

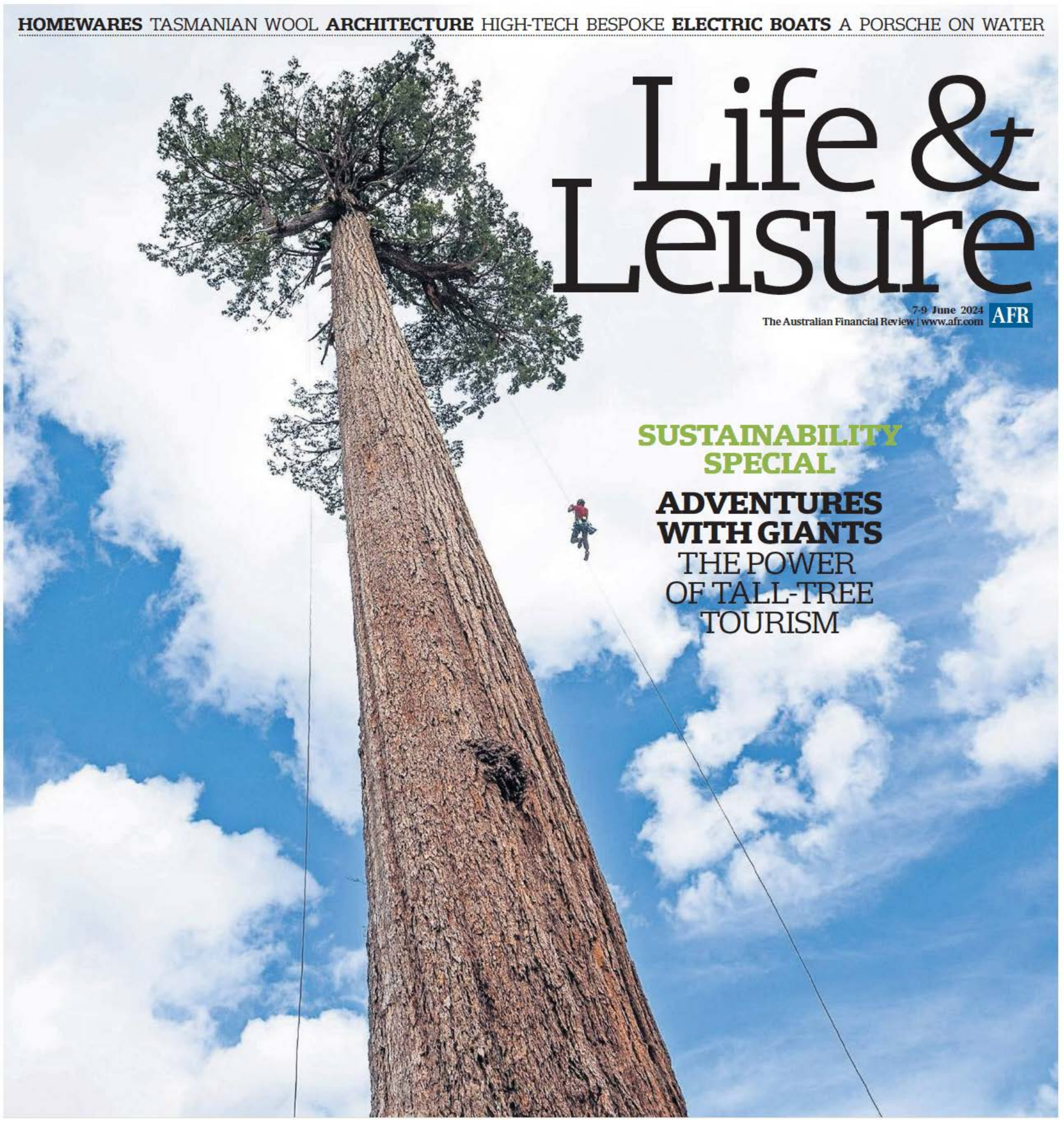
HOMEWARES TASMANIAN WOOL **ARCHITECTURE** HIGH-TECH BESPOKE **ELECTRIC BOATS** A PORSCHE ON WATER

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**SUSTAINABILITY
SPECIAL**

**ADVENTURES
WITH GIANTS**
THE POWER
OF TALL-TREE
TOURISM





SUSTAINABILITY TOURISM

Natural high

Ever met an arboreal giant? Around the world, communities are finding new ways to protect precious old-growth forests, writes **Ute Junker**.

