

Maatsuyker Island – Winter 2015 (Part 1)

Why would you want to live in isolation in one of the windiest places in Australia? As far south as you can go without hitting the sub Antarctic islands, and oh yeah no heating as it causes all sorts of dramas and by the way throw in a few odd jobs as well.

I've been working, deck handing and diving in the Tasmanian fishing industry for over thirty years and worked consistently over the past ten years on Tasmania's West and South West Coasts occasionally sharing some of these trips with my partner Amanda. It would have to be one of the best offices in the world, but as we pick the guts out of the weather we are in general seeing 'our wild west coast' through rose coloured glasses. You know - sunny days and low swells and you often wonder what it would be like to actually spend a prolonged period of time out there.

Enter the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service (Parks) Volunteer Program which apart from Maatsuyker Island places volunteers at Deal Island, Bruny Island Light Station, Cockle Creek and Melaleuca amongst other amazing sites for periods of up to six months.

Amanda and I went through an application and interview process two years ago for Maatsuyker Island, an interesting process in itself especially if you have never applied for a job in your life. Apparently constantly repeating that over 25 years experience in the fishing industry, working in an extreme environment, been around small engines and get along well with myself for question after question does not exactly meet the selection criteria when you are dealing with the public service. Fortunately Amanda being an office manager before recently pursuing a Fine Arts degree came to my aid. Thus, begins, the first of our many disagreements in the process of getting to spend six months on Maat!

Well despite all my confidence in 'us' being the perfect applicants, we missed out but were encouraged to get some experience as volunteers 'so we can also get to know you' and then reapply. Fortunately the public service system never quite got another application process underway and we never found the time for volunteering. So about ten months down the track we received a phone call from Noel at Parks to see if we were still interested. Yes we were but as I needed to be about for the end and the beginning of our fishing year and if we were going I wanted to give ourselves the best chance of seeing the Southern Ocean in full flight - you know ten metre seas and seventy knot winds. I was also a bit worried that summer might see too many visitors (laugh). Maatsuyker Island is possibly one of the hardest places to get to in Australia. Surrounded by cliffs, no beaches and just one small gulch where you can land but can't tie a boat up. Helicopters are an expensive choice and require permission to land in a World Heritage area. So we thought we had said goodbye to our chance at that experience.

Then in December whilst driving to the North West Coast for work the phone call again came from Parks and this time it did not take a lot of thinking about. I've been working with my son Benn over the past ten years so we sat down and worked out a game plan it seemed that 'yes' was the appropriate reply to Noel.

Aah and can you look after the dog for 6 months.

And so started the next phase in the Maat process, organising and packing up six months of gear and supplies. Not being one for lists I left it to Amanda (no sense both of us stressing ourselves stupid) and to say lists is probably an understatement. I think even Amanda started to lose it when she had lists to keep track of the lists. Besides I had work to worry about and as Murphy is always alive and well it was one of the worst starts, weatherwise that I have experienced in thirty odd years of fishing.

So as I tried to fish with trips to Granville Harbour, the only accessible part of the West Coast and around to the South West on the abalone mothership Alcazar, Amanda just kept on sprinting and before we knew it she had narrowed it all down to one list of the lists. Mid February was my last trip around the South West and as we came around South West Cape for what I knew was going to be the last time for at least seven or eight months, a real nostalgia set in. Why anyone would voluntarily give up this occupation and the life style it brings was completely beyond me. Even knowing I would be spending six months looking at this very view from our future residence, the head light keeper's house.

Then followed two weeks of final purchases, packing and our induction with Parks. One of our OH & S topics covered asbestos (all houses were refurbished through the heyday of this wonderful product) and most importantly being aware that you are living in a very remote environment and you can 'only' get out through injury or illness if a helicopter can get 'in'. A crash course in small engine maintenance and the correct use thereof; 'If there are three brush cutters, two powered mowers and two lighter mowers, how much actual mowing is there?' From memory asked with a hesitant stutter. 'It's not that bad, you've got plenty of time' was something like the reply.

So after that it was three days training with the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) and a crash course in clouds, clouds and more clouds. As Maatsuyker Island is the eyes for the whole South Coast of Tasmania the manual observations including sea and swell state is a fairly important part of the caretaker role (continual weather observations for nearly a hundred years are on file at Maat). Fortunately from spending my whole life playing and working in and on the ocean the sea observations were something that we had a head start on. Mind you I did field a few phone calls when I posted a 30 metre swell in our first couple of weeks. One call from BOM, not asking if it was right but a request that I amend it and the other calls from mates and family asking what I was on down there.

