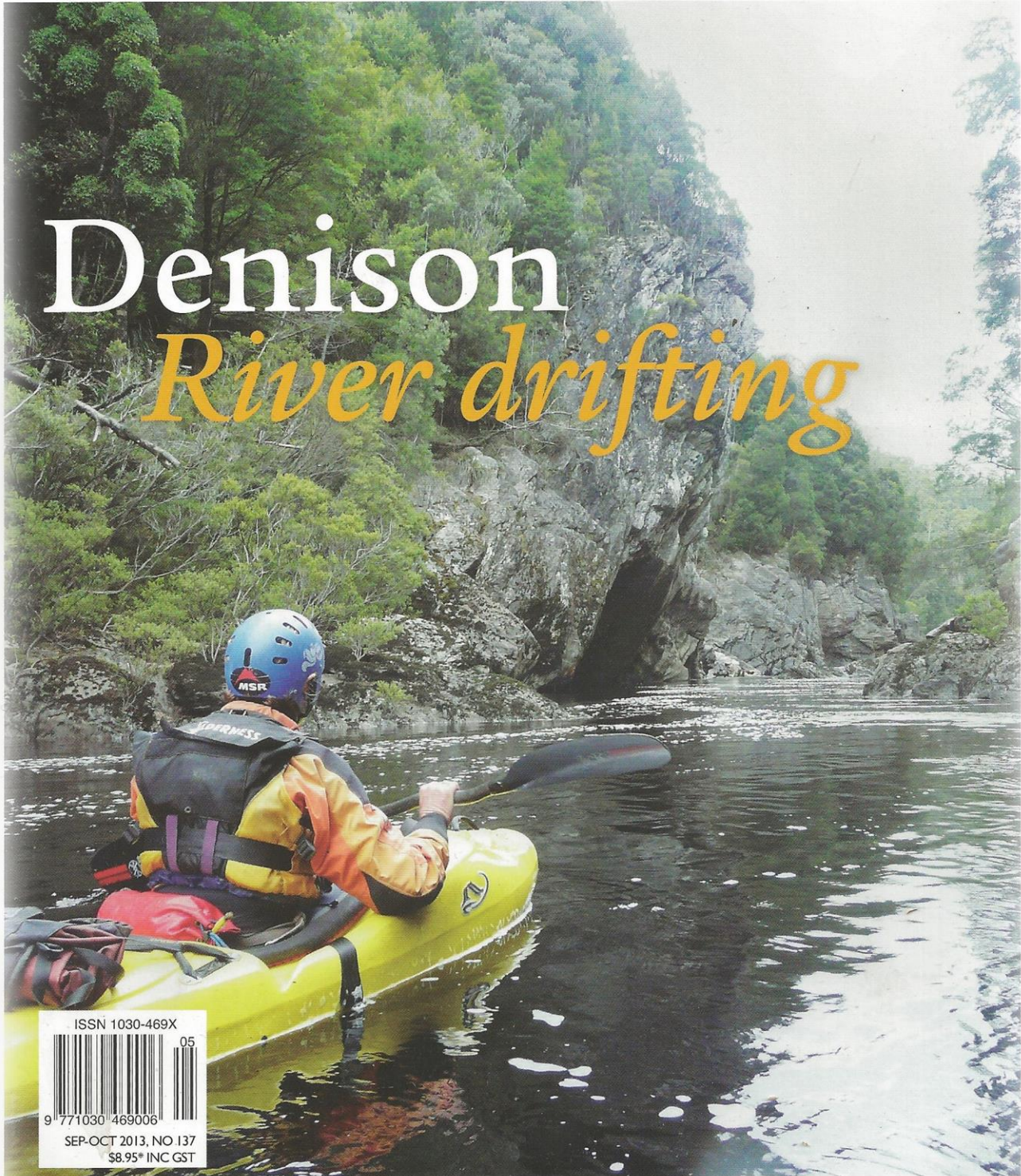


Wild 137

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Denison *River drifting*

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RIVER

Dan Kozaris on the Gordon River. Photos: Ro Privett

LESS *travelled*

The passion of previous explorers ripples through time to *Ro Privett* as he paddles Tasmania's wild Denison River

