

TALES FROM THE WILDERNESS

By Rosemary Ann Ogilvie

Several hundred photographs taken on scores of visits covering tens of thousands of kilometres. Typical statistics given out by anyone who likes to travel and who likes to take photographs, whether they be dedicated professional or happy snapper.

Except in this instance, the stats are as far from typical as its possible to be, for the photographs were taken on a large-format camera, which the photographer lugged on his back along with a tripod, extra lenses, and other sundry photographic equipment, plus food, fuel and associated basic necessities for survival, as he trekked – on foot, and usually alone – through the remotest, most physically demanding regions of Tasmania for months on end, through the proverbial rain, hail, snow and occasional searing heat over a period of four years.

The end result of Mark Humphries truly epic journeys is *'Wilderness, The Essence of a Wild Land'*, a stunning photographic book that reveals in broad strokes and intimate details, a Tasmania few visitors, or for that matter residents, get to see. This book gives form to the idealised vision many people hold in their hearts of a pristine island state untouched by civilisation and associated 'progress'.

The photographs, of course, offer no clue to the challenges Mark faced in creating them (to quote the legendary Ansel Adams, photographs are usually looked at – seldom looked into) beyond the fairly obvious fact that he would have had to roll out of his sleeping bag pretty early to get some of the images. There's no hint of the incredibly difficult terrain Mark encountered: the treacherous mud and peat bog in the southwest, getting stuck in the trackless scrub heading for the Frankland Range, again in the southwest, or the murderous three-kilometre trail that took nine hours to walk.

Flipping through the book, you may sense that the weather could be a tad uncooperative at times, but you don't realise that Mark had to hike the same difficult 14-day trail three times before his camera even saw the light of day.

And there's absolutely no indication of the level of fitness Mark had to achieve to trek these legendary wilderness areas – national parks such as Franklin-Gordon Wild Rivers, Southwest, Mount Field, Freycinet, Ben Lomond, Walls of Jerusalem, Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair, and the Central Plateau and Arthur Pieman Protected Areas – loaded with a pack almost equal to half his body weight!

"Many of the places I went to are really, really beautiful, but they are incredibly difficult to get into," says Mark. "The fitter I got, the easier – and consequently the more enjoyable – the walking became." The initial treks, however, were anything but easy: on Mark's very first hike to Federation Peak, the camera gear had to stay behind because he simply wasn't fit enough to carry it. Fortunately, this wasn't a huge loss as the rain bucketed down the entire time. Nor did the photographic equipment make it on Mark's first hike through the Western Arthur Range, even though he was significantly fitter when he undertook that journey. "The Western Arthurs are just incredibly demanding. I ended up coming back out after a week thinking this is unbelievable, and tried to get in somewhere a bit more forgiving."

Mark returned the following year, and this time managed to hike the Western and Eastern Arthurs from end to end, but still without the camera. "When I finally got back in again – this time with the camera – the weather didn't clear the whole time, so it never came out of the pack!"

Eventually, the Linhof Technica flatbed field camera underwent some major surgery as it was just too heavy to carry in its traditional form. "Essentially, a large-format camera is a bellows with a lens on the front and a piece of glass on the back. Anything else is merely for support. So I pulled all the bits and pieces off the camera and drilled holes in it. The end result looks terrible but it works!" And it drew more than a few odd looks and derogatory comments on the trails: Mark says people had absolutely no idea what this strange object was!

While repeated visits to Tasmania allowed Mark to address the fitness issue, there wasn't a thing he could do about the weather, the unpredictability of which is the hallmark of the Tasmanian wilderness. He simply learned to accept that sometimes the rain would set in and there would be no photographs for weeks on end, and now dismisses this aspect with a *c'est la vie* shrug. You get the feeling that the important thing is actually being in these wild and remote areas where he clearly feels at home, and that any photographs he manages to take are a bonus "Until you experience the journey to each place, you don't appreciate the reward: i.e., a great photograph," he says.

The desire to be in Tasmania and to do a book about it led Mark to quit his job as a medical sales representative in Sydney and move to Melbourne. The job provided him with the capital to make extended forays into the state. He would spend six months there at a time – always in the wilderness – settling in to an area for a while wherever this was possible. "In some places such as the Western Arthurs where you start and finish a trek at different points, you are forced to keep moving," Mark explains. "It's a different matter in areas where you can go in and return from the same point: you can generally have a few days in the one place with these."

