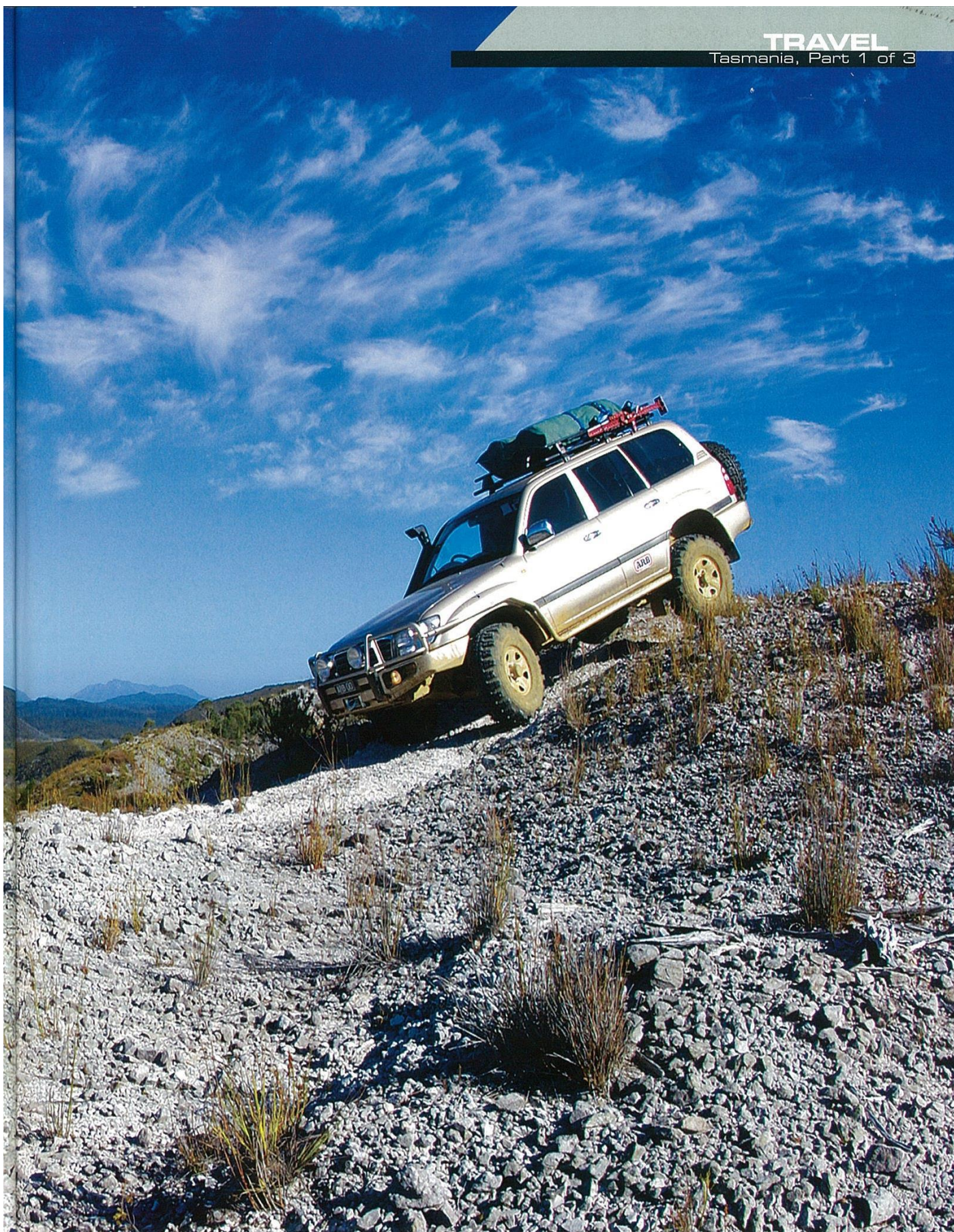


STATE OF SURPRISE

Tasmania did nothing if not shatter Roothy's misconceptions about the Apple Isle

4WD WORDS BY JOHN ROTH PHOTOGRAPHY BY OFFROAD IMAGES

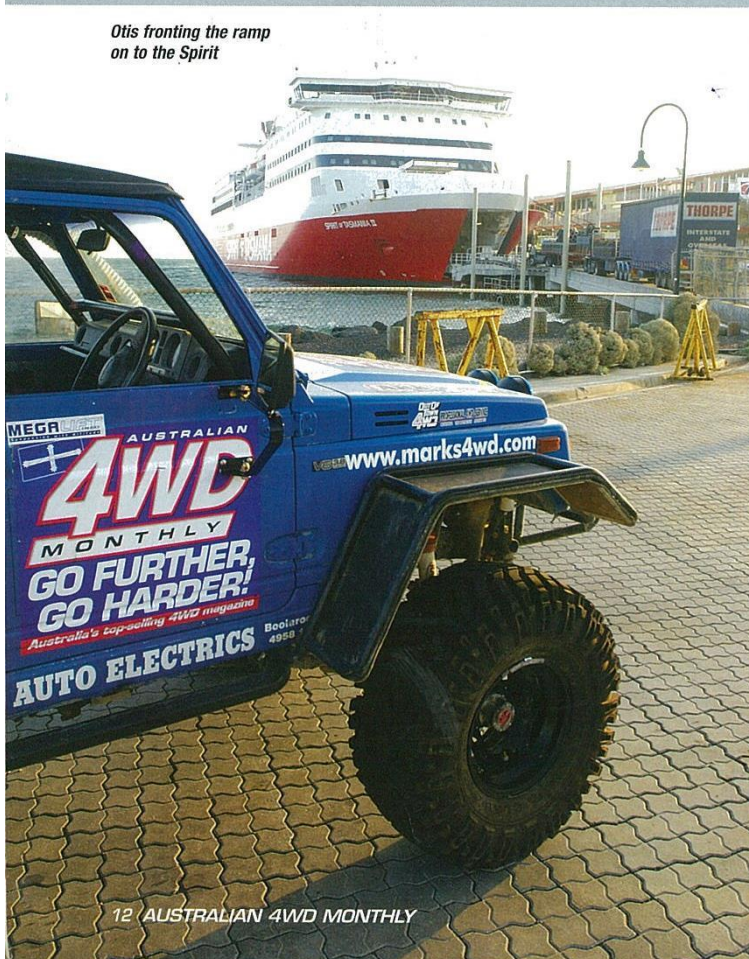






Reminding us we were here to work, Pat does the intro for the video as the rest of us wait to hit the bar...

Otis fronting the ramp on to the Spirit



12 AUSTRALIAN 4WD MONTHLY



SPIRIT OF TASMANIA

Despite having a lot of faith in our snorkels and waterproofing, we decided it'd be better to take the 'fairy' to Tasmania. (Queenslanders note: fairy is what they call a barge in those strange southern states – they wear thongs on their bums too.) Tell you what though, at 29,000 tonnes, carrying 750 people, 300 cars and shifting along at 27 knots, these are big mother fairies! Apart from being the only way to get your own 4WD to the island, the overnight trip on the ship is a terrific way to kick off a holiday. All three Spirits are luxury cruise ships complete with bars – yes! – restaurants and shops. Most of the crew are Tasmanians and they make you feel right at home and relaxed the minute you're on their deck. By the time you wake up you're in Devonport and time has slowed down from the frantic mainland pace. Beware, the hangover won't be any better just because you're breathing the purest air in the world.

Spirit of Tasmania I and II travel between Station Pier in Port Melbourne and Devonport (on Tasmania's north coast), while Spirit III travels between central Sydney and Devonport up to three days a week. Spirit of Tasmania I and II make nightly crossings in both directions, leaving at 9pm and arriving at 7am. Additional sailings are scheduled in peak periods, with a daytime sailing in both directions leaving at 9am and arriving at 6pm. Normal-sized cars and 4WDs are carried free most of the year, with passenger fares averaging \$200 per adult for a shared cabin one way. Expect to pay a bit more for the better cabins or if you want to take the trailer along.