The careers of Olegas Truchanas and Peter Dombrovskis, two of Tasmania's conservation heroes, have long inspired me. In his 1975 book, *The World of Olegas Truchanas*, Tasmanian painter Max Angus asks: 'What would the odds be of two men from the Baltic states finishing up in Tasmania, being top wilderness photographers, each dying out there, each devoted one to the other?' Their photos have been referred to as windows into the 'unknown quarter' or Transylvania of Tasmania, inspiring many an adventure in the island's south-west. Hoping to follow in their footsteps, I spent a year planning a journey through this uninhabited region – one of the last temperate wildernesses on earth – before taking to my trusty kayak.

Looking across Lake Gordon from the sleepy hollow of Strathgordon my travel companion Dan Kozaris and I are nervously excited about the week ahead. The plan is to venture up Pearce Basin, then drag our kayaks over the King William range to access the Denison, a wild and remote river that Truchanas first explored in the late 1960s. A couple of days floating down this watery postcard would lead us onto the renowned Gordon River and Sir John Falls, before arriving at Heritage Landing

near the opening to Lake Macquarie. We had packed supplies for six days, including a small bottle of port for special occasions.

As long ago as 1916, the potential of these rivers for hydroelectric power had been noted. In October 1963, *The Mercury* reported that the Commonwealth Government would 'bear the cost of constructing an access road from southern Tasmania towards the remote and hitherto largely inaccessible southwest for development of the vast hydroelectric resources'.

In the years to follow the rising waters of the Gordon Dam swallowed some of the area's hidden treasures, including the sublime Lake Pedder. Truchanas and Dombrovskis played a pivotal role in the Franklin River campaign of the newly formed Wilderness Society by providing the visual ammunition. Truchanas became famous for hosting wilderness slideshows in Hobart to raise public awareness of the region's mountainous grandeur, while his protégé Dombrovskis captured the iconic image of Rock Island Bend that sold the green message better than any speech.

With this tumult echoing in my memory, we reach the north-west corner of Pearce Basin and bunker down for the night on a tiny island.

After a lazy first day, I'm not long into day two before sweat is pouring down my face. The 50 metres up to the first knoll, carrying gear on my back and an empty boat, is tortuous, and there are 300-odd more metres to go. Scrambling up the side of a steep range through thick, near-horizontal scrub, often on all fours, while dragging a plastic anchor, is no mean feat.

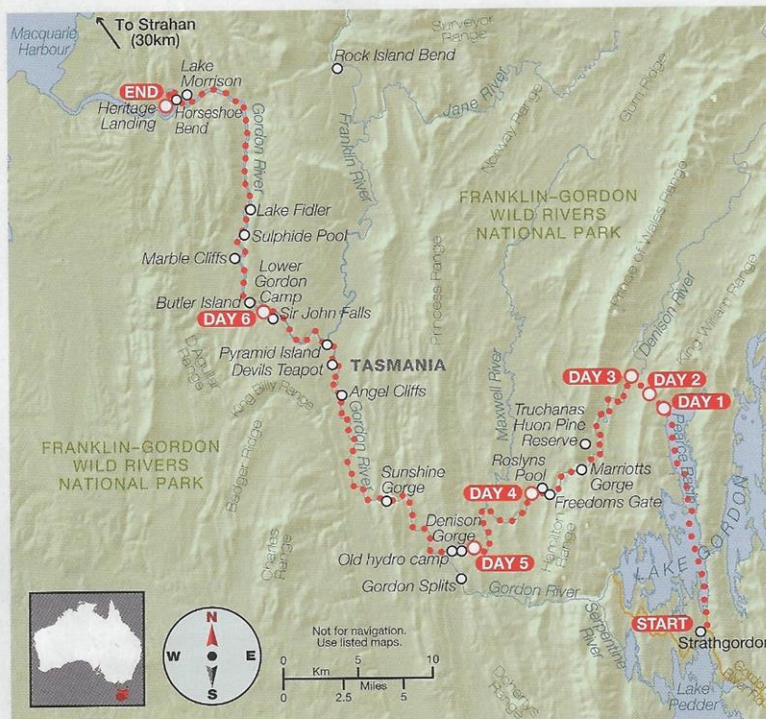
Thankfully, the track through the maze of melaleuca scrub is easily discerned, in most places. As a view of Lake Gordon opens up behind us, we come to the highpoint of 541 metres. It has been several hours of toil, including yanking our kayaks over numerous logs, but we've made it to a perfect campsite for a late afternoon rest.