This is a tree that demands attention. Thrusting 70 metres into the sky – about the height of a 20-storey building – the towering Douglas fir has a diameter of almost four metres. That sort of girth doesn't develop overnight: this specimen has been sinking its roots into the rich earth of Canada's Vancouver Island for around 1000 years.

There is another reason this tree stands out. It stands alone.

Once sheltered by the old-growth forest that enveloped it on all sides, its sheer verticality is cast into stark relief by the stump-studded scrublands that surround it. Fourteen years ago loggers razed the entire forest save for this one survivor, dubbed Big Lonely Doug. Doug owes his survival to a logging company surveyor who – for reasons unknown – wrapped a ribbon around its massive trunk on which were written the words "Leave tree".

"Big Lonely Doug represents both incredible beauty and incredible destruction," says conservation photographer T.J. Watt. Describing himself as a "big-tree hunter", Watt spends much of his time exploring remote parts of Vancouver Island in search of the region's last arboreal giants.

As co-founder of the Ancient Forest Alliance, he has worked for years to protect the region's oldest trees from logging. Stands of tall trees such as Avatar Grove – identified by activists in 2009 and placed under government protection three years later after a protracted campaign – have become tourist attractions in their own right. Nearby Port Renfrew, formerly a quiet fishing village, now markets itself as the Tall Trees Capital of Canada.

The battle between tourism and logging is not a new one, but the Canadian province of British Columbia is a critical frontline. The temperate rainforests that blanket the province's Pacific Coast are places of incredible beauty, where soft light filters through the high tree canopy, loamy scents of rich soil rise with every footfall, and the mosses and lichens that blanket most surfaces soften every sound.

They are a vital environment for grizzly and black bears.

These forests, which comprise more than 60 per cent of the province, also play a vital role in combating climate change. Studies have shown the tall trees in old-growth forests are especially effective at sequestering large amounts of carbon. Rainforests are oxygen-rich environments: they cover less than 10 per cent of the world's land surface yet produce nearly a third of our oxygen.

Only around 30 per cent of the world's surviving forests are old-growth ones, however, and many are under threat. Across the world, communities are turning

to tourism as a way to protect these precious landscapes. The success of these projects is not only vital for local communities – in British Columbia's case, predominantly First Nations people – but also for the health of our planet.

British Columbia's government recognises that its forests draw tourists. Tall trees feature prominently on the province's tourism website, along with the slogan "Super, Natural British Columbia". But Watt says a bigger commitment is needed.

"If the B.C. government got on board and improved the signage and roads, and did some more promotion, you would see such an incredible boom. We could be like the redwoods of Canada."

South of the border with British Columbia, the redwood forests of northern California are home to sequoias and Douglas firs that stand up to 100 metres tall. They are proven money-spinners. The US National Parks Service reports that in 2022, 458,400 visitors to Redwood National Park spent around \$US31 million and sustained more than 400 jobs.

Different countries take different approaches to marketing their old-growth forests. In Waipoua on New Zealand's North Island, the emphasis is on particularly mighty specimens such as Tāne Mahuta, the king of the forest. The largest kauri tree in the country, Tāne Mahuta stands over 51 metres tall, with a girth of almost 14 metres.

On the Kii Peninsula on Japan's Honshu island, where pilgrims have followed the Kumano Kodo trail through shady forests for more than a thousand years, the experience is as much about communing with culture as it is about marvelling at nature.

An increasing attraction for some visitors are the wellness benefits associated with spending time among tall trees. Study after

Top: The Daintree Rainforest is a precious resource; T J Watt, photographer and co-founder of the Ancient Forest Alliance, right; Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge in British Columbia is literally embraced by forest. PHOTOS: JASON SOUTH, T J WATT



Below: Jarrah forest in Western Australia cleared for Alcoa bauxite mining operations; and, right, an ancient red cedar near Port Renfrew in British Columbia, Canada. PHOTOS: GETTY/NINE NEWS; T J WATT

study has indicated that immersion in nature can improve everything from heart health to emotional wellbeing, and help stave off cognitive decline.

"There are so many physical and mental health benefits from going to these ancient natural places, embedding a little natural code in people who are usually living in busy urban environments," says Mark Olsen, chief executive of Tourism Tropical

North Queensland. Olsen is intimately involved with Australia's most successful tall-tree tourist destination, the Daintree Rainforest.

One of the oldest rainforests in the world, listed as a World Heritage site since 1988, the Daintree's flora is as remarkable as the region's cassowaries and tree kangaroos.