The new Spirit III service departs Darling Harbour in Sydney at 3pm on Tuesday, Friday and Sunday and arrives in Devonport at 11.30am the following day. That means you get to sail under the Harbour Bridge, down the scenic coast of Eastern Australia and past those magnificent Bass Strait islands during daylight hours. Because most of our crew were assembling in Melbourne, we took the shorter trip – anyway, Editor Pat needed an excuse to sit in Milo's cab for 10 hours straight... For further details on Spirit fares, or to make a booking, go to their excellent website www.spiritoftasmania.com.au.



“We’re going to Tassie next week. We’ll meet at ARB in Melbourne on the tenth and be on the Spirit overnight. You okay with that?”

Editor Pat’s call caught me with my pants down. I pushed the button and gave the old hands a quick rinse. Why do people always ring when a bloke’s settled in for a quick read of the sports section?

“Yep, sounds great,” I said, wondering why the hell we’d be drinking spirits so early in the trip. Oh well, I’m a Queenslander. We can drink anything, anytime. I started tallying up the things that’d need to be done to Milo before next week.

“Oh, and Roothy, I’ve got a surprise for you, mate. The Tasmanian brewers, Boag’s, have heard about you and they’re giving us a cut-price deal on a pallet of their finest. Looks like we’ll be seeing Tasmania in style, after dark at least.”

“You beauty!” I love these trips away. Sure we do some tough all-day driving but the nights spent swapping yarns around a campfire and knocking back a few coldies before swagging it on the roof-rack more than make up for that. It’s a pity to have to leave the Handbrake behind and all but I figure absence makes the heart grow fonder. I know we’ll both survive.

Especially the one of us with a couple of cold Boag’s under his belt. And this time I figured there’d be none of that ‘drive from one side of Australia to the other’ stuff before we kick off, just a gentle nudge down the inland way to Melboring avoiding all the city cramp. An easy day and a half’s drive with a pub stop south of Dubbo. Stewth, then a doddle around Tassie, which isn’t much bigger than the Glasshouse Mountains according to Chooka’s map. Too easy!

