

A RIDE ON THE WILD SIDE

We join a group of adventurous jetskiers exploring the wild waterways of western Tasmania.

By Chris Beattie

otherwise known as the Tasmanian Jet Sport Boating Club, a group formed around the idea of using jetskis to explore far and not so far-flung places in a group scenario. It was early March and we were preparing to launch a fleet of 16 jetskis on Lake Burbury, a man-made reservoir a short drive from Queenstown, on Tasmania's west coast. A weekend of activities was planned, including a day on Macquarie Harbour and a run up the World Heritage-listed Gordon and Franklin Rivers.

Club Marine and the magazine had been invited along as we'd recently signed up as official insurance provider and sponsor for Jetskitas, and the weekend's ride was supported by Hobart Sea-Doo dealer, Maynes Marine.

Our Lake Burbury tour was split into morning and afternoon rides, exploring the coastline and meandering up some of the inlets and tributaries around the lake's 54sq km.

Our host was Dave Gray, President of Jetskitas, a man with considerable experience at the helm of a jetski, most recently completing The Ride for Pippa, a circumnavigation of Tasmania in support of the Leukaemia Foundation (see separate news story, this issue).

A MIXED MOB

The participants for this west-coast adventure were a mix of veteran, experienced and not so experienced riders, some riding solo and others two- or even three-up in the case of one enthusiastic family.

Reg Turner, of Maynes Marine, kindly supplied a pair of Sea-Doos – a Wake and Spark – for myself and Club Marine Victorian and Tasmania Manager, Justin Quinton, to ride.

Our perfect day just kept getting better once all the 'skis were launched and ready for the day's adventure. We were soon underway in a loose convoy of jetskis of varying brands and models, following Reg as he led us off for a tour of the lake's picturesque shoreline, much of it semi-wilderness area.

All Jetskitas rides include a lead rider out front, who has experience in the particular area being explored, plus a sweep rider at the rear to ensure everyone is present and accounted for at the start

The scene was almost surreal in its perfect tranquility and beauty. A craggy mountain range with rolling forested foothills led down to an ice-blue lake, with not a drop of wind to interrupt the mirrored reflections. Overhead, a brilliant blue sky and piercing early morning sun were beginning to burn off the low mist on the far side of the lake.

As I stood on the shore, it occurred to me that Tasmanians are spoilt for choice when it comes to outdoor adventure opportunities and locations.

We were in the company of a group of jetski enthusiasts who call themselves Jetskitas,



and end of each ride and that anyone who has issues is looked after. All riders are briefed on the area being explored before heading off, including any hazards along the way, and new riders are checked to ensure they feel comfortable with the conditions and that their jetski is properly equipped and in good working order.

Given the perfect mirror-like conditions on the lake and its tributaries, it was a relatively unchallenging ride, leaving everyone free to enjoy the wild scenic wonderland that surrounded us. Tributaries and coastal features were explored as we spent the day enjoying the freedom of being on the water in the great outdoors.

With the sun heading for its rendezvous with the western horizon, we eventually loaded up the 'skis for the next port of call, an overnight stay at

the historic township of Strahan, on Macquarie Harbour on the west coast, a little over an hour's drive away.

SOCIAL SCENE

The Jetskitas crew enjoy their off-water activities as much as on, judging by a great dinner and raffle draw we attended on the Saturday night at Bushmans Bar & Café, overlooking the waterfront at Strahan. The raffle was in aid of Lifeline Tas, a suicide prevention service, that the club raised more than \$1500 for on the weekend.

The main prize was a \$500 insurance voucher donated by Club Marine and won by Club Marine members Ian Macleod and Anne Flint.

Sunday was going to be the 'glamour' ride of the weekend, circumnavigating Macquarie Harbour – a body of water six times the size of Sydney Harbour – and taking in some of the scenic and historic features of the area.

It proved to be a day of varied riding conditions covering nearly 190km and meandering up a wilderness river – although not the planned one. More on that later.

First port of call was the often hostile and aptly named Hell's Gates, a narrow opening where the harbour meets the Southern Ocean. Sandwiched between the Cape Sorell lighthouse

Adventure-bound ... Jetskitas members prepare to mount up for a day on beautiful Lake Burbury.

Tasmanians are spoilt for choice when it comes to outdoor adventure opportunities





A rare calm moment at the aptly-named Hell's Gates at the entrance to Macquarie Harbour.

to the south and the wide expanse of Ocean Beach to the north, the entrance can be an unpredictable and hazardous place at times. The ocean was fortunately in a benign mood when we arrived, encouraging the more adventurous riders to venture a couple of kilometres beyond the entrance out into the ocean.

