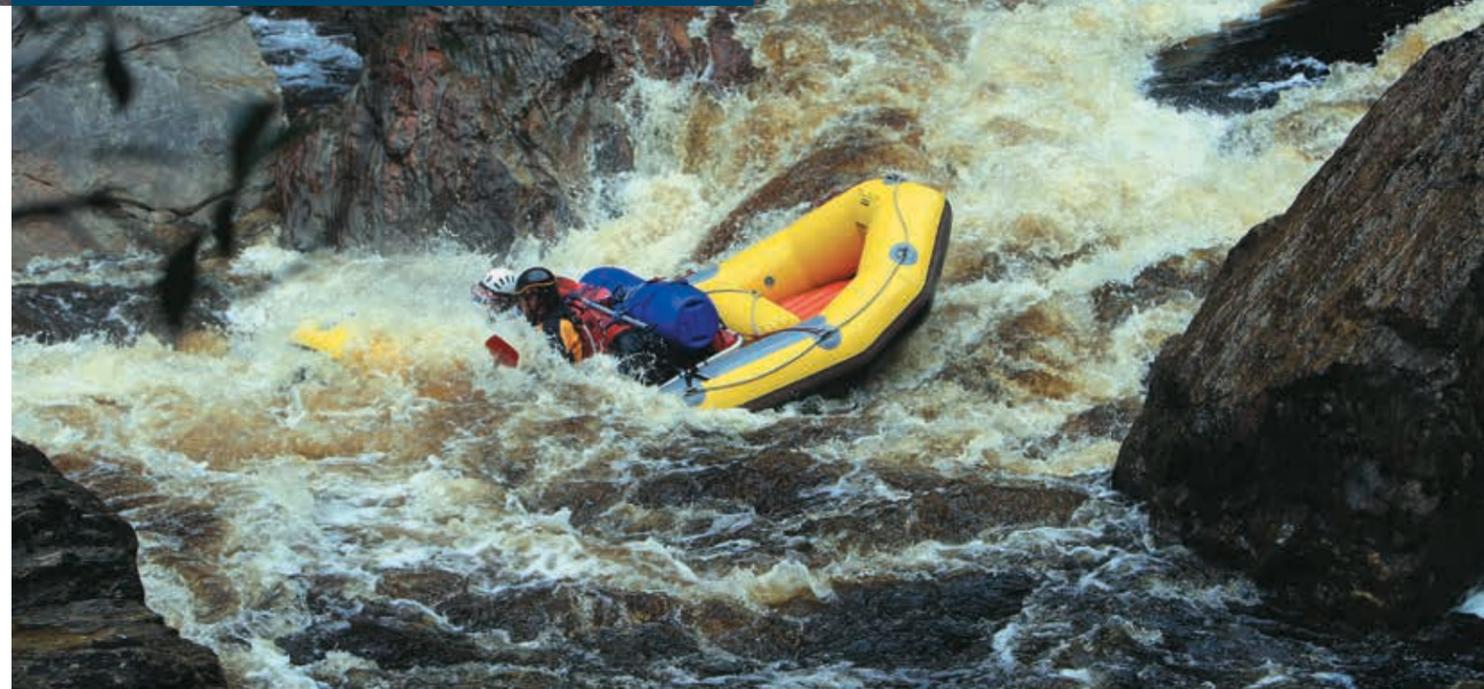




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# CAMPING AND RAFTING (PART ONE) – FOOD FOR THE BRAIN

Words and images: Cathy Finch

A thunderous pounding fills my ears as rushing water barrels over slippery, jagged rocks. My river guide, Rob, and I are out in the middle of a swollen river on a lonely piece of rock, swift flowing current on either side of us. We need to bounce our teams' raft out to the edge of this narrow shaft and then drop it down vertically into a tight chasm, into the pumping rapid. Well, that's the plan. If manoeuvred correctly it will save hours of portage time, carrying heavy kit bags around dangerous terrain.

'Are you starting to get nervous?' shouts Rob, who sees me slip and falter waveringly close to the drop into the churning abyss. 'You should be,' he answers the question himself. 'If you slip over here, bad things will happen. Never let go of the boat.'

My job in the next part of the process is to jump in and weigh down the front of the raft while Rob lowers it vertically off the rock, jumping in at the last moment to ride us to safety. 'This can be tricky okay. I'm going to push the boat off, so it's going to be pretty vertical. I need you to just get down and hold on, obviously you can't paddle here. I'm going to jump in while we go, so if you turn around and I'm not there, just do your best okay. Try to paddle over to the wall.'

'Right, got it,' I acknowledge. I love the adrenalin rush of living on the edge but if the truth be known, what I really want, with camera mounted to my helmet, is video footage of this precarious event. My camera, however, has a different reaction in the face of adversity. It shuts down; right before we are due to enter

the force of nature, leaving me with only private, vivid memories of what is to come.