One such area is the beautiful Walls of Jerusalem National Park, where Mark spent many months. "It's the sort of place where you can walk in, camp and explore for days. I've walked in from just about every conceivable angle. I've hiked from Walls down into Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park and back out the top end of Central Plateau Conservation Area, then entered again from the side of Central Plateau. It's a special place, absolutely magic, and the lakes country around there is stunning."

Periodically, Mark returned to Melbourne to finance the next extended Tasmanian sojourn, working as a commercial photographic assistant, a position he was certainly well qualified to hold having achieved his Bachelor of Applied Science (Photography) degree at RMIT, and subsequently first class honours for his research project: designing and constructing a new large-format camera. He is currently in the process of becoming a commercial photographer.

However, each time he counted the days until he could once again drive onto the Spirit of Tasmania at Port Melbourne to make the Bass Strait crossing. "Life wasn't really a challenge at home, it was just something that happened. Being highly challenged and pushing personal boundaries is something I crave." Although most trips were solo, loneliness was never an issue. Mark says it really doesn't enter the equation, as there's always so much to do and so much to think about in getting to the next place. "Often you're in trackless country, guided only by compass and you need to know exactly where you are. You have to be completely focused." He relished his mid-winter visits as much because he had this silent, frozen, magical world completely to himself as for the challenge they presented.

The other thing that occupied Mark's mind on his lone trips was food. Over time he learned a great deal about producing delicious, nutritious, energy-packed food for the trail. To save money, he cooked and dehydrated all the meals himself, in itself no easy task. "In the beginning, the food was bad," he recalls with a laugh. "Towards the end, I ate better in the bush than at home!" Which prompted him to start writing a cookbook about food for backpacking, which gave him plenty to think about during the often-lengthy periods of having to sit and wait for

the perfect moment to capture a scene. So seriously did he take his trail cuisine that he even fashioned an espresso maker for the fuel stove. "Fresh coffee as a treat for a successful new summit climb – what serenity!" he sighs.

As word spread about Mark's extraordinary hiking adventures, people asked to go with him – and he describes the process of getting potential companions fit enough to actually enjoy the treks as an absolute strain. However, everyone who accompanied him raved about the places, experience – and, of course the food!

One person he didn't have to worry about in regard to fitness was Tony Dorl, a veteran of the Tasmanian wilderness who accompanied Mark on a number of occasions and ultimately made a significant contribution to the book. "We would egg each other on and sort of push the boundaries of what we could achieve together. This would really push my project forward, and it would push Tony forward in things that he thought weren't physically attainable anymore, things he'd put behind him years ago. "Tony is a walking encyclopedia! He taught me a great deal about these special places and had an uncanny knack of raising morale when things were getting tough."

Mark's decision to self publish his book was possibly his most courageous act of all, considering the capital investment involved in such an undertaking. Not one of the many publishers he approached wanted to pick it up, regarding it as a great risk since it focussed on Tasmania only, rather than the entire country.

"So we [Mark and partner Justine Frost] decided well, if no one's going to pick it up, we'll do it," says Mark. And they have literally done everything. "When I studied photography, digital was just coming in but it wasn't taught, so we really started from square one: we've taught ourselves digital, along with the whole process of pre-production, design and offset printing." The completed product was delivered to their office around Easter 2005 and, not surprisingly, has been very well received both locally and in Europe, garnering some terrific reviews from some high-profile people including Senator Bob Brown, Peter Garrett AM MP, and Ralph Ashton of the World Wildlife Fund in Sydney.

The motivation behind the book, says Mark, was to provide visitors to Tasmania with a collection of high-quality images they can take home and cherish. "My publication warmly embraces and visually communicates the environmental treasures found only within Tasmania." It's been a long journey since it began all those years ago. When asked if he would do it over again starting tomorrow, he just grins enthusiastically at the thought and adds, "You bet"!

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An exhibition of Limited Edition prints from Wilderness will be on display at the Lab X Gallery, 40 Pakington Street, St Kilda, from October 14th to November 8th. The book launch and official opening will commence at 6pm, Friday 14th October. The gallery will be open to the public 7:30am to 9:30pm Monday to Friday and 1pm to 7pm on Sundays.

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