

The Southwest



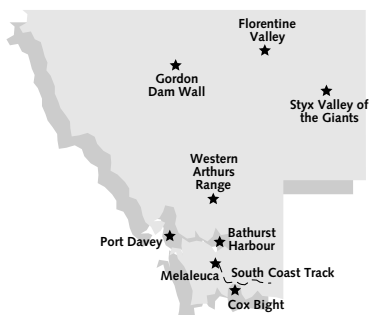
Tasmania's southwest corner is about as wild as it's possible to get in this plenty-wild state. It's an edge-of-the-world domain made up of primordial forests, rugged mountains and endless heathland, all fringed by untamed beaches and turbulent seas. This is among the last great wildernesses on Earth: a place for absorption in nature, adventure and isolation.

Much of the southwest is incorporated into the Southwest National Park, some 600,000 hectares of largely untouched country. Just one road enters the southwest, and this only as far as the hydroelectric station on the Gordon Dam. Otherwise, all access is by light plane to the gravel airstrip at Melaleuca, by sailing boat around the tempestuous coastline, or on foot. Despite its isolation, Tasmania's southwest has a human history. It was home to Tasmanian Aborigines for some 35,000 years, then became the territory of surveyors, miners and adventure-seekers. Apart from periodic burning here by the first inhabitants, which helped form the buttongrass plains, the southwest bore little human imprint before hydroelectric dams drowned a great swathe of it in 1972. Today, the logging of ancient forests continues controversially on its fringes, and the southwest has become known for antiforestry protests.

For the well-prepared visitor this part of Tasmania is an enticing adventure playground. There are challenging, multiday walks (as well as shorter wanders), remote sea-kayaking on the waterways of Bathurst Harbour and Port Davey, and ancient forests to explore. Those who prefer aerial pleasures can take a mind-blowing abseil down the curvaceous wall of the Gordon Dam, or swoop over the valleys and mountains on a scenic southwest joy flight.