So now when you think you are ready, comes the packing into good old ab bins as we call them. This is all well and good when you have a bit of space but we had moved into our eight by seven metre 'shack' and were still trying to finish a renovation. Our life's blood for the next six months was finally packed, loaded and transported to Ryans Point at Cockle Creek, Australia's southernmost settlement. From there it was slung over by helicopter with the rest of the resupply, diesel, gas etc.

We had already had an induction on helicopters so it was pretty well roll up at the airport and we were off. Another wash down and spiel on introduced species, seeds,

weeds, rats and mice. Maatsuyker Island is possibly the jewel in the crown of the South West World Heritage area. The site was placed on the Australian Heritage Commission Register in 1980 and inscribed on the world Heritage List in 1989. So despite 126 years of European occupation it has no introduced fauna and very little introduced flora. I found it interesting that in crossing water to get to Maatsuyker it is mandatory to wear life jackets, fit the helicopter with floats and the life raft sits beside us in the cabin. *So how much faith do they actually have in these things!*

Then as I switched off the mobile phone, reality sets in, no mobile phone, no internet, so no email and no TV. I sit on two boards within the fishing industry as well as a ministerial committee, so no mobile and email is feeling a bit like having your throat cut, or is it!

On arrival we are met by the outgoing caretakers Wendy and David. The only two people they had seen in the previous three months walked up looking for us, so, in theory we had already missed our first visitors. It's actually hard to know if the smiles worn by Wendy and David were for a friendly greeting or that the reality of actually leaving the Island was rapidly setting in.

So began three days of onsite induction - a real head spin, information overload of the highest order. Trying to take in water systems, powerhouse with solar and diesel generator, the BOM office computer and weather observations, the Parks radio, Tas Maritime Radio and Telstra repeaters, the Tupperware light as the current navigation aid is known and the grand old lady of the island, the lighthouse.

So as well as Amanda and myself the outgoing caretakers, Noel from Parks and four people from Friends of Maatsuyker Island (FOMI) on working bees doing weed control and Shearwater (mutton-bird) surveys. There are 800,000 + pairs on the island so throw a chick for nearly every pair and you have about 2.5 million Shearwaters. Unless you make the effort, ie. get up a couple of hours earlier than usual you just don't see them, the perfect neighbour. As Parks along with most Government Departments, suffer from continual budget cuts FOMI are the life blood of the Island. So after three days of what seemed like people everywhere, we were finally left to our own devices or to put it more candidly, I think they have left a lunatic in charge of the asylum!

So we settle in exploring the island, all in all there are about three kilometres of formed tracks and get up to speed reading through 'useful things to know' and the diaries of previous caretakers and it was like, what! It seemed that everyone but us hit the Island running - mowing lawns, brush cutting, starting projects, it all seemed a bit full on. So after a couple of days, it was like 'let's just put the diaries back in the cupboard and find our own way'. With very little rain over the previous month we actually managed not to fire up a mower or brushcutter for about five weeks, quite a reprieve by Maat standards. Mind you the fact that Wendy and David had left the island close to immaculate certainly helped.

So our days evolved as we slipped into island time with our first alarm going off at 0515 every morning for early weather obs. It's weird as my life's been dictated to by the weather, now the weather is dictated to by the clock. Obs at 0600, 0900 and 1500 every day as well as radio weather skeds at 0833 and 1803 with the Tas

Maritime Radio. These guys (all volunteers) keep an eye on us and all things maritime.

Our day to day work consists of maintenance. As I said to one fisherman when he asked me what it is actually like 'well imagine you are trying to keep a 100 year old boat afloat, but all you can use is what the last owners have thrown away. It blows a gale for three days a week and aah, and you also have three of them!' We repair leaking rooves, stuck windows, leaking taps, air the three houses and lighthouse, mow, brush cut and walk the island doing storm patrol. We keep the vegetable garden up to speed (we are still getting tomatoes in June) as well as keep several kilometres of drains clear. We had already decided to take on a couple of jobs in the heritage lighthouse, so we free up and unblock the original brass vents and are removing layers of paint back to the bricks on the top level as an exercise in trying to let the tower breathe, time will tell.

We have a 240volt power supply, but the house (circa 1890) leave us with the choice; to run the available heater and constantly scrub the mould off the walls and ceilings because of the condensation created. We've opted for the second option - flow through ventilation and extra clothes. We are three months in and it seems to be working. The occasional late afternoon calls for a bath or early night for the luxury of the electric blanket.

