three 275 horsepower four-stroke engines, capable of taking the 42 passengers (at full capacity) on what must be a sea experience like no other. But it's not just a three-hour thrill ride – although there is no shortage of exciting moments. Cruising the Tasman Sea and the Southern Ocean, you'll see ancient landscapes and amazing wildlife, from Australian fur seals to dolphins, sea birds and, if you're really lucky, the humpback whale.

The cruise sets off from Bruny Island Charters' base at Adventure Bay on South Bruny – about an hour-and-a-half away from the Tasmanian capital, Hobart. After a hot drink and some scrummy muffins, it's a short walk from the booking office to where the boats are moored. While embarking on the boat, Rob and his team offer helpful advice: "Those who tend to get seasick should sit towards the back." Naturally, the

seats at the back rows get full up pretty quickly; nonetheless, there are some fearless souls who make a beeline for the front row seats that would undoubtedly offer a more panoramic, albeit stomach-churning ride. Before leaving the jetty, the crew come around offering ginger tablets, said to be the perfect antidote for seasickness. It's an offer no-one refuses. Given the cold winds and swells, especially as the boat heads into the Southern Ocean, passengers are also offered wet weather gear.

Before long, we set off and after arriving in a sheltered bay, just five minutes from the jetty, the boat stops for the safety briefing. "This is a lifejacket, it's the only one on the boat and it's mine," says Rob. His humour, insightful commentary and vast knowledge of the sea will make the next three hours seem like mere minutes and leave you raring for another ride. Jokes aside, for Rob and his team, passenger safety is paramount. The crew are equally attentive to those suffering from seasickness – ginger tablets notwithstanding, moving around the boat to get that picture-perfect shot amid the swells and cold winds will turn even the hardiest green around the gills. "You alright there, mate? Do you need to go to the back?" are oft-heard refrains on board.

As we round Fluted Cape, a mesmerising sight comes to view. Dolorite sea cliffs so high and ancient – formed 165 million years ago when the continents split apart – just take your breath away. Indeed, Tasmania is one of the few places on earth where ancient dolorite rocks dominate the landscape. We travel beneath the towering crags and drift up to listen to what Rob calls the "breathing rock" and, within mere seconds, we see why it's so called. With a great sigh, the blowhole heaves a series of huge sprays, each getting progressively higher until the crescendo that is some 20 metres into the air.

A few more of these sights and we are off again, this time approaching a narrow channel separating the wall and a dolorite column – towering some 50 metres high – on the bow. The engines are kicked up a notch and before you can say "rocks ahead", the boat whizzes through the narrow gap leaving a trail of white foam in its wake. It's an adrenalin-pumping moment and to our delight Rob asks if we want to have another go at it. Cheers and applause greet the question and we have another turn through the channel, past the column that's been dubbed The Monument. As we make our way onward, I look back for another view of The Monument; with the sun in my eye the sea stack looks otherworldly, like something from Tolkien's *Two Towers*.

Untouched by the hand of man, the landscape here is raw and wild. Grass carpets the tops of the cliffs, sculptured by centuries of sea and wind and painted with lichen and guano. We smell the latter before we see the birds – comorants, shearwaters and gannets.

Black faced cormorants atop a cliff.



## ADVENTURE ISLAND

Bruny Island is 50 km long and is actually two islands, North and South Bruny, which are joined by a narrow isthmus. Bruny Island itself boasts a landscape rich in fauna and is said to be a bird watchers' paradise; there's even a chance of spotting fairy penguins at dusk. Bruny Island was first sighted by Abel Tasman in 1642 and named after Rear Admiral Bruni d'Entrecasteaux who visited the island in 1792-93. The island is of national importance with respect to European exploration in the southern seas. In 1773, Tobias Furneaux, who was exploring the coastline with Captain James Cook, anchored his vessel, the Adventure (which gave the name to the island's main bay) off the island's coast. In 1777, Cook sailed the Discovery and Resolution into Adventure Bay. A year later, Captain Bligh anchored the Bounty in Adventure Bay and is said to have planted some seeds. It's claimed that Bligh was responsible for Tasmania's apple industry. Aside from the wildlife, there's a whole host of activities on the island, from bushwalking to scenic drives.

Bruny Island is 40 km south of Hobart, along the A6 to Kettering; from here it's a 20-minute ferry ride to North Bruny Island. For more information, go to [www.brunyisland.com](http://www.brunyisland.com) or [www.brunyisland.net](http://www.brunyisland.net).

For more information on Bruny Island Charters, go to [www.brunycharters.com.au](http://www.brunycharters.com.au)

As the boat approaches The Friars, a group of small islands just off the most southerly point of South Bruny, Rob lets it rip. A great blast of the horn is Rob's way of celebrating where the Tasman Sea meets the Southern Ocean. If we steer the boat straight ahead, the next landfall is Antartica. At The Friars, we see more gannets and black-faced cormorants and a huge colony of Australian fur seals. The boat edges so close to the mammals that at once we get a whiff – actually, more than a whiff – of the seals' fish breath permeating the air. These blubbery animals, with their chocolate, velvety coats sunbathe on the rocks by the hundreds, occasionally dipping into the frigid waters for a swim.

Having got our fill of the seals, Rob steers the boat away from the coastline, hoping to catch a glimpse of dolphins. The swells get more intense and as the boat crests the waves, salty sprays hit my face, the taste of the Southern Ocean is at once invigorating and life-giving; I can understand why Rob loves the sea so much. Here, on the Southern Ocean, the winds are biting cold. I forsake vanity and ask for a beanie, pulling it down almost to my eyes. We don't see any dolphins but there are albatross aplenty, diving for fish then taking flight, a dance that is wild and majestic.

By 2pm, we catch sight of the powdery white sand of Adventure Bay. The cruise has come to an end and waiting for us back at the booking office café are bowls of steaming hot pumpkin soup. Catching up with Rob after the cruise, I ask him what has been the highlight for him these past nine years. "Experiences with both animals and people... swimming with dolphins and being eye-balled by whales five feet away... Giving people a great day and giving them awareness of and showing them this environment," says the skipper.

Spoken like a true man of the sea.

KL-BASED FREELANCE WRITER, SREEREMA BANOO WOULD BE AT SEA ALL THE TIME IF NOT FOR THE ANNOYANCE OF SEASICKNESS.