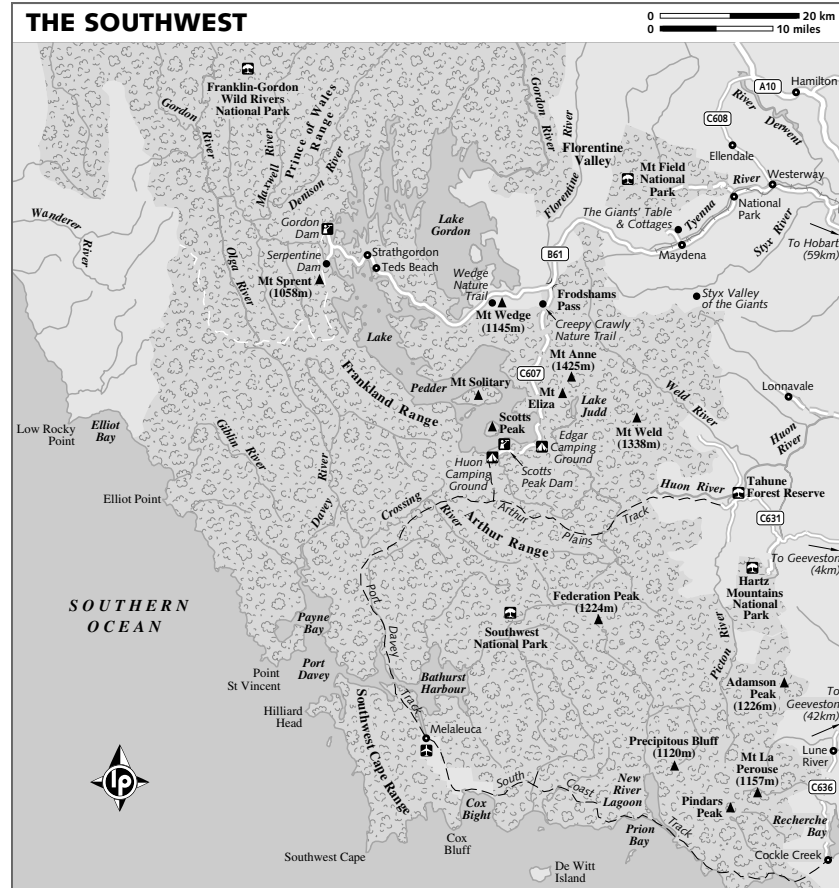
HIGHLIGHTS

- Setting off for days of full immersion in nature on the **South Coast Track** (p303)
- Skimming over the perfect reflections on a sea-kayaking trip at **Bathurst Harbour** and **Port Davey** (p303)
- Flying over the southwest by light plane, then swooping down to land on the beach at **Cox Bight** or the gravel airstrip at **Melaleuca** (p303)
- Abseiling over the side of the **Gordon Dam wall** (p301)
- Sitting quietly in the **Melaleuca bird-hide** (p304) and watching for endangered orange-bellied parrots
- Wandering in awe among the tall trees in the ancient forests of the **Styx Valley of the Giants** and the **Upper Florentine Valley** (p302)
- Traversing one of Australia's hardest bushwalks through the **Western Arthurs Range** (p303)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 03 ■ www.parks.tas.gov.au/natparks/southwest ■ www.wilderness.org.au

THE SOUTHWEST



History

When the first humans came to this part of the world, they inhabited a planet in the grip of an ice age. The southwest was then covered in frigid open grasslands – ideal for hunting game and covering large distances on foot. Between 18,000 and 12,000 years ago, as the ice retreated, the landscape changed dramatically. Rising sea levels drowned river valleys and formed landlocked waterways like Bathurst Harbour. Warmer temperatures also brought more extensive forest cover, which Aboriginal Tasmanians burnt periodically to keep it open for hunting. Early European documentation of the original inhabitants here records them mostly around the coastline – though no doubt they ventured in-

land too for hunting game and meeting with other bands.

European explorers were at first appalled by the landscape. Matthew Flinders, the first to circumnavigate Tasmania, described the southwest thus: 'The mountains are the most dismal that can be imagined. The eye ranges over these peaks with astonishment and horror.' Other reports from those who climbed the peaks aptly described the interior as a series of rugged ranges that extended to the horizon.

Most of the early explorers were surveyors who cut tracks here and endured great hardships in the name of opening the region for development. But the acidic soils of the southwest, its remoteness and harsh weather

conditions meant little farming ever got off the ground. Mineral deposits also proved less than anticipated, so although a road was cut as far as Gordon Bend in the 1880s, no permanent access to the southwest was established. Apart from the hardy few who came to Bathurst Harbour to hunt for Huon pine, and a few stalwart miners at Adamsfield and Melaleuca, early Tasmanians left the southwest well alone. They simply regarded it as uninhabitable.

The trials of early explorers make for interesting reading in *Trampled Wilderness: The History of South-West Tasmania* by Ralph and Kathleen Gowlland (out of print, it can be difficult to obtain). There's also *South-West Tasmania* by Ken Collins (Heritage Books), a fascinating natural history and field guide that identifies geology and glaciation, vegetation and the ecology of this region. An insight into the southwest's more recent human history can be glimpsed in *King of the Wilderness: the Life of Deny King* by Christobel Mattingley, a wonderful biography of Tasmania's best-loved bushman, who made Melaleuca his home.

Of these early developments, all that remains is the tiny tin mining lease still worked by the elderly Wilsons at Melaleuca, who, like the early pioneers, periodically sail their diggings out to Hobart by yacht. For most visitors – bushwalkers, kayakers and those flying in for a day trip – Melaleuca's most important feature is its small gravel airstrip built by Deny King, which gives access right to the heart of this great wilderness.

MAYDENA

☎ 03 / pop 250

Maydena is a quiet little town in the Tyenna Valley, surrounded by hills and eucalypt forests, just 12km west of the village National Park on the way to Strathgordon and the southwest. Take Junee Rd north out of town for about 10 minutes, and you'll come to the start of the 10-minute walk to the mouth of **Junee Cave**. Here, a waterfall cascades out of the cave mouth that is part of a 30km-long series of caverns known as the **Junee River karst system**. The system includes Niggly Cave, reputedly the deepest in Australia at 375m. Cave divers make hair-raising journeys through the flooded underground passageways, but other visitors can't enter.