**IT’S A PITY TO HAVE TO
LEAVE THE HANDBRAKE
BEHIND AND ALL BUT I
FIGURE ABSENCE
MAKES THE HEART
GROW FONDER**

NORTH WEST OFF ROAD

Located conveniently close to where the Spirit of Tasmania docks in Devonport, North West Off Road stocks everything for locals and visitors alike to make your Tasmanian trip a real adventure. Peter Holman or Duncan McCreddie, North West Off Road, 24 Kelcey Tier Rd, Spreyton TAS 7310. Ph: (03) 6427 3266. Email: nwoffroad@bigpond.com.



First stop was North West Off Road in Devonport, where we got everything organised for the trip – as in split a pallet of Boag’s best beer between the trucks and kicked a few tyres.

TRAVEL

Tasmania, Part 1 of 3

Within an hour or so we were spearing off the sealed road and into the bush heading for the Ring River. Absolutely beautiful country and suddenly we're in the middle of it!

"Err, Roothy, one last thing. Can you drop by Silverwater on the way and pick up Otis? I figured seeing as you were going past, we might as well stick her on the trailer. Milo should pull three tonnes shouldn't she?"

So much for going down the inland way. But at least Pat and I had a good chance for a yarn – or we would have if we could have heard anything over the scream of a 13BT turbo'ing its way down the Hume. Still, I consoled myself with the thought that after the big highway haul, Tassie would be a doddle. How wrong can a bloke be?

The trip on the Spirit of Tasmania involved very few spirits as it turned out, although we did get a chance to trial a few Boag's. Mmm, very nice indeed. Not quite enough to quell the smell once Antman's boots came off, but not much short of a kerosene bath and a match would have much hope there anyway.

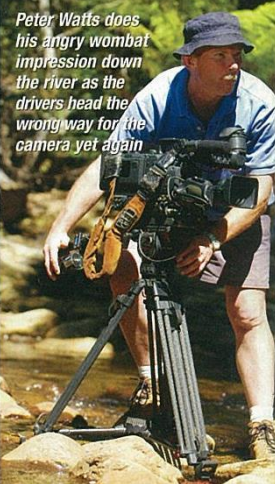


Otis takes a little swim down the Ring River. All the water in the world couldn't get the grin off Editor Pat's dial about now



Milo follows Otis downriver. Considering the size of some of the debris, and the way it was right up the banks, this was no place to get stuck in a flood

14 AUSTRALIAN 4WD MONTHLY

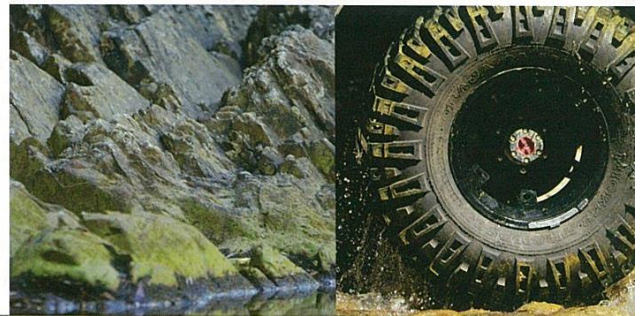


Peter Watts does his angry wombat impression down the river as the drivers head the wrong way for the camera yet again



Time out to introduce the crew. Above Antman's boots was the Ant himself, *4WD Monthly's* Victoria correspondent Anthony Kilner. Having made a habit of coming to Tasmania on off-roading trips for the last few years, Ant had handled a lot of the pre-trip organisation – most of which consisted of getting the right local blokes to lead the pack! Ant had been forced to leave his beloved 80 Series behind this time because Editor Pat needed some ballast on the passenger side of Otis. Not that Pat put it that way of course; he said he needed Ant's ability with the tools nice and close.