Twelve of the planet's 19 families of primitive flowering plants are found here,



including 50 species rarely seen anywhere else. The Daintree is also home to the world's tallest conifer, the bull kauri, which can grow up to 50 metres in height.

Since 2019, the park has been jointly managed by the Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation and the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, and the cultural knowledge of the Eastern Juku Yulanji people is now a key part of the tourist offering.

Being introduced to the landscape by an Indigenous guide changes your perspective, says Olsen. "You no longer see a wall of green. You see a cultural landscape."

Just as in British Columbia, Australian Indigenous communities are benefiting from tourism.

"They get to look after Country, to stay on Country, to teach the language connected to that landscape. It's about the inseparability of story and place," Olsen says.

There are so many physical and mental health benefits from going to these places.

Mark Olsen, Tourism Tropical North Queensland

The Daintree may be a success story but elsewhere in Australia, "irreplaceable" tall-tree forests remain at risk, says Amelia Young, the Wilderness Society's director of national campaigns. "Because of our evolutionary history, these forests are unlike those found anywhere else on Earth. There are so few left, [yet] they are incredibly significant for biological and cultural reasons."

These forests include the jarrah trees in Western Australia's southwest, which are "still subject to deforestation, principally for bauxite mining"; the mountain ash forests of Victoria's Central Highlands region; and, of course, Tasmania's old-growth forests.

Last year The Wilderness Society released its *Big Tree State* report showcasing eight potential sites for tall-tree tourism in the Huon, Styx and Tyenna valleys. An initial investment of \$745,000 would generate 139,000 visitor days and \$20.2 million in revenue for regional communities.

Since then, Tasmania's government has promised to introduce new protections for tall trees, but Young says this is only part of the solution. "We also need to protect younger forests so they can become old forests."

Of course, forest tourism brings its own challenges. In California's Redwood National Park two years ago, the National Parks Service was forced to close off an area around Hyperion, spruiked as the tallest tree in the world. Trespassers face a \$US5000 fine (\$7500) and six months in prison.

Even though the National Park Service had kept quiet about the exact location of the soaring redwood – at 115 metres, it is taller than the Statue of Liberty – so many people had found their way there that the ground around its base had eroded, potentially endangering its roots.

Wilderness areas require particular protections, says Dr Susanne Etti, the global environmental impact manager for Intrepid Travel. The company hosts multi-day treks in Tasmania's Tarkine Rainforest, and has implemented protective measures there ranging from waste-removal processes to managing contaminants.

"Our leaders are very clear about the dangers of contamination from pathogens," she says. "Cleaning your boots at the start of a trip must be second nature."

Luxury tourism operators are also finding ways to 'immerse' their guests in landscapes that remain relatively untouched. At Clayquot Wilderness Resort, an exclusive wilderness camp on Vancouver Island's wild west coast, room rates start at \$CA2900 (\$3190) a night.

General manager Sarah Cruise says she sees a physical change in travellers during their stay: "You watch your guests come in drained, and see them filling up on green." The effect of being surrounded by these towering trees fulfils our deepest needs as a species, she adds.

Gesturing to the forest outside her office, Cruise says: "This is our home, this is where we belong – we just don't know it." **L&L**

TRAVEL BALI



Clockwise from main: The writer in his kayak on a calm day; West Bali National Park, his final destination; lunch to savour at a waterfront warung.

PHOTOS: IAN NEUBAUER, ALAMY

It's the Easter long weekend and the tail-end of the rainy season in Indonesia yet there's not a cloud in the sky as I push off from deserted Amed beach at the start of a five-day, 150-kilometre solo kayak trip along Bali's sleepy north coast.

Minutes later, I find myself gliding along palm-fringed shores with volcanic black-sand beaches interspersed by rocky headlands and Hindu temples decorated with gargoyles of water dragons and giant fish. I am only two hours' drive from the traffic-choked capital Denpasar, yet I may as well be in a far-flung corner of the South Pacific for all the beauty I see and solitude I feel.

Except for the odd fisherman casting a net into the sea or a passing *jukung* – the traditional outrigger boats of Indonesia – I am alone with the sounds of the ocean and my thoughts.

It is my fourth long-distance kayaking trip in Southeast Asia: an extreme sport I took up on a whim last year after growing increasingly bored with the land-based trips I regularly embark upon as a travel writer.

My kayak, a high-tech, hard-edged inflatable model from France, cost \$1400 and weighs only 18 kilograms. It folds into a backpack I can take anywhere in the world where conditions – gentle seas and the absence of crocodiles – are suitable for cruising on a very small boat.

Bali's north coast ticks those boxes and then some.