The following day, the trail develops into a razor-like ridge. Steep drops either side have me gripping my kayak for dear life, terrified it will 'ghost boat' down the slope to freedom. At least the rocky outcrops keep the vegetation at bay and serve up tantalising views to the west, the Denison River tantalisingly close.

Eventually, the Denison flows before us in all its glory, hidden from the clutches of the manmade world. After such anticipation, this moment is now frozen in my mind forever.



Sir John Falls



MAPS

Coverage of the area is provided by the Tasmapp 1:100,000 Olga, Wedge and 1:25,000 Lancelot, Olegas, Serpentine maps. Be aware that low water would mean more portaging over logs, while flood conditions could cause problems in Marriotts Gorge. tasmapp.gov.au

This river has spent millennia forcing its way through the Precambrian quartzite that covers about half of the region, moulding the rock into the craggy waves and folds we see today.

Though my kayak must be as eager as I am to touch the river, it's late and a stony beach is calling us to safe harbour for the night. Here, tucked away in a remote valley, I discover the true meaning of escapism. Port wine has never tasted sweeter, and a quote of Dombrovskis' springs to mind: 'There is a certain wildness, a certain wild element in man's nature that is essential to the humanness of man. If man becomes contained, too docile, programmed, then he becomes less human.' Just as the effort of reaching this place has exhausted me, it is also rejuvenating my soul.

Remembering the notes of the first canoeing party to tackle the Denison, we approach the river's deep and narrow gorges (which didn't appear on maps until the 1960s), with no small amount of trepidation. I half expect to see Truchanas floating in front of me in his self-designed kayak, and wonder if we have made the right decision bringing 'plastic fantastic' kayaks that don't have the same advantage as his aluminium-frame boat of being easy to dismantle.

After paddling a few kilometres we reach the northern boundary of the Truchanas Huon Pine Reserve, which was established in 1971 as a result of the photographer's campaigning and since absorbed into the Franklin-Gordon Wild Rivers National Park. The highlight of our trip, these uniquely Tasmanian conifers were first described by the Sticht party in 1928 and later identified as the oldest living trees in Australia, placing them among the oldest living organisms on Earth. One set of fossil records from a tree found here dated back 3,462 years.

With Marriotts Gorge fast approaching, I have to paddle defensively as the river pierces the Hamilton Range. We bounce through boulder rapids, occasionally scouting and portaging around chutes choked with ugly logs or boulder sieves, in between rocks that seem to pop up everywhere like a mob of meerkats on the savannah.

The timing of our arrival at the next mini gorge, Freedoms Gate, is impeccable, with the westerly sun cutting through the cliffs like a secret gateway to heaven. I'm relieved at the placid approach to the gorge and drift wearily into the comforting clutches of Roslyn's Pool. I imagine Dombrovskis glancing back upstream from this same spot and realise I have it easy with my compact digital camera. He mostly used a large, heavy Linhof Flatbed Field camera and carried no more than two large sheets of film, so it was



Dan on the first leg drag to Lake Gordon

one shot and one shot only. He would wait all day for the perfect moment. Looking at Dombrovskis' work you feel like you are tip-toeing through the untouched valley with him, so it's strange to experience it for real. I think he captured the sacred atmosphere of this place perfectly when he noted: 'We moved in a glittering sun-splashed world where living assumed a clarity and intensity unknown in ordinary city-bound existence'. I even find myself looking out for the Tasmanian thylacine, famously extinct since 1936.