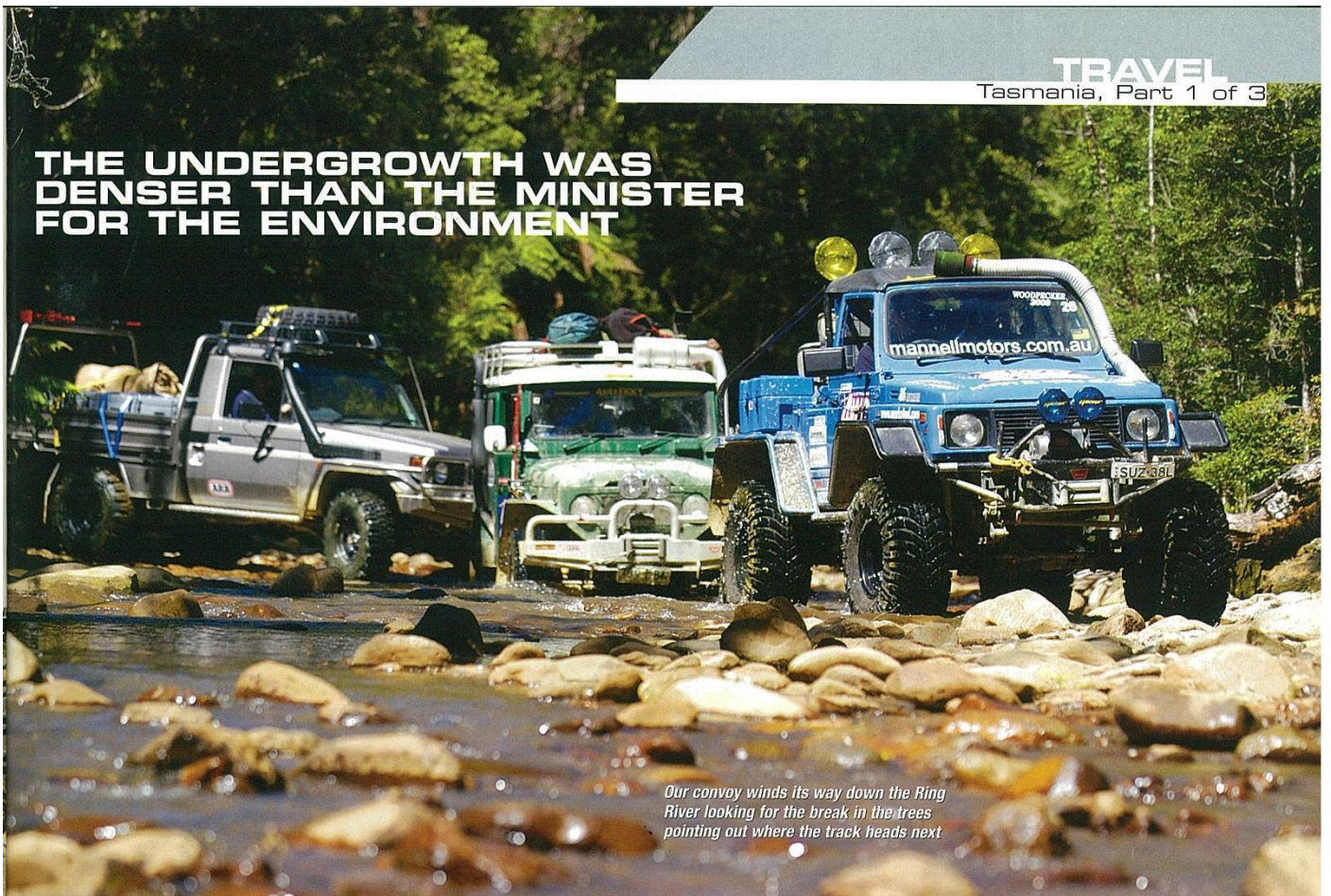
Making a return after a season off filming the mating habits of the red-nuttled bush wombat was our intrepid cameraman, Peter Watts. Wattsy's ability with the moving picture box has seen him cover everything from wars in Africa to docos for the ABC's department of all things furry and cuddly. He's the best, and let's face it, with a bunch of ugly mugs like us to work with he needs to be! Anyway, I reckon a few more trips away with us and I'll have him hanging for a beer instead of calling for a claret. You've got to work on these Victorians.



TRAVEL

Tasmania, Part 1 of 3

**THE UNDERGROWTH WAS
DENSER THAN THE MINISTER
FOR THE ENVIRONMENT**



Our convoy winds its way down the Ring River looking for the break in the trees pointing out where the track heads next

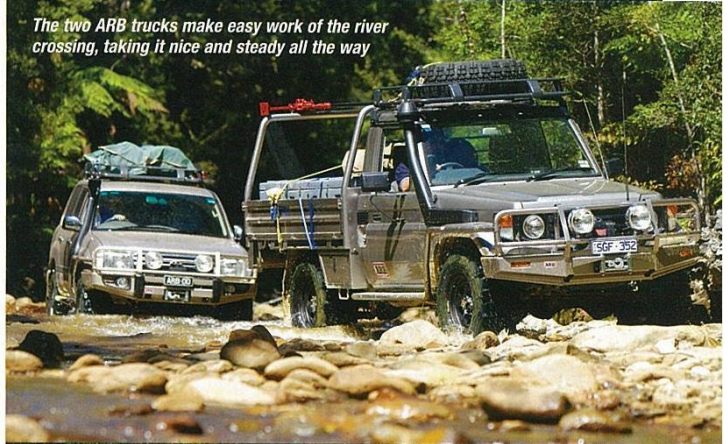
Not so the third Vicbloodytorian. Mark Lowry's day job involves product development and testing at ARB's Kilsyth HQ. His night job involves edible underwear I believe. Whatever, Mark came with a great off-road pedigree and an awesome truck. Yep, somehow he'd managed to squeeze the boss's new rig right out from under him just for this trip. Mark was driving ARB Andy Brown's personal truck – a new 79 Series Toyota equipped with the lot. When he drove into the dock the first thing he did was jump out and give the 79 a quick once-over with the polishing cloth. I remember thinking this wouldn't last long...

From South Australia came another ARB specialist, the quietly spoken but pin-sharp John Ludlam, driving a new 100 Series that had been fully decked out with almost everything the company offers. It was a beautiful sight: a big golden wagon that looked like it was worth a million dollars. It turned out John had borrowed it from the state manager, whose last words had been "bring it back in one piece or I'll kill you" or some such thing. John, whose quiet manner hid a rally driver's reflexes and a great sense of humour, didn't seem to think that'd be a problem. But apart from Ant, none of us had any idea of what this trip would bring. And Ant wasn't saying much – just chuckling under his glasses anytime one of us mentioned "holiday doddle".