Back in Maydena, employment has historically been in forestry. That's not

been sufficient to thrive on, however, and Forestry Tasmania has recently decided to jump on the tourism bandwagon and develop another of its forest attractions near Maydena (see the Tahune Forest AirWalk, p148, Hollybanks Treetops Adventure, p222 and Dismal Swamp, p264). The Maydena development has been on the cards in various guises since 2005, and by the summer season of 2008–09, there should be something up and running here. What's envisaged is a journey to nearby **Abbot's Lookout** that has panoramic views right over the southwest forests. This may be reached by 4WD bus. There may also be an activity centre here, in partnership with private enterprise, incorporating anything from a flying fox to mountain biking, horse riding and helicopter rides. The visitors centre in Hobart (see p84) will be able to update you on current developments.

Sleeping & Eating

Wren's Nest (☎ 6288 2280; 8 Junee Rd; d \$120, extra adult/child \$25/15) A well-equipped and homy three-bedroom cottage in a peaceful garden setting. It has all self-contained necessities including laundry and wood heating, and is just 20 minutes from the Styx Valley and an hour from Strathgordon.

Roydon Alpaca Stud & Accommodation (☎ 6288 2212; <http://roydonalpacastud.com>; 46 Junee Rd; r & cottage d \$135, extra adult/child \$20/15) There are cosy timber-lined one- and two-bedroom cabins here with glorious mountain views, and – something you don't expect in Tasmania – a small herd of friendly alpacas who are just dying to pose for a photo with you. There's also an in-house B&B option, and the friendly owners are a mine of information on the area.

our pick **Giants' Table & Cottages** (☎ 6288 2293; www.giantstable.com.au; Junee Rd; cottage d \$140-160, extra adult/child \$30/15) Named for the nearby giant trees in the Styx, these were once simple workers' cottages – but you would never know. Now beautifully decorated in contemporary style, they're spacious, warmly wood-heated and come in various configurations: one sleeps up to 10. There's also an on-site restaurant (two/three courses \$30/35, open for dinner Tuesday to Saturday in summer. Call for winter opening times, bookings essential) serving hearty fare to fill you after a day's adventuring. Platypuses are a frequent sight in the ponds on the property.

LAKE PEDDER IMPOUNDMENT

At the northern edge of the southwest wilderness lies the Lake Pedder Impoundment, a vast flooded valley system that covers the area that once cradled the original Lake Pedder, a spectacularly beautiful natural lake that was the region's ecological jewel. The largest glacial outwash lake in the world, its shallow, whisky-coloured waters covered 3 sq km and its wide, sandy beach made an ideal light-plane airstrip. The lake was home to several endangered species, and considered so important that it was the first part of the southwest to be protected within its own national park. But even this status ultimately failed to preserve it.

In the early stages of what was known as 'hydro-industrialisation', the government body responsible for Tasmania's electricity production – the Hydro-Electric Commission (HEC), now Hydro Tasmania – built dams, power stations and pipelines on the Central Plateau and Derwent River. These activities went largely unchallenged until the 1960s, when the HEC proposed flooding Lake Pedder to create a storage lake for electricity generation at the Strathgordon Hydroelectric power station, on the Gordon Dam, adjacent.

By this stage, Tasmania's fledgling conservation movement was stepping up a gear, and there were sustained, adamant protests with street marches in both Hobart and Melbourne. This did little to sway the HEC's all-consuming industrial agenda, despite the revelation that there were feasible engineering alternatives to flooding Lake Pedder for the Gordon Dam hydropower scheme.

The Tasmanian parliament collapsed under the weight of antiflooding protests, and a proconservation political movement called the United Tasmania Group – the world's first Green party – was formed. This polled 7% of the state vote in 1972, but failed to win a seat. Popular protest and political pressure were to no avail, however: the Scotts Peak and Serpentine Dams were built and Lake Pedder was lost under floodwaters in the winter of 1972. Next, the HEC turned its attention to the lower Gordon and Franklin Rivers. For details of the ensuing struggle to prevent new dams here – with a remarkably different outcome to the Lake Pedder campaign – see p287.