We float past the Maxwell River confluence and spy the tantalising lead-in rapids of Denison Gorge. The gorge is a smorgasbord of grade-three rapids, some of which require portage as the lines are either

choked with fallen timber or simply unrunnable. We paddle carefully, realising that the section of the river that could suck us underground lay just ahead. Dropping through countless boulder garden rapids, I understand what Dombrovskis meant when he wrote: 'Our bodies became attuned to rock and rapid, our senses eagerly absorbed the roar of white water and the silent greens of the rain forest'.

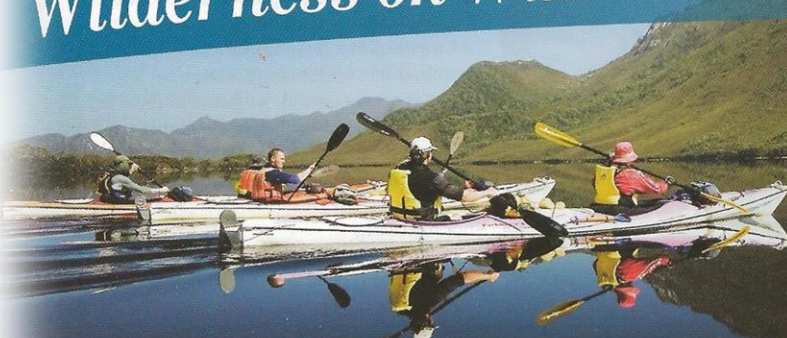
When we reach the spot where the Denison heads underground, we disembark and haul our kayaks up an indistinct trail that's signposted by an old pair of thermals hanging from a tree. After the intense concentration of riding the rapids, the idea of someone sacrificing their underwear to the river makes us both fall about laughing.

The next two hours, however, turn out to be the toughest of the trip. The first vertical step requires a three-to-one mechanical pulley system and our boats get repeatedly wedged between tree roots. More than exhausted, and beset by drizzle, we happily retire for a night in the gorge.

The next day offers up a selection of grade two and three rapids with nifty chutes and drops. When the whitewater eases off, we paddle beneath the high cable of the old Hydro camp. It's a sobering reminder of what might have been had the dams on the lower Gordon not been stopped. Somewhere around here is a 300-year-old aboriginal site and the spot where stone tools were discovered that proved prehistoric occupation of the region.

Wilderness on Water

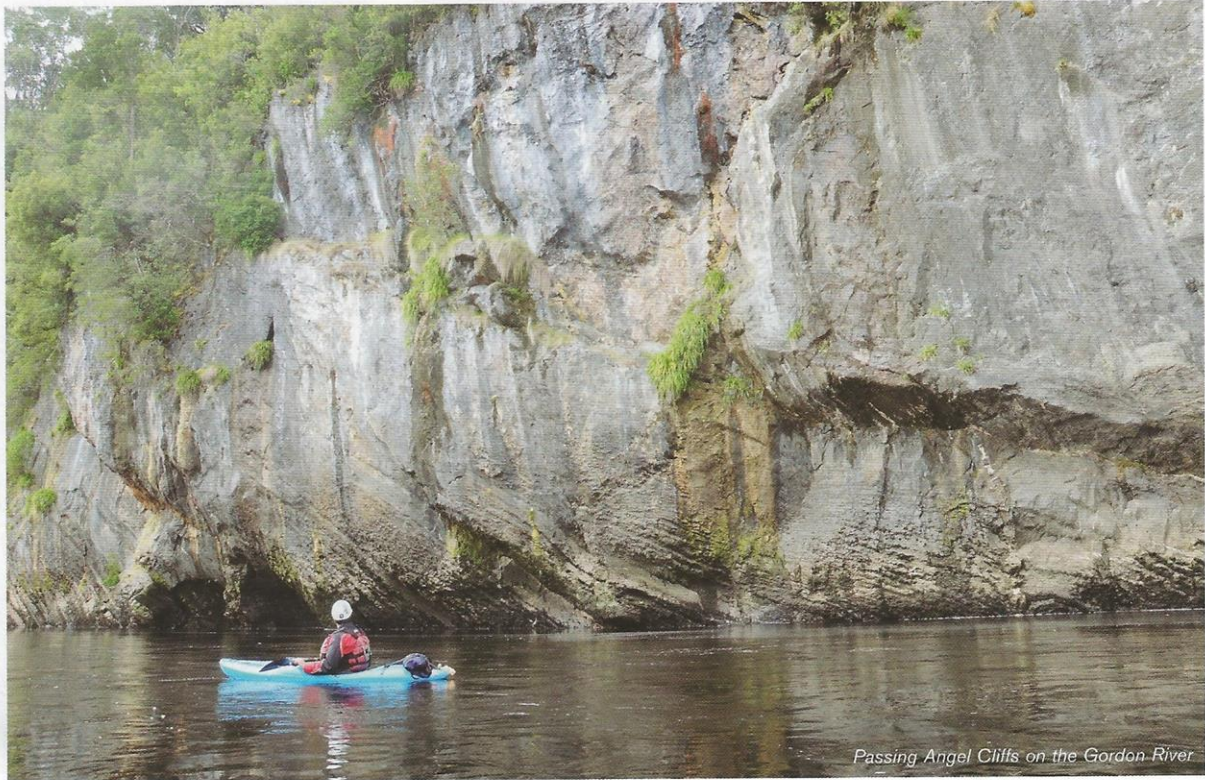
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Passing Angel Cliffs on the Gordon River