It was here that another important aspect of the Jetskitas rides became apparent. One of the rider's 'skis developed an electrical issue that shut the engine down, which could have developed into a dangerous situation given the currents running through the area. Fortunately, there was a mechanic amongst the riders, who was able to diagnose the problem and provide a quick fix, allowing the rider to continue with confidence.

Similarly, on a couple of occasions 'skis were brought to a halt when they ingested floating

debris into their impellers, a not uncommon issue with jetskis. Generally, it requires that the 'ski be towed to shore where it can be turned on its side, with the errant twig or piece of seaweed removed. It can be a difficult process at best for a lone jetskier, but with experienced club members on the ride the 'skis were quickly attended to and up and running again.

We continued south, exploring the western coastline of the harbour, including the large – and controversial – salmon pens that now occupy the southern reaches. Our destination was the mouth of the Gordon River, where it was planned

the majority of the members are now more interested in touring and exploring.

"When I first joined, members were generally much younger than they are now," he said. "Now we have more middle-aged and older members, with a few professional people who tend to have more time on their hands."

Anne says the club runs take the pair to places they might otherwise not visit.

"We go to places that we wouldn't go to if it was just the two of us because you've got the group support and we have people with mechanical skills and more experienced riders who can help out if needed.

Ian agrees: "You get pushed outside of your comfort zone to do things you wouldn't otherwise attempt."

He says Tasmania is uniquely suited to exploration by jetski.

"In Tassie, the distances between places aren't so great and we have such a variety of choices, from lakes and rivers to offshore islands and the coast. You can ride through sea caves, and explore inland rivers, all on the same day."



MEMBER BENEFITS

Hailing from Devonport, on Tasmania's north-west coast, Ian Mcleod, manager of an agricultural research company, and partner Anne Flint, an optical practitioner, share a love of the outdoors, which they explore together on their Sea-Doos.

A former club president, Ian has been a member of Jetskitas for 10 years, while Anne joined about three years ago, initially riding pillion with Ian before buying her current GTX 155 a little over a year ago.

Ian says when he first joined, the club was more focussed on racing and time trials, but



a sign at the mouth of the river that declared that Jet Ski's (sic) were banned from entering

that we would regroup for a ride up through the pristine World Heritage-listed river and wilderness area. Except we couldn't.

'SKIS NOT WELCOME

Between the club's last ride up the river and this one, the Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service had erected a sign at the mouth of the river that declared that "Jet Ski's" (sic) were banned from entering. One wag suggested that given the literal wording, the ban might only apply to Kawasaki Jet Skis, since the Japanese brand had, until recently, claimed a copyright on the two-word term.

Meanwhile, Dave Gray attempted to contact the officials responsible to see if we could be granted a temporary exemption while we waited at the mouth, but it was to no avail and it was

Top: Jetskis not welcome ... we were forced to abandon our cruise up the Gordon River.

Below left and right: The ruins of the penal colony on historic Sarah Island.





NO EASY RIDER

Jetskitas club president Dave Gray has an industrial-strength sense of adventure judging by his various exploits on his customised Yamaha WaveRunner Cruiser FX HO. One of the club's more accomplished riders, he has recently completed a circumnavigation of Tasmania in the company of fellow member John Beswick on two 'skis provided by Sea-Doo Australia. Dubbed the Ride for Pippa, the epic trip was a fundraiser for the Leukaemia Foundation and named after a brave young lady, Pippa Harmey, who has endured more than 740 days of chemo and other treatments since she was first diagnosed with the disease at the age of three.

While the ride took a lot of planning and logistical support, it was by no means Dave's first offshore exploit.

The 60-year-old property developer from Launceston has been a not-infrequent visitor to Flinders Island in Bass Strait as well as the smaller islands off the north-west township of Smithton.

He says the offshore rides require a lot of planning and preparation, but are among his favourite club activities.

One of the key issues for offshore travel is having adequate fuel onboard. His Yamaha is equipped with what he calls his 'Bathurst' fuel system, a network of four 20lt fuel churns, augmented by a pair of 10lt containers, all housed in a lightweight aluminium rack on the rear of the 'ski.

All containers are linked and feed directly into the main 70lt tank via a vacuum system, meaning that Dave doesn't have to stop and top up as each churn empties.