Whereas the island's south and west coasts are riddled with sea cliffs, wide fringing reefs, dangerous currents and surf beaches, the waters in the north are generally calm. There are hotels and restaurants every few kilometres, yet development is still low-key, as only a fraction of the 15 million tourists who flew into Bali last year visited this part of the island.

Late in the afternoon I reach Tulamben Beach. It's a popular dive spot, home to the wreck of the United States troop transport ship *Liberty*, torpedoed in 1942, and a half-dozen inexpensive dive resorts. The moment they are in sight I fish out my phone from a dry bag and book a room for the night using an accommodation app. I never do so in advance because the seas are unpredictable, and I can't be certain of where I'm going to land at the end of each day.

I am only metres from landfall, focused squarely on my hotel, when the kayak beaches on top of a large submerged rock. In my haste to retreat, I flip over and fall into the sea. I lose my sunglasses in seconds and all five water bottles I am carrying, though I am able to retrieve most of them. The experience is startling. I would be in trouble if this had happened further out at sea as it's not easy to get back into this particular kayak once you're in the water.

The lesson is well-learned: I must be more mindful of my surroundings.

I'm back on the water at 7am the next day. The sun is already burning high in the sky and the water is gin clear. Cutting across bays, I can see up to 20 metres down to the

ocean floor. There is plenty of coral but a lot of it is colourless and degraded as a result of unsustainable fishing practices such as cyanide poisoning and the use of dynamite.

However, a much greater environmental challenge is looming.

While campaigning in Bali in the lead-up to Indonesia's general election in February, president-elect Prabowo Subianto promised to revitalise a decade-old plan to build a second international airport in north Bali. With a proposed capacity of 32 million passengers, and two parallel runways built through land reclamation, plus a seaport, cargo terminal, toll roads and more, the mega-project will make this tranquil yet forlorn part of Bali similar to the overdeveloped south.

I do it for fitness and as a form of meditation, and because it teaches me self-reliance.

At noon, I stop at a waterfront *warung*, a small family-owned restaurant, for a delicious fish grilled on coconut husks with steamed rice, vegetables and sambal chili paste to replace some of the calories I am burning through like an Olympian. I always carry canned food, tuna, wraps and soup, but whenever the opportunity for a hot meal arises, I go for it. Ditto with hotels. I never get a great night's sleep in my tent and on this trip I don't even have to pull it out of its bag: there are lovely little places to stay every night.

Day three begins easily enough, with the same perfect conditions: bright skies and lake-like waters. Lunch is at the seafont restaurant of a five-star resort. The staff are surprised to see me emerging from the beach and even more surprised when I tell them about my journey.

I order a big burger and fries and wash it down with two soft drinks, a carb-orgy I would never allow myself at home.



When I start the much harder afternoon shift, the wind kicks up and I find myself battling choppy waves up to half a metre high. I paddle like a madman to cover only 3km an hour – about half my usual speed.

This part of the coastline surrounds the northernmost headland of Bali, Kubutambahan district, which is the proposed site of the new international airport. And it's not too pretty: the beaches are strewn with rubbish and the fishing hamlets are dirt poor. As I pass the docks at Singaraja, the second-largest city in Bali, the water turns green with algae and smells like sewage in parts.

It is with relief that I make landfall at dusk in Lovina, a low-key resort town 8km west of the city, where tourists come from all around the world to see the dark-skinned spinner dolphins that live in these waters.

Despite paddling more than a kilometre out to sea, I don't see a single dolphin the following day. I do, however, have an unexpected encounter with a large monitor lizard swimming and diving with all the agility of a fish. It's a welcome distraction as I slog on in the heat, trying to ignore the burning pain in my shoulders, elbows and wrists, the blisters on my palms and fingers, and my numb legs and feet, not to mention an unquenchable thirst.

Finally, after five days at sea, I reach the finishing line for my trip, West Bali National Park. With its snow-white beaches and sandbars, green mangrove forests and turquoise waters like those of the Maldives, it's the most beautiful part of Bali's coastline.

When people ask why I do this sort of gruelling trip, I have many different answers. I do it for fitness and as a form of meditation, and because it teaches me self-reliance – how to solve problems on the run. I do it because it gives me a sense of achievement I presently can't find anywhere else. And I do it because it lets me see the world from a different perspective, including areas I otherwise wouldn't experience.

Most of all, I do it to disconnect with urban life and reconnect with myself and nature. Oh, and because I can't afford a yacht. **L&L**

Kayak safari



SOURCE: FINANCIAL REVIEW