This is indeed a camping trip with a twist. We are penetrating one of Australia's most pristine Heritage listed areas on the Franklin River, centrepiece of the 4500-square kilometre Franklin-Lower Gordon Wild Rivers National Park, sitting within an area of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage area. The trip is a seven day white water rafting adventure with *Water by Nature* led by owner Brett Fernon. Known to many locals as the 'godfather' of the river, Brett has rafted this water more than two hundred times.

'As a boy,' Brett explains, 'I always loved the sound of running water, but the only thing that ran in Sydney was the storm drains, if it ever rained. Then I came down to Tassie and everything ran. I bumped into someone who was a river guide and couldn't quite believe he got paid to take people down the river. I thought that sounded pretty cool. Time went on. I was a punter with a paddle in New Zealand, nursed in Sydney then came to Tasmania in a Holden panel van when all the 'No Dam' protests were starting. I did a private raft trip on the Franklin then went up to the Tully [in Queensland] to learn what I could. On my return to Tassie I scored a river guiding job with Peregrine and stayed for fifteen years before buying the business in 2002. That was the birth of *Water by Nature*.'

Brett brings with him a wealth of knowledge and a depth of experience that we punters can only dream about. What I bring with me are two useless pairs of bikinis, unused sunscreen and a partner; let's call him Andy.

Andy's an amateur camper and business owner, loathe to leave the clutches of technology. In fact, I know he would never have agreed to come if he had known it would rain all week and we were set to sleep in caves with myriad other numerous-legged cave dwellers. And, although I can't predict the weather, I admit I hadn't come clean with all of the details. Instead, I used all sorts of trapper tactics on this quiet unassuming man, insisting I had even found research from the great boffins in the United States suggesting that rafting (and camping – I added that bit myself) was good for the brain. They had taken all types of professional and business people and put them out on a river for days at a time, testing how long it took them to stop asking the time and looking skyward for mobile phone towers. It was heralded a great success, intent on freeing the mind and body.

So I assert that this is just what Andy needs – to free the mind, to penetrate an area so remote and untamed (a bit like his camping and rafting skills) and sit back and paddle into the heart of silence. The area will be pristine; some of the most beautiful, rugged and inaccessible country in the world.

I didn't lie. The area is all of this, and more, but once you're in there, there's no way out. You're committed to camping and paddling unless you want to pay for a rescue helicopter. I reiterated the air mattress would be comfy while forgetting to mention minor details such as having to poo into a tiny freezer bag. It is a World Heritage area after all, extremely vigilant on making the least possible footprint on nature, using minimal impact camping techniques.

Everything that campers take in must be taken out – even human waste. But Andy would get over this, surely. I wanted to see how he would react to not having access to his business, technology and a phone to his ear.

As it turns out, they were the least of his worries.

When our journey begins we are told not to forget those who have passed before us and venturing down these waters that run as pure as they did when the Tasmanian Aborigines first settled here tens of thousands of years ago, I am eternally thankful that the worries of the Franklin River ended some thirty years before.

As long ago as 1916, the Franklin River had been noted for its potential for hydroelectric power. In 1979, a scheme was put forward to build a series of power stations on the river, bringing the Franklin River to the attention of the world. Public outcry and protests were led by

the Tasmanian Wilderness Society, and the now well-known politician Bob Brown, with people rallying to halt this project that threatened the river's very existence. There was a non-violent blockade of the river and over one thousand people went to jail for their beliefs in the largest act of civil disobedience in Australian history. Widespread condemnation of the dam prevailed throughout Australia, but still the first bulldozer arrived in January 1983 to start damming the river. Thankfully public outrage and a newly elected Labor government headed by Bob Hawke put an end to the scheme and equipment was dismantled by July 1983.

In reality, all of the history and confrontations of this unspoiled piece of Australia should have made our challenges on the river seem extremely menial. It didn't. And to top things off, just when we are so cold that we cannot feel our gums or teeth, the rain increases.

Dry and safe that night within our cave-home, Andy borrows a quip from Rob our rafting guide's bag of stories. 'Do you know what I hate more than camping in the rain?' Andy asks. 'No, I don't,' I reply. 'What don't you like more than camping in the rain?'

'*Nothin*,' he scoffs.

We look at each other and crack up laughing as a steady stream of water encroaches on our dry space.

**For more information:**  
[www.discovertasmania.com.au](http://www.discovertasmania.com.au)  
[www.franklinrivertasmania.com](http://www.franklinrivertasmania.com)

Read **PART TWO** in the August issue. A day-by-day account of Cathy and Andy's Tasmanian rafting/camping adventure, which, by the way, both rated as exceptional and thoroughly enjoyed. ❖