The loop up to Montezuma Falls takes in some awesome tracks pushed through dense forest with big drop-offs all over the place. Low-range all the way – yippee!



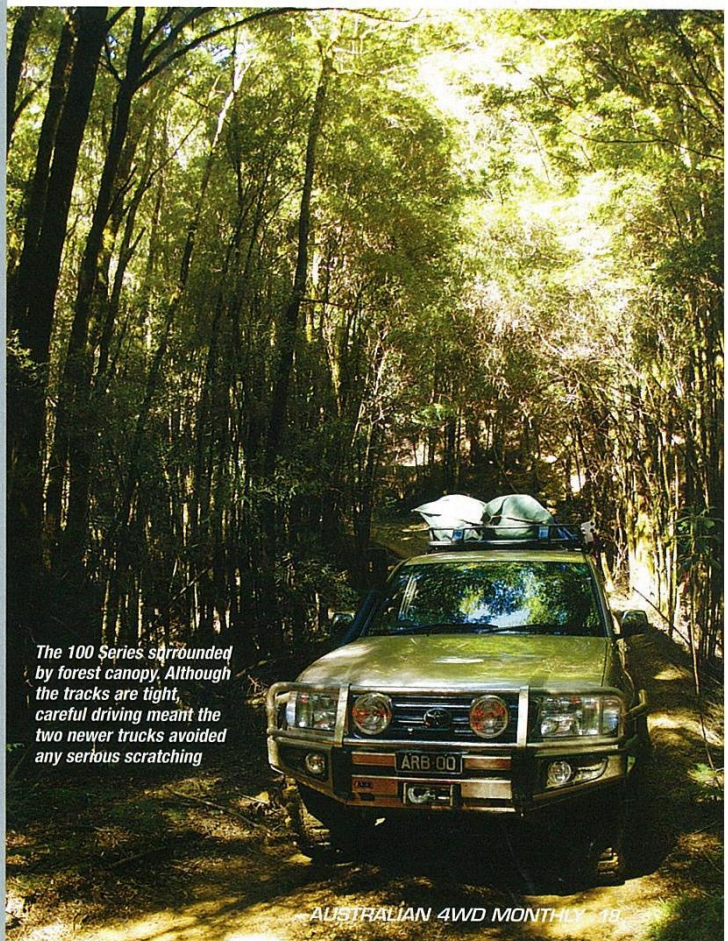
The two ARB trucks make easy work of the river crossing, taking it nice and steady all the way

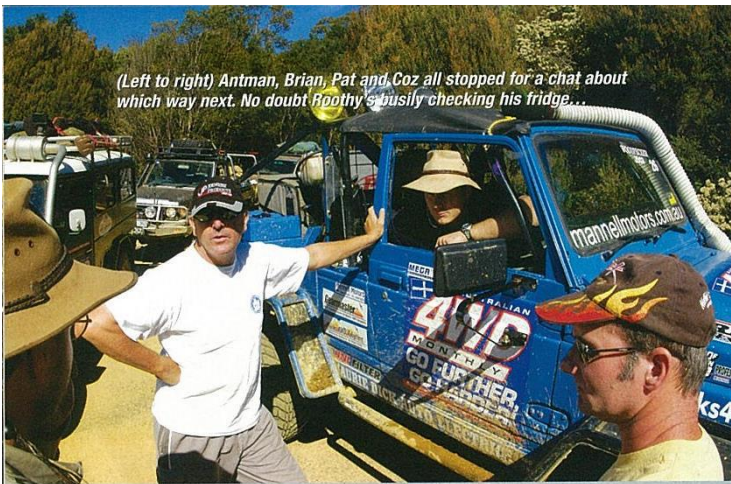


There are a few signs, but like most signs, they tend to crop up when you know where you are rather than when you need them. Tagging in behind the locals is the best way through the twisted forest tracks

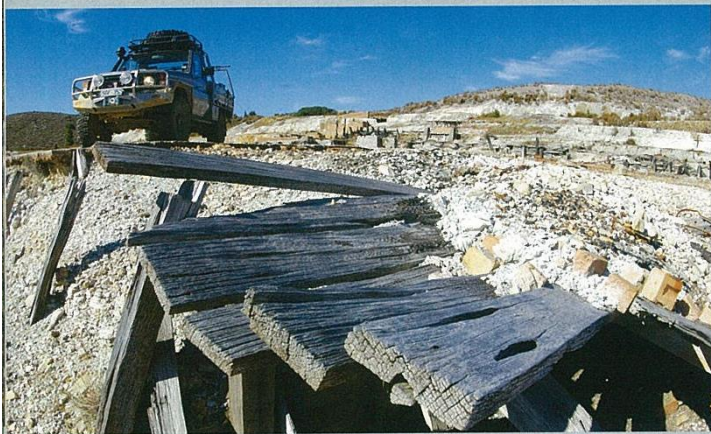


The 100 Series surrounded by forest canopy. Although the tracks are tight, careful driving meant the two newer trucks avoided any serious scratching





(Left to right) Antman, Brian, Pat and Coz all stopped for a chat about which way next. No doubt Roothy's busily checking his fridge...