Ahead of us is the confluence with the mighty Gordon River, and it's with both gratitude and awe that we bid farewell to the river that has treated us so well. Truchanas must have been a man of great courage as the first ever to navigate these turbulent waters via the Serpentine River in 1958.

Three kilometres upstream of the junction are the famous Gordon Splits. This is where the powerful water of the Gordon has worn a deep slot through quartzite to create a geological phenomenon. The craggy masses of the splits form a hundred-metre gorge with a narrow passage of water flowing in

between; Truchanas and Dombrovskis' photos of this are spellbinding. Unfortunately, we don't have enough strength to paddle and scramble upstream to see the splits for ourselves this trip, but what better reason to return?

Up next is Sunshine Gorge, near where the proposed dam and power station would have committed its crime to wilderness and flooded parts of the Denison, Maxwell and Gordon valleys. When Pyramid Island comes into view we know we have reached the Franklin. A fair few miles upstream is Rock Island Bend, the photograph of which galvanised 6,000 protestors and helped the High Court overrule the state government's hydroelectric plans in 1983. It is then with something greater than relief that Dan and I beach ourselves on the sandy shores of the Lower Gordon camp.

After a beautiful sunrise, we make for Sir John Falls. This oft-photographed spot boasts a magnificent waterfall of about 34 metres. Then floating past the unmistakable Butler Island, where so many protestors stood, we come to the almost-mythical Lake Fidler. Fidler, like nearby Lake Morrison, is one of the shallowest meromictic lakes in the world, meaning the salt and freshwater layers do not intermix.

Before we know it, we're rounding the final bend and pulling up for celebratory beers at Heritage Landing. As much as my



Negotiating the rapids

aching limbs beg me to return home, the grandeur of this part of the world is holding me back. This wilderness has given me time to myself, to reconnect with a good friend, to rediscover the joy of simple things. It's as if the world has stood still for a moment – that silent, floating moment – and I see why the older I get the more I want to explore wilder places rather than greater rapids.

Photography Hall of Fame. The timeless work of these two men reminds us that people who are not concerned about the environment aren't so because they do not care but simply because they do not know. They certainly opened my eyes to new environments and experiences.

Dombrovskis said it all when he explained: "I go out there to get in touch with the land, to get in touch with myself.

'We moved in a glittering sun-splashed world where living assumed a clarity and intensity unknown in ordinary city-bound existence.'