The system gives him a range of more than 340km, depending on conditions. With a Flinders Island round-trip accounting for around 220km and 10 hours travel time, it gives him plenty in reserve in case conditions deteriorate or in the unlikely event he has to tow a disabled 'ski.

"Fully loaded the fuel system adds around 100kg to the 'ski, but it's within the load specifications for the model," he says. "It feels a bit heavy at the start of a ride, but it also gets through the waves really well due to the extra weight."



In addition, he's fitted a GPS and base radio and makes a point of staying in regular contact with Tasmanian Marine Radio when offshore. He also carries an EPIRB and wears an offshore-approved PFD.

Staying warm and dry is a priority and Dave wears multiple layers of thermal and wetsuit garments, as well as a motorcycle helmet. He also carries a water supply in a backpack that he can draw on via a hose while underway.

Dave says his favourite offshore destinations include Flinders and surrounding islands, and he's particularly fond of running out to the islands off the north-west coast.

"Any ride out to Robbins Island, Trefoil, Steep or Three Hummock Island is great. You encounter so many spectacular features such as cliffs, reefs, hidden bays and fantastic beaches.

"Riding through the sea caves on Bruny Island, south of Hobart, is pretty special, too," he says. "You can't do that in a boat, although you have to have the right conditions to do it safely."

A staunch devotee of the 'safety in numbers' maxim, he always travels in company.

"If you're alone and offshore and you do have a small problem, it can very quickly become a big problem," he warns. "And you certainly wouldn't want a helicopter being sent out to rescue you just because you had a stick stuck in your impeller. You *definitely* wouldn't want to be that guy."



eventually decided we would instead head for the King River further up the harbour.

Along the way, we dropped in on historic Sarah Island, which was a penal settlement from 1822 to 1833. Only the most incorrigible convicts ended up at Sarah Island, which was intended to break their spirits due to its extreme isolation and harsh climate. Today, the ruins are still evident all over the small rock, with plenty of fascinating and informative signposts describing the island's history and the forbidding lives of its inhabitants.

At each stop throughout the day, ride leader, Dave Gray and his sweep, Carolyn Pillans, made the rounds of the riders to check that everyone was comfortable with their 'skis and the pace of the ride.

By early afternoon, the wind had whipped the waves on the shallow harbour to a half-metre chop, which made for a lumpy passage as we attempted to keep to our schedule and take in the ride up the King River on the harbour's north-eastern corner.

After a half-hour or so of carving through the chop and spray, it was a relief to enter the calm of the river and enjoy a relaxed run of around 20km as the river meandered its way through the dense forest. The ride was made more interesting by the unannounced entrance of the West Coast



Wilderness Railway's historic steam train as it crossed a bridge over the river on its regular run from Queenstown down to Strahan.

FREEDOM AND MOBILITY

The King River stretch reinforced the freedom, mobility and accessibility that jetskis offer over more conventional craft. The 'skis were completely unfussed over the minor rapids that we encountered and riders were able to explore little inlets and other geographic features that would have been out of bounds to even small boats.

We eventually ended the day with another evening's gathering at Strahan, sharing observations of the day's adventure over a few beverages.

Top: Exploring the untamed King River, including the unannounced arrival of the West Coast Wilderness Railway steam train.



The more, the merrier ... Jetskitas welcomes new members and is hoping to host visitors on group rides in the future.

Having ridden jetskis in a variety of ocean and inland waterways over many years, I found the day on Macquarie Harbour and the stretch up King River to be particularly fascinating. Being in the company of other riders made the ride all the more enjoyable as we compared observations

and marvelled at the breathtaking scenery of the rugged west coast.

Jetskitas is a great model for 'ski enthusiasts who want to exploit the advantages of jetskis to access otherwise difficult or inaccessible waterways.

With rider behaviour being an ongoing issue in some areas, Dave Gray says the club is keen to dispel the hoon image that is all-too-often portrayed in the media.

"It's really annoying to us when we see publicity about 'ski riders doing the wrong thing and annoying people," he says. "As a club, we always emphasise that the water is there to be shared and we promote good behaviour to build the credibility of the club and jetskiing in general."

Dave says the club is always on the lookout for new members and is currently looking at the possibility of hosting groups from the mainland on week-long adventure rides that would offer the full range of destinations and experiences, including river runs, lakes, and coastal and offshore islands for the more adventurous.

Annual membership of Jetskitas is \$45 for singles or \$60 for a family membership.

You can find out more by checking out jetskitas.com. 

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