Together with Lake Gordon (to which Lake Pedder is connected via McPartlan Pass canal), the dams are the largest water catch-

ment in Australia, with a surface area of 514 sq km, and a volume of 15.2 cubic kilometres – more than 20 times that of Sydney Harbour. The Gordon Power Station is the largest hydroelectric power station in Tasmania and generates 13% of the state's electricity.

Trout fishing is popular here. The lake is well stocked and fish caught range from 1kg to the occasional 20kg monster. Small boats or dinghies are discouraged because the lake is 55km long and prone to dangerously sizeable waves. Boat ramps exist at Scotts Peak Dam in the south and near Strathgordon in the north.

There are two free camping grounds near the lake's southern end. The **Edgar Camping Ground** has pit toilets, water, fine views of the area and usually a fisherman or two – in wet weather it's less attractive as it's exposed to cold winds. There's also **Huon Camping Ground**, hidden in tall forest near Scotts Peak Dam with the same facilities as Edgar.

STRATHGORDON

☎ 03 / pop 30

Built to house HEC employees during construction of the Gordon Dam, Strathgordon still accommodates the few souls who operate the power station today. It's a quiet base for walking, fishing and water-skiing in summer.

About 2km past the township is the turn-off to the **Lake Pedder Lookout**, with good views over the lake. A further 10km west is the **Gordon Dam** itself. From the car park, walk down a flight of steps that takes you along the perfect curve of the dam wall. You can't go inside the underground power station any more, but you can plunge over the edge of the dam wall – all in the strictest safety of course – by spending a day with Hobart-based **Aardvark Adventures** (☎ 6273 7722, 0408-127 714; www.aardvarkadventures.com.au), which organises abseiling trips here (\$180, suitable for beginners, minimum four people). You can do two different abseils, and then the big one: 140m right down the wall. It's the highest commercial abseil in the world.

There's a free camping ground at **Teds Beach** beside the Lake Pedder Impoundment (toilets and electric BBQs; no fire permitted), or ex-hydro **Lake Pedder Chalet** (☎ 6280 1166; www.lakepedderchalet.com.au; d with/without bathroom \$90/55, units \$120-150; ☎), which offers various room standards: the cheapest are open only in summer (October to April) and the best have

STYX VALLEY OF THE GIANTS

The Styx: Even the name is evocative, speaking of the ancients and underworlds. Perhaps 'crossing the Styx' is not what you imagined doing on holiday, but if you come to the Tasmanian Styx, you'll be absorbed in a domain of ancient tall trees and forests so mysteriously beautiful you'd be forgiven for thinking you have indeed crossed to another world. Putting aside the intangible, Tasmania's Styx River Valley has also become known for something far more of this world: the logging of old-growth forests, and the fight to save them.

In the rich and heavily watered soils of the Styx River Valley, trees grow exceptionally tall. The *Eucalyptus regnans* (swamp gum) here are the loftiest trees in the southern hemisphere, and the highest hardwood trees on Earth. Trees of up to 95m tall have been recorded in the valley, and many of the trees in what's known as the **Valley of the Giants** reach over 80m above the ground.

Tasmania's powerful forestry industry has long been cutting these giants. Presently, 300 to 600 hectares are cut each year, and the region is the site of ongoing tussles between forestry operations and protesters. After Tasmania's forests became a national issue in the 2004 elections, 4000 additional hectares of the valley were added to reserves: an acknowledgement that intact forests are valuable for tourism. With new roads recently cut into previously wild territory, however, the loggers appear determined to clear-fell remaining old-growth forest here. On-site protests continue.