Stop and walk it first – that's the rule when you're driving around on unfamiliar ground, especially when some bastard's stolen the bridge



So with Pat, Michael Ellem and myself, that made seven of us on the ferry. After an uneventful trip that saw us feasting in the Spirit's restaurant until late that night, we disembarked in Devonport on a lovely summer's day. First stop was Peter Holman's North West Off Road 4WD shop where manager Duncan 'Knobber' McCreadie had fired up a breakfast barby. We broke out the maps of Tassie and proceeded to dribble sauce all over them. Hmm, I might have to watch how I word that last bit...

Both Pete and Knobber are fair dinkum off-road enthusiasts who love the sport and are always keen to help. Given they've got a great workshop and stock almost everything, their version of help is solid! I'd reckon anyone contemplating a trip like this should drop by and meet the lads before going anywhere.

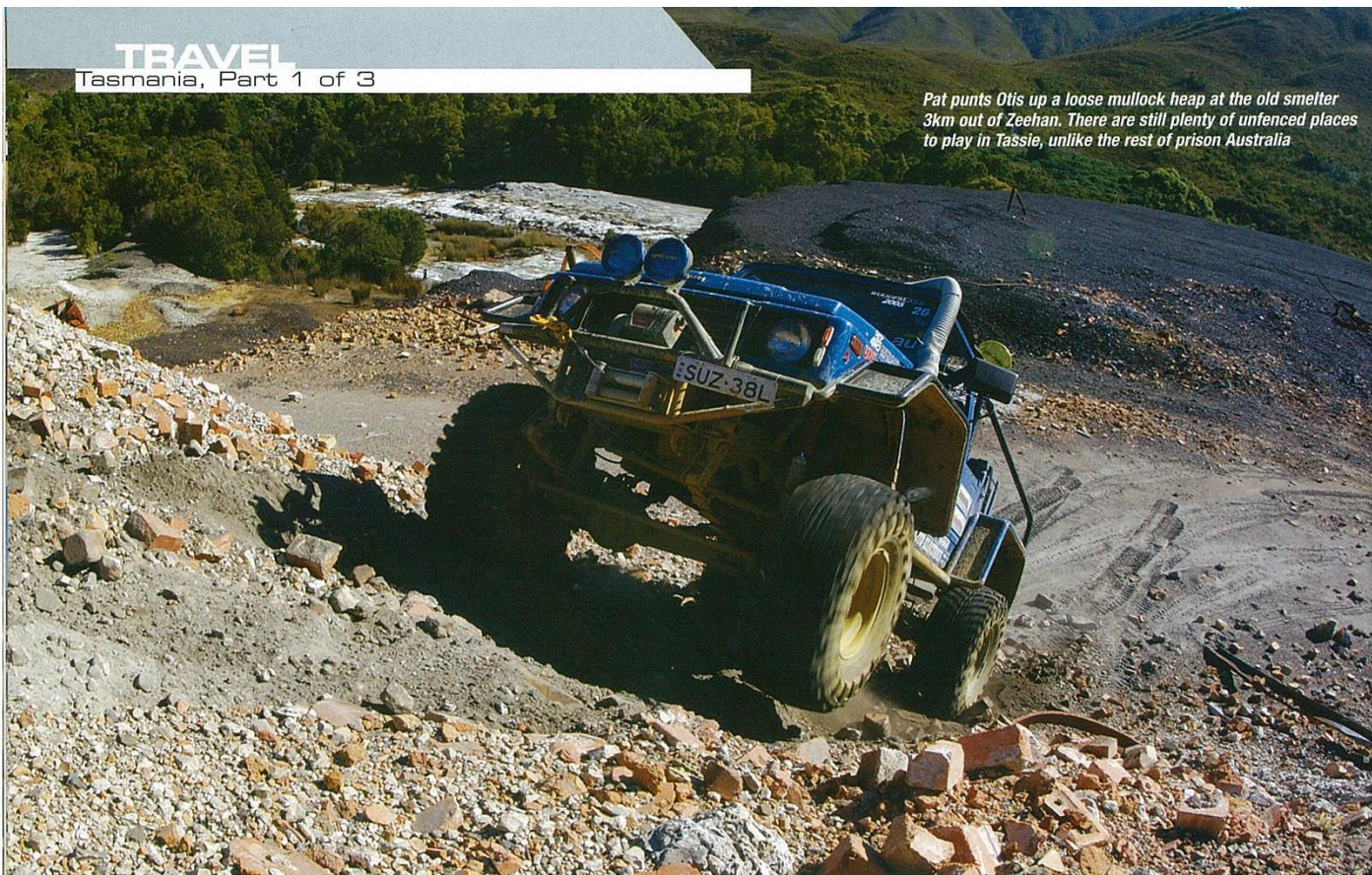
At North West Off Road we met our two guides for the trip – Devonport locals Brian Imlach and Peter Cos. Long-time mates, foundation members of the Devonport 4WD Club and never frightened by the thought of a few more grogs, Brian and Coz were to prove the best assets we've ever had on a trip like this. It always pays to have some local knowledge but in Tasmania, as we were soon to find out, local knowledge can make all the difference in the world.

