

Woolly day at Maatsuyker Island.





Where wild winds blow

writer *Christine Danger*

photographs courtesy *David and Mary Nicholson*

When you listen to David and Mary's tales of Maatsuyker you see a faraway look in their eyes. There are long pauses, like escapes back to the wild, windswept landscapes. They display a kind of serene contemplation and a quiet sense of achievement. Like many Maatsuyker caretakers, they have lived through a unique experience which was physically challenging but intensely satisfying. They followed a path less travelled to a place where wild winds blow.

It is blowing a gale, the walls are shaking and the window panes are flexing in the tiny meteorological office on Maatsuyker Island. "Hurry up and finish off the weather," yells Mary Nicholson to husband David over the roar. "We have to get away from here." The 60-something couple are caretakers for a six-month spell on the loneliest, southernmost lighthouse island in Australia.

What is it about islands, and desolate ones in particular, that have a spell-like attraction? What is it that appeals to the imagination of so many people? Is it the sense of isolation, the escape from ordinary life, the hope of discovering what really matters, the desire to catch a glimpse of the old lighthouse keepers' life?

Whatever experiences David and Mary had expected when they applied for this assignment, they lived the daily reality of their dream between August 2013 and February 2014. And the reality turned out to be rich in emotions, unforgettable events and enduring lessons.

*below Mary and David Nicholson on Maatsuyker.
bottom Maatsuyker Island showing the location of the
lighthouse, with Needle Rocks in the foreground.*



Maatsuyker is an island where wind and sea reign. Most days, you are rugged up in down overalls, looking like the Michelin man. The wind is constant and it rains more days than not.

“The noise is what gets you most,” says David. Most of the time, it is howling and shrieking through the house, outbuildings and sheds. “Even on calmer days the lighthouse hums,” Mary adds. “The rare times when the wind does not blow, the total silence stops you in your tracks.” It is so different and unusual that you take notice, look around in awe, and little critters which were in hiding make an appearance, such as the tiny pink breasted robin.

Life and work on Maatsuyker means physical labour. Rain, hail or shine, there is a job to do and it is often demanding. Island caretakers have a structured schedule which brings a rhythm to their life. Three times a day they must take weather observations: cloud watching, sea state assessment, wind speed measurement, rain gauge check. These are relayed to the Bureau of Meteorology in Hobart.

But try doing this when the wind is blowing at 50 knots (92km/h), when you struggle to stay



upright, when the driving rain is stinging your face. During their six months' retreat, they transmit 540 weather reports without fail. In between weather reports, you have to keep the grounds and gardens tidy, which means mowing and weeding. With all the rain, the grass grows quickly, and of course the land is at an angle, so even though the mower is motorised, the going is tough. "Great for fitness and weight management," says David, who lost 7kg in the process.

Another aspect of island maintenance is the clean-up after the ravages of regular gales. I recall a phone call to the island, when Mary announced, "We've just done a storm patrol." What is a storm patrol? It's a safety check of the buildings and surroundings, making sure nothing has been blown off or damaged, cleaning up the gutters, tidying up the tracks where debris has been strewn, chopping off broken branches with a hand saw . . . "That was a 60-knot storm. We have collapsed, totally exhausted. I haven't got any energy left for cooking tonight."

They are not immediately evident, but there are compensations to life on Maatsuyker Island. The highlights for David and Mary were the unusual and unexpected encounters. The best was the passage of the tall ship fleet on their round the world voyage. They recount the chance sighting of the Dutch ship *Tecla*. On a foggy afternoon, it made a ghost-like appearance under full sails in a break in the fog, and gave a resounding ahoy when it blew its horn as a tribute to the Dutch name of the island, whilst talking to David on the VHF radio. Other tall ships rounded the island in the fog and a few more passed in the night, unseen. Tall ships from all over the world were wandering the oceans, following the old trade routes of historic times and taking part in the International Fleet Review.

Another type of encounter that enthralled our two castaways was of the animal kind, with their discovery of the antechinus, a mouse-like marsupial, considered rare in Tasmania and the only terrestrial mammal on the island. These tiny creatures are renowned for their frenzied sex life.



above *Tecla* emerging out of the fog.

below *The elusive antechinus.*

Mating in September, the males become aggressive searching for females; they mate for up to six hours at a time over a period of two weeks with a number of females, after which not a single male is left alive, death resulting from the stress of aggressive behaviour and excessive mating ritual. There is no better evidence that love kills.

And then there are the seals. Sometimes you might be lucky to spot a southern elephant seal coming ashore to join the colony of Australian and New Zealand fur seals. The seals have a hideaway home, named the Gulch, in the lee of the prevailing wind. "You can hear them barking from the top of the hill," says Mary.

The Gulch is the old boat-landing site, a derelict spot of tumbled concrete blocks and

rusty iron that once supported a jetty and cable haulage way, the island's only means of access for supplies before helicopters. David and Mary ventured down the steep and muddy track a few times, holding on to a safety chain to lower themselves. "But you want to keep your distance" from the seals, they point out, "and they are very smelly." Indeed, slow and quiet movement usually produces curious but alert stares, with a few nervous ones heading for the water. Quick movement, noise and getting too close will start a stampede for the water. It seems the seals have never lost their wariness of humans after being almost wiped out by sealers in the 1800s.

Another astounding sight is the daily comings and goings of short-tailed shearwaters. "They arrive at dusk in the thousands," Mary says, "like a dark cloud, somehow find their burrows along the rugged cliff sides, and then depart before dawn for their daily foraging at sea." These sea birds are slow breeders, only one egg each year, and face many dangers through migration and harvesting by humans.

Short-tailed shearwaters travel up to 32,000 kilometres a year. They arrive on Maatsuyker in September and October. After breeding, they travel around the world. Recent studies suggest the birds circumnavigate the Pacific flying north along the western part of the ocean to the Arctic region, and returning southwards through the centre and eastern part of the ocean. Then they fly back across vast areas of open sea westward towards Australia to breed again, returning, amazingly to the same burrow with the same partner as the year before.

"Watching the shearwaters is breath-taking and quite emotional when you understand their phenomenal migratory story," says Mary.

The most intense experience David and Mary relate is their involvement in a sea rescue that earned them a Certificate of Recognition from the Australian Maritime Safety Authority. They played a critical communication role during a hazardous search and rescue operation. It involved the fishing

vessel *Jensanette*, in distress off the South West Coast of Tasmania on January 3, 2014. For nearly seven hours, they relayed messages between the skipper of the fishing boat and the water police. It all happened in the middle of the night, in darkness and storm-force conditions.

With a failed engine, snapped anchor lines and limited radio communication, the worsening wind and sea swell conditions meant that the fishing vessel was drifting out of control. David and Mary maintained contact, comforted the skipper and his two crew members, tracked and recorded their position at 45-minute intervals, and relayed all information via the water police control room to the rescue vessel *Van Diemen*, sailing from Hobart. The fishermen were eventually saved in rough, hazardous conditions, and 10 minutes later their abandoned boat hit Flat Witch Island and sank. Had it not been for David and Mary's relay communication work, and the courage of the *Van Diemen* rescue team, the *Jensanette* crew would have been lost.

During the big storms, waves swell to heights of 16 metres. The sea is completely white with foam and the air is filled with driving spray. Storm force winds on the Beaufort scale are classified as 56 to 63 knots, or 103 to 117 km/h. The night the crew of the *Jensanette* was saved, gusts of 71 knots were recorded.

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