Tragically yet aptly, both Truchanas and Dombrovskis died alone in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area to which they devoted their careers. It was on the Gordon River, above the Denison confluence, where the former drowned on January 6, 1972. Then in 1996, Dombrovskis suffered a heart attack while photographing in the Western Arthurs. His parting gift was a snapshot of Mt Hayes, which contributed to his being the first Australian inducted into the International

When you get out there, you don't get away from it all. You get back to it all. You come home to what's important; you come home to yourself."

Before I can get too caught up in self-analysis, however, the Lady Jane Franklin II cruise boat – our ticket home – rounds the opposite corner. [W](#)

Albury-based *Ro Privett* works in outdoor education, dabbling in whitewater whenever he can.

MORE PADDLING ADVENTURES

Roaring 40s Kayaking offers sea kayaking tours of the Bathurst Harbour and Port Davey waterways in south-west Tasmania ranging from three to seven days (paddling between campsites). A seven-day tour taking in the Breaksea Islands in December, including internal flights and park fees costs from \$2950 per person. [Roaring40skayaking.com.au](#)

A 10-day expedition rafting the full navigable length of the Franklin River, including a day walk to Frenchman's Cap, is available through Water by Nature from \$2890 per person in January. Tours are led by two guides, internal flights included and groups limited to 10 people across two rafts. [Franklinriver.com](#)

Franklin River Rafting offers eight and 10-day beginner tours for \$2595 per person in October including equipment, optional hike to Frenchman's Cap, meals, park fees and coach transfers from Hobart. [Franklinriverrafting.com](#)

A six-day walk, cycle and kayak tour of the east coast is one of Tasmanian Expeditions' most popular. [Tasmanianexpeditions.com.au](#)

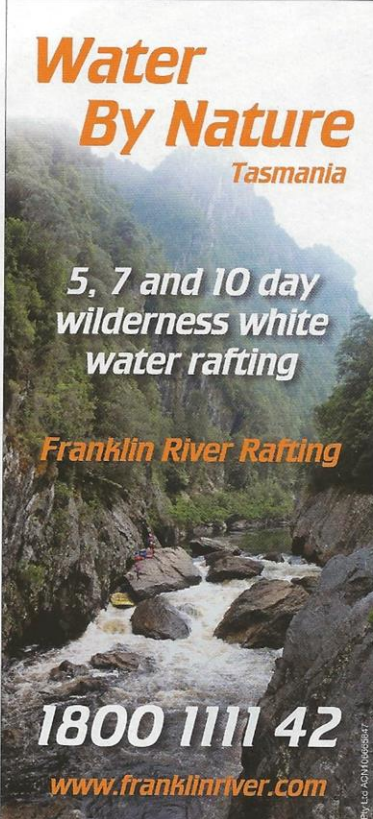
Tassie Bound offers a half-day kayaking tour on the Derwent River. [Tassiebound.com.au](#)

Sea kayaks can be hired on the Freycinet Peninsula for \$55 per day. [Freycinetadventures.com.au](#)

For more info on minimal impact kayaking in and around Tasmania visit [parks.tas.gov.au](#)

Or for something completely different...

For those who prefer warmer waters, Coral Sea Kayaking offers a seven-day tour of the world heritage-listed waters around Hinchinbrook Island priced from \$1,970. [coralseakayaking.com](#)



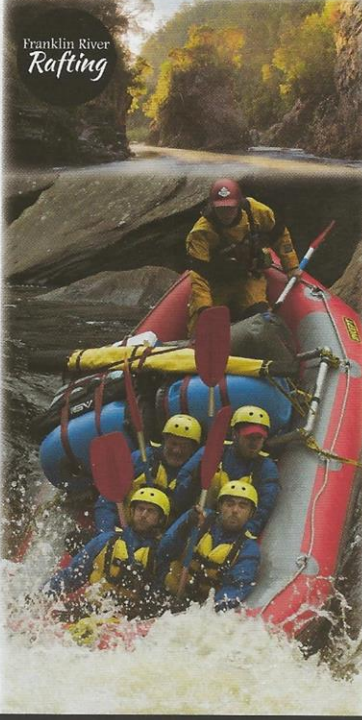
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