Conservationists and the Wilderness Society advocate a 150-sq-km national park in the Styx. Though this looks unlikely, you can visit the Styx to see for yourself what's threatened and be inspired by walking among some of the world's tallest trees. Southern visitors centres stock Forestry Tasmania's brochure on visiting the Styx and the Wilderness Society's *Styx Valley of the Giants* brochure and map with detailed driving directions and interpretation. You can also download this from its website at www.wilderness.org.au/campaigns/forests/tasmania/styx/. Note that the road here is unsealed and, though manageable by 2WD vehicles, can be slippery after rain. Watch out for log trucks.

In recent years, a similar battle to the one in the Styx has also been fought in the nearby **Upper Florentine Valley**. New logging roads have been pushed into previously undisturbed forest, and the Upper Florentine has also been a protest flashpoint that's attracted international attention. The Wilderness Society publishes a map with tour notes that will guide you to more soaring eucalypts, giant myrtles, treacle-coloured rivers and elegant man ferns. There are several walks varying from 15 minutes to two hours return. The Tiger Valley Lookout is one hour from the car park and has awe-inspiring views over the peaks and forests of the southwest. See www.wilderness.org.au/campaigns/forests/tasmania/upper-florentine-self-drive-guide.

lovely lake views. There's an on-site **restaurant** (lunch \$7-13, dinner mains \$14-25) serving three meals a day accompanied by wonderful water views. It also hires out boats, rods and fishing tackle. The hotel reception now also doubles as the Gordon Dam visitors centre, and has comprehensive information including two huge mock-up models of the power station and maps of the mountains and the lakes in 3D.

SOUTHWEST NATIONAL PARK

There are few places left in the world that are as isolated as Tasmania's southwest wilderness. The state's largest national park is made up of remote, wild country – forest, mountain, grassy plains and seascapes. Here grows the Huon pine, which lives for 3000 years, and the

swamp gum, the world's tallest flowering plant. About 300 species of lichen, moss and fern – some very rare – festoon the rainforests, and the alpine meadows are picture-perfect with wildflowers and flowering shrubs. Through it all run wild rivers: rapids tearing through deep gorges and waterfalls plunging over cliffs.

Each year ever more people venture here in search of peace, isolation and challenge. Fit, experienced bush-walkers can undertake tough multiday walks (see opposite). One short walk is an easy 20-minute stroll through rainforest with child-friendly interpretive signage known as the **Creepy Crawly Nature Trail**. Its start is about 2km after the Scotts Peak turn-off from the Strathgordon Rd. Further south, the road leaves the forest near Mt Anne, re-

vealing wonderful views of the surrounding mountains in fine weather. To the west lies the Frankland Range, while to the south is the jagged crest of the Western Arthur Range. The road ends at Scotts Peak Dam and there's free camping nearby (see p301).

Get your national parks pass and information about the southwest at the **Parks & Wildlife visitors centre** (☎ 6288 1149) at Mt Field National Park.

Sights & Activities

DAY WALKS

From Scotts Peak Rd you can climb to **Mt Eliza**, a steep, five-hour return walk, giving panoramic views over the Lake Pedder Impoundment and Mt Solitary. Continue on the same track to climb **Mt Anne**, a challenging walk with some difficult scrambling of at least 10 hours return. Another challenging eight-hour walk for experienced hikers is from Red Tape Creek (29km south of the main road, B61, along Scotts Peak Rd) to **Lake Judd**.

From the Huon Campground, the best short walk follows the start of the **Port Davey Track** through forest and buttongrass plain. **Mt Wedge** is a popular five-hour return walk (signposted off the main road), and has great views of the Lake Pedder Impoundment and Lake Gordon. If you're not up to that, there's

the 15-minute **Wedge Nature Trail** from the car park.

LONG BUSHWALKS

The best-known walks in the southwest are the 70km **Port Davey Track** between Scotts Peak Rd and Melaleuca (four or five days duration), and the considerably more popular, 85km **South Coast Track** between Cockle Creek and Melaleuca (for information on Cockle Creek see p152).

The South Coast Track takes six to eight days to complete, and hikers should be prepared for weather that could bring anything from sunburn to snow flurries. Light planes fly bushwalkers into or out of the southwest, landing at Melaleuca, and there's vehicle access to Cockle Creek on the park's southeastern edge (see p304). Detailed notes to the South Coast Track are available in Lonely Planet's *Walking in Australia*, and there's comprehensive track information on the PWS website at: www.parks.tas.gov.au/recreation/tracknotes/scoast.html.