But don't get me wrong the island is absolutely stunning, the panoramic view of the South Coast of Tasmania from South West Cape to Cox Bight. The vegetation seems to be on steroids, shrubs on mainland Tasmania actually grow as trees here especially the native peppers. Twelve hundred odd millimetres of rain a year and no frosts, ice or snow are the likely reason for these anomalies. Several times a day while you are out working you realise you have stopped for no reason other than to take in the play of light working its way along the bluffs on the mainland, or the ever changing cloud formations or swell conditions. The weather and sky change so rapidly that it is hard not to put your head up either from work or your latest book, to see what is currently happening. Add to those regular trips to Alomes Gulch to see what variations we have in the seal house today. Families of Australian and New Zealand fur seals are the permanent residents, two female elephant seals have set up a fairly permanent camp and even a sub Antarctic fur seal are all part of the ever changing menagerie.

The best weather day in our first month here and we are bystanders to a search and rescue, a dinghy upturned and a person missing (all a bit hard when you know that you are going to know everyone involved). We watch the nearby 'Motanui' turn around put the hammer down and head back towards the South Coast to assist the police rescue helicopter. Due to fading light the body of the deckhand was recovered the following morning. 'Vale Joe Russell'.

Drives home the dangers of what we decide to do for a living in the real world and adds to the significance of keeping ears and eyes in this remote part of Tasmania.

So now that the day to day routine is established we sit back and wait. Had a few days of winds around the 55 to 60 knots then a weekend of light winds and 7-10 metre seas that look pretty spectacular but with nothing to give it scale in the photos. Then we enjoyed week upon week of fairly light winds and mild conditions, good

autumn weather as we would call it then over ABC radio, our only commercial link with the outside world we get our first severe weather warning and it comes.

Why is it that things come to you at 0300 when the fronts hit early and it is raining and blowing at 70 knots ' like get out of that nice warm bed and get down the hill and shut the lighthouse up!' Yeah with gusts above 80 knots I wasn't expecting the wind to be this strong this early so a moment of indecision creeps in. After constantly telling Amanda not to worry about the wind, the houses have stood for over a hundred years and haven't suffered any major storm damage I start packing up all the camera gear along with the laptops packed into their bags and again into dry bags. Who knows?

Heading up to the BOM office to take it all in, our strongest gust of 85 knots (157 km/h) hit while I am at the kitchen window filling up the coffee thermos. Tell Amanda to stay in the rack as I have the clouds under control and head up the hill to the BOM office, quite a task in this wind. I watching the screen on the computer with the wind gusts coming and going sustaining averages over 70 knots. First light got Amanda out of bed and a wow lightning storm all around us; I am buzzing around the place like a madman thanks to the thermos full of coffee, we can feel the wind, rain, hail and very close lightning as we stand at the bedroom window. The wind stays around the 65 – 75 knots for the next five hours with an increasing swell. What we came for, Maatsuyker Island in full flight.

Then after a week of winds come the statement 'you know that you have acclimatised when it is 'only' blowing 40 knots' and you look forward to doing a bit of outside work because of the improving conditions

And with a break in the weather comes visitors, well not exactly, a work crew from BOM to install a new sat link for the weather data. A bit weird though when we went out to dinner the following night. Firstly we were going out and secondly as we walked into the kitchen the heat hit us. We were in a sealed room with a heater going and pulling layers of clothes off instead of rummaging through the drawers to find an extra layer.

The helicopter returned two days later with a part to finish the project, but as mentioned above Murphy is alive and well and things did not go quite to script. The chopper was a bit late getting away due to weather in Hobart so the project was not quite finished in time to get back to Hobart by dark, so as well as my speculation on flotation and safety, policy doesn't allow flying at night either! So another night for the BOM guys and stranded pilot Brian, the helicopter parked (and tied down) on the pad increasing the assets on the Island by about \$3.5m. So some bedding for Brian, dinner for an extra three and luxury for us another night out at the restaurant up the road.

Speaking of restaurants, nature's kitchen of convenience has been removed, we hardly saw the resident eagle for the first two months and now with the departure of the 800,000 Shearwater chicks from the island we find that we have a pair of eagles with a juvenile in tow constantly gracing our front door going through the day to day process of having to hunt for a living.

Our second severe weather warning seemed to turn into a bit of an anticlimax. Don't get me wrong, it was blowing. It averaged 52 knots (96kmh) over a 24 hour period and 7-10 metre seas again, but the gusts constantly topped out in the mid seventies and did not surpass the strength of the earlier storm. Maybe Hewey set the bar too high too early, the next three winter months will tell.

This week will see Parks and our resupply, not quite half way but getting close. Looks like getting the BOM guys back as well to fix a hiccup in the solar system, would have been good if they could have at least staggered the trips by a week or three, that's life.

Thanks to Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, their dedicated staff and Friends of Maatsuyker Island (FOMI) for all support and advice and allowing us to look after Maat. ©2015,

Paul Richardson

Part 2

Life continues on Maat with unforgettable experiences, big winds, big swells and lightning strikes.