Thanks to Brian and Coz we saw tracks and places that most of us 'north islanders' would never get to see. And we got an insight into the real Tasmania too, an island where people don't lock their vehicles, don't mind if you camp in their paddocks and figure everybody has enough common sense to use tracks without abusing them. Yep, just like Australia used to be before local governments, dickhead politicians and office-bound environmentalists stuffed it all up by deciding we were all too stupid to be allowed freedom in our own country.

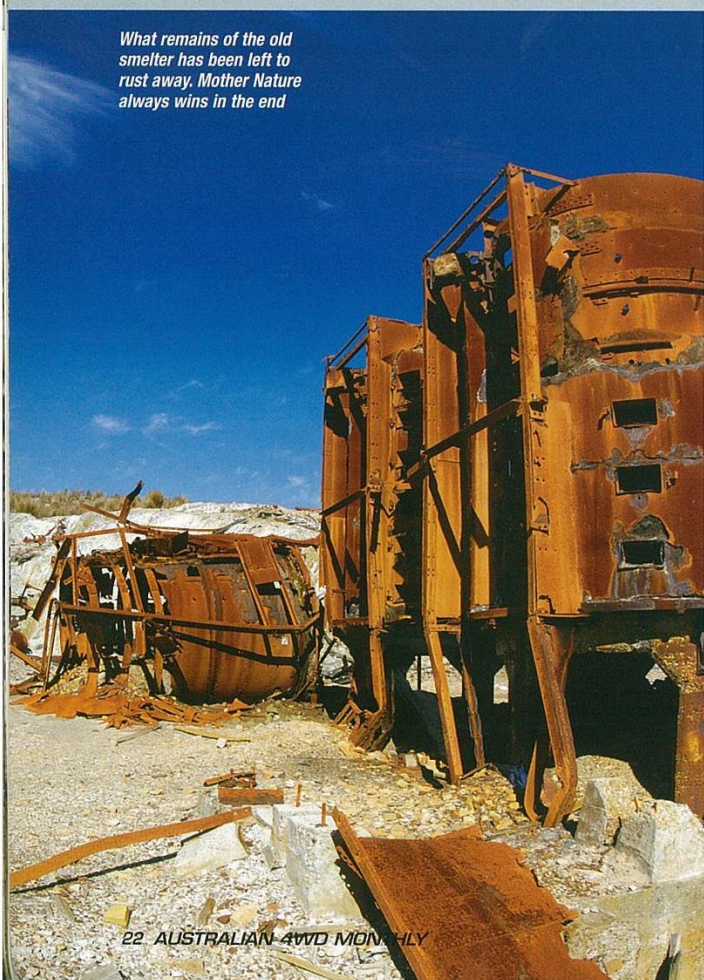
**I THOUGHT TASSIE WOULD BE A DODDLE.
HOW WRONG CAN A BLOKE BE?**



Pat punts Otis up a loose mullock heap at the old smelter 3km out of Zeehan. There are still plenty of unfenced places to play in Tassie, unlike the rest of prison Australia



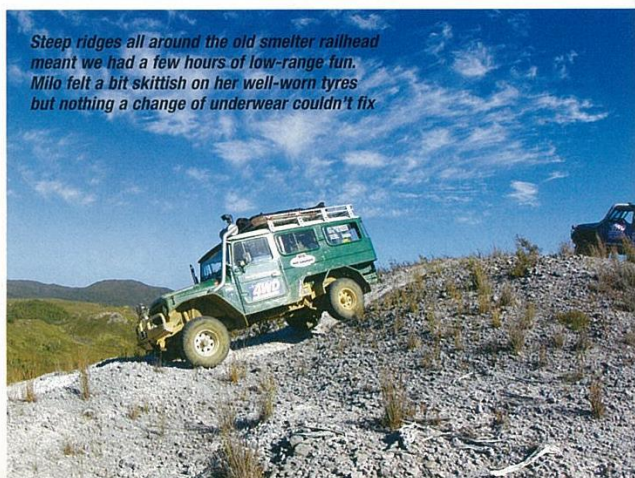
What remains of the old smelter has been left to rust away. Mother Nature always wins in the end



After filling up on bacon sangers our convoy drove west along the Bass Highway to Burnie before turning south and driving up over the mountains towards Ridgely. The coastline looked magnificent: pure blues and greens everywhere and scuds of white cloud highlighting the sky. It could have been Queensland except I was looking for a jumper. Even though it was the middle of the day, there was a chilly bite in the air as we climbed into the mountain country.

Distances, on sealed roads at least, are pretty short in Tasmania. Within a couple of hours of leaving Devonport, Brian led us down an un-signposted track running off to the left of the road, and within 100 yards we were locking hubs and looking for low-range. Huge trees loomed over the track and the undergrowth was denser than the Minister for the Environment. A few minutes later we edged slowly down to the Ring River and found enough of a clearing to put out some lunch.

Steep ridges all around the old smelter railhead meant we had a few hours of low-range fun. Milo felt a bit skittish on her well-worn tyres but nothing a change of underwear couldn't fix



IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR
MINING, THE HIPPIES
WOULDN'T EVEN KNOW
ABOUT THE
WILDERNESS COUNTRY



Day one and we're in serious off-road exploration mode almost straightaway! Wow, the rest of the afternoon just got better too as we looped up the old tracks towards Montezuma Falls. The whole west coast is lush with rivers and creeks lacing those massive hills and dense bush and we were in the middle of it.