There are many other walks in the park, but you should first complete one of the better-known routes. The South Coast Track makes good preparation for the more difficult walks involving unmarked tracks – these require a high degree of bushwalking skill to complete

TOURS IN THE SOUTHWEST

There are a few tours available for those who'd like to tackle the southwest in a small group, with an experienced guide and someone else organising much of the gear and logistics.

Tasmanian Expeditions (☎ 1300 666 856, 6339 3999; www.tas-ex.com) offers three walking tour options in the southwest. The first is a nine-day trek on the South Coast Track (\$2160), flying into Melaleuca and walking out along the coastline. For hard-core trekkers there's a 16-day trek along both the Port Davey and South Coast Tracks (\$3280), and it also now offers the legendary Western Arthurs Traverse (12 days), one of Australia's hardest, remotest – and most spectacular – walks.

If you prefer your wilderness on water, consider a sea-kayaking adventure in the southwest. From December to March, **Roaring 40s Ocean Kayaking** (☎ 6267 5000; www.roaring40skayaking.com.au) offers kayaking and camp-based walking trips exploring Port Davey and Bathurst Harbour with access by light plane to and from Hobart. Costs vary from \$2250 (seven days) to \$1550 for a three-day trip, or \$995 for a weekend.

You can also swoop over the southwest from the air on a scenic small-plane flight with Hobart-based operators **Par Avion** (☎ 1800 144 460, 6248 5390; www.paravion.com.au). On a clear day you can see the whole of this corner of Tasmania as you buzz over wild beaches and jagged peaks before landing at Melaleuca. Prices start from \$180 (child \$144) for a half-day trip, and \$290 (child \$236) for a full-day tour including a boat cruise on Bathurst Harbour.

Tasair (☎ 6248 5088; www.tasair.com.au) also offers flights. Its speciality is a two-hour flight (\$243) that includes 30 minutes on the ground after an exciting beach landing at Cox Bight (if weather conditions are right). It also does a 'gourmet' flight into Melaleuca for \$316 per person, which gives you time to get to a scenic spot and enjoy the picnic hamper provided.

safely and enjoyably. The shortest of these is the three-day circuit of the **Mt Anne Range**. The walk to **Federation Peak**, which has earned a reputation as the most difficult bushwalking peak in Australia, will take a highly experienced walker around seven days. The spectacular **Western Arthur Range** is an extremely difficult traverse, for which seven to 11 days are recommended.

Getting There & Away

From the end of October through March, **Tassielink** (☎ 1300 300 520; www.tassielink.com.au) operates an early morning bus to the start (and finish) of the Mt Anne Circuit, and to Scotts Peak, three days a week. It also runs a service to Cockle Creek during the same period. For the current season's departure days, times and fares, call Tassielink or look on its website from about September.

MELALEUCA

Melaleuca is little more than a couple of houses hidden in the bush and a white quartzite gravel airstrip with a wooden shed for an

airport. As you fly in, you'll see the workings of the earth from the tin mining carried out by hardy bushmen over the years. In the trees by Moth Creek is the house lived in for over 40 years by the southwest's most legendary resident, Deny King (see p299). All around are buttongrass plains, mountains, water and wilderness. Walkers can overnight in a basic hut, and there's camping nearby. You can also visit the excellent bird-hide, where you might see the rare orange-bellied parrot.

One-way bush-walkers flights by Par Avion (one way \$160, return \$300) and Tasair (one way \$176, return \$330; for both see boxed text, p303) deposit walkers at the Melaleuca airstrip. They also pick up here by arrangement, and can leave food drops for hikers coming in to Melaleuca on the Port Davey Track. Tasair also drops walkers at Cox Bight on the coast. Flights run on demand, so book well ahead, especially in the summer season. Note: gas canisters and fuels like shellite and methylated spirits cannot be carried on the planes. You must purchase them at the airline offices and pick up at your destination.

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