Some of the tracks we travelled were old mine railways, some cut to get timber out and a few started out as explorative roads, but all had one thing in common – they were kept open purely by the work and enthusiasm of the local four-wheel drivers. It's amazing to think that in a country where nature is obviously so overpowering puny little men in offices can use the 'environment' excuse to try and close it off to the people who really love it. Stewth, leave this lot alone for six months and you'd never know man had been there at all!

Coz told me one of the tracks we were on was originally cut by a bloke on his own in a small bulldozer. Apparently during the 1950s he'd been contracted to push a track through the unknown bush for a mining company looking for minerals. Where he went was up to him and he just kept pushing that blade wherever it'd go, hauling his fuel behind him for a month or so at a time. That's the thing about this part of the land, it's so dense nobody knows what's there even now.

Despite a few soft spots and some wet clay our four well-equipped trucks found the going pretty easy. I doubt it'd be the same after a decent rain, and the sight of big trees pushed high up the riverbanks confirmed that. Whatever, this is no place to go driving on your own, and if you did manage it without local help, I'd suggest that a full tank of fuel, a good topographical map and a GPS would be minimum requirements.

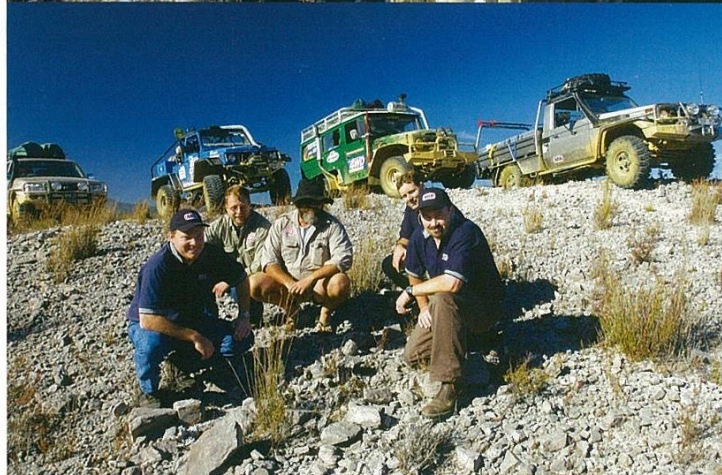


The west coast is riddled with old mines and care must be taken whenever you hop out of the car. Not the sort of place you'd let the kids too far off the leash

A few hours after lunch we popped out on the Murchison Highway near a place called Melba Flats. Back on sealed road we drove south, skirting the edges of Cradle Mountain National Park, but just outside of Zeehan we stopped to play again. This time it was the huge remnants of an old smelter and mine site. Steep shaly hills, plenty of loose gravel and ruts big enough to lose a car or two were surrounded by country pockmarked with old mines.

With a bootful of V6, Editor Pat roared off to play, grinning from ear to ear as he gunned Otis up, down and around slopes the rest of us were crawling over. Both Tripod Ellem and Wattsy the Brave went nuts with their cameras, recording some brilliant scenery on one of the small plots of Tasmania not covered with trees.

On the way back to Zeehan, Brian and Coz had another surprise in store – a trip through the old mining tracks on the other side of town culminating in a drive through the Spray Tunnel. Carved out of solid rock to facilitate trains hauling ore straight through a hill, the Spray is a remarkable example of just how hard men are willing to work to get at the good stuff buried underground. As an old miner myself, I marvelled at the enterprise that's been and gone along this part of Tasmania's coast. No matter what anybody says, if it hadn't been for mining, the hippies wouldn't even know about the wilderness country they're always on about. They'd have never gotten close enough.



The 79 Series needed its lockers through some of the tight sections up behind the Spray Tunnel. There's a track for everybody up here

With the sun going down, it was time to find a campsite, which took about as long as it takes to turn off the sealed road and pick a paddock. Brian found an open place on top of a hill that was covered in the thickest green moss mat I've seen this side of Ireland's Lake Country. It was like camping on a giant mattress.

Damned good thing actually, especially after the huge feed of steaks cooked on a hardwood fire and the sixty-hundredth Boag's started tripping the crew over. Our first day in Tasmania and, as I put another couple of jumpers on and zipped up the bag, I was feeling as if we'd done it all. So much, so soon, so beautiful, so wild and so bloody brilliant. Boy, was I in for a surprise! *4WD*

A 4WD vehicle, possibly a Land Rover, is driving through a dark, rocky tunnel. The vehicle is illuminated by several bright spotlights mounted on its roof and front. The tunnel walls are rough and textured, and the ground is uneven. The vehicle's front bumper has a sticker that reads "mannellmotors.com.au".

**TASSIE ISN'T MUCH BIGGER THAN THE
GLASSHOUSE MOUNTAINS ACCORDING TO
CHOOKA'S MAP**

The 100 Series lights up the Spray Tunnel. Originally dug through the hill for the mining railway, it was widened into the keyhole shape to haul some big boilers through. No worries, at least Roothy fits now...

