

Kayaking Bathurst Harbour

TEN THOUSAND YEARS AGO, NATURE DID SOME ASTOUNDING THINGS TO TASMANIA. WITH THE RETREAT OF THE ICE AGE GLACIERS, SEA LEVELS ROSE, OCEANS INUNDATED VALLEYS, MOUNTAIN PEAKS BECAME ISLANDS, AND TASMANIA WAS WRAPPED AROUND BY SEA.

By Gabi Mocatta

Today glacial melting and sea level rises are some of the fearful harbingers of global warming, but what glacial melting created in Tasmania at the end of the last Ice Age made it quite simply a sea kayaker's nirvana.

Shrouded in splendid isolation, edged with a convoluted tracery of land and sea, Tasmania has wilderness waterways aplenty. In the far South West, surrounded by 600,000 hectares of UNESCO World Heritage Wilderness is a place that's so isolated, it feels like the end of the world. This is Bathurst Harbour and Port Davey; a vast inland harbour and a drowned river system spread like a giant hand, gloved in white quartzite sand and stretching out to sea.

Aboriginal Tasmanians lived here for millennia, shifting their hunting grounds up and down this wild coast, collecting abundant shellfish and leaving behind detailed traces of that life. Frequent burning of the coastal bush by these first inhabitants shaped the landscape permanently, forming from the original temperate rainforest open buttongrass plains. The high tannin content of the acidic buttongrass famously colours the waters

here; the shallows of Bathurst Harbour and Port Davey lap a rich tea brown, and where the waters are deeper they're an inky obsidian.

Sea kayaking at Bathurst Harbour is a fly-in adventure. The journey starts in a Cessna out of Tasmania's beautiful waterside capital, Hobart. As the plane tracks over Hobart's wide Derwent River and out of town, there are soon razorback peaks and tall forests as the South West Wilderness unfolds. As forest gives way to buttongrass, the small gravel airstrip at Melaleuca comes into view; this built almost single-handedly by legendary Tasmanian wilderness pioneer Deny King, who spent most of his life in Melaleuca's edge-of-the-world isolation. Before the airstrip, the only way into Melaleuca was by boat – or on foot; a week of tough, sodden walking to the nearest human settlement. Gear is carted from the airstrip, and kayaks are packed and checked. This is to be a week-long exploration of these waterways, but the mounds of gear fit easily into roomy double kayaks. Soon, we're on the water and powered by two pairs of arms, we glide swiftly along. We've paddled less than a minute and our brightly coloured kayaks

are the only man-made things about. We're paddling a narrow, reed fringed channel, stippled by a slight breeze. Ducks catapult out of the water on our approach, and hang silhouetted against a sky of deep, summer afternoon blue. Mountains are distant and hazy in the warm air.

Anyone who's spent time in the Tasmanian bush knows to expect one thing: weather. For the South West Wilderness multiply this tenfold. This region bears the brunt of the infamous Roaring Forties winds that whip around the planet with no land to speak of between here and South America. That means sun burn or snow flurries on any given day, and waters that transform from mirror calm to whipped-up-in-white caps in a blink of an eye, which of course is part of the South West's excitement. To underline the dangers, the map of this area bears a prominent here-be-dragons warning that reads: "Extreme caution is needed when crossing these waters particularly in windy weather. Do not cross at Bathurst Narrows when wind or tidal surges make seas rough." We'll get weather forecasts by satellite phone, and if we're smart, we'll be close to planned campsites when the winds roar in. Then

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we'll hunker down in tents, or climb some blustery peaks while we wait for a kayakable lull.

Muscles warming to the task, we paddle for the first time onto the vast watery sweep of Bathurst Harbour, and cruise round the Celery Top Islands. In contrast to the sparsely treed, buttongrass covered slopes that surround most of this area, the islands are rafts for rainforest remnants. Celery top pine, leatherwood, myrtle, tree ferns are some of the Gondwana rainforest species that survive here. The area receives more than 3 metres of rain a year, but these islands and a few steep, protected gullies are the only remainder of the original rainforest that cloaked this area before it was changed by eons of fires – natural as well as manmade.

The open country makes for good wildlife viewing, and as we paddle we see wallabies, and their smaller, Tasmanian cousins, pademelons, springing through the buttongrass. Echidnas – spiny anteaters – are there in the buttongrass too, as are quolls, bandicoots, and of course the emblematic Tasmanian devil. At night in our tents, we hear possums in the trees. Tasmanian Tigers were once here also; the open buttongrass prime tiger hunting ground. Tigers were spotted in this part of Tasmania well after the animal was generally considered extinct.

Below the water there's some unusual wildlife too. Often when we disembark from our craft, we see spiny puffer fish skitting through the amber-hued shallows. In the deep, the high tannin content has crafted a unique ecology. Where the dark, tannin-laden water of Bathurst Harbour meets the clear salty sea water of Port Davey, they form two distinct layers, the dark water on top. This enables sea life normally at home in deeper, darker depths, to live

where it's much more shallow. Colourful sea fans and primeval looking sea whips thrive not far below the surface. Because of this unusual spectrum of sea life, all of Bathurst Harbour and Port Davey are Marine Reserve. Adventure divers come here for what they call "blackwater diving" and, equipped with powerful torches to light their way, they declare it some of the most interesting diving in the world.

Reflections are one of the magical things about Bathurst Harbour. On the mornings we wake early enough, before a breath of wind, we watch the dawn tint surrounding hills rosy, then orange, then golden. Except we watch it twice: once the right way up, and again, in mirror image, in the water. Perhaps the blackness of these waters has something to do with it.

One morning we paddle out early while the water is still glassy and under the imposing form of Mount Rugby we enter Bathurst Narrows. At finger-like Joan Point, there's a rowboat pulled up by the shore. This is for walkers on the Port Davey Track, a seven day walk that traverses the South West to Melaleuca. There's another boat on the other side of the narrows, barely 100m away, and walkers must row themselves across. This is where the map advises "extreme caution", despite the shortness of the crossing. It's not unknown to have to camp on one side for days and wait out ferocious weather.

We kayakers, on the other hand are having it all fine. We nose into Joe Page Bay, and make a brief stop to walk to the grave of Critchley Parker – a young man who came down here in the 1930s to find a haven for a Jewish homeland. He was lost in the wilderness and his body found many months later. This was always a place for tearaways and dreamers.

At the head of Joe Page Bay we find the

Kayak the Wilderness:

Roaring Forties Ocean Kayaking, www.roaring40skayaking.com.au, (03) 6267 5000, offers three- and seven-day guided, fully equipped, fully catered fly-in sea kayaking tours to Bathurst Harbour and Port Davey. Trips run from November until April.

Getting there:

Flying to Melaleuca takes 45 minutes from Hobart with Par Avion Wilderness Tours, www.airtasmania.com.au, (03) 6248 5390. Par Avion offers wilderness half day and full day trips with a cruise on Bathurst Harbour. Par Avion also offers 2 and 3 day fly in/live aboard cruises on the MV Southern Explorer. Bushwalkers also fly into Melaleuca to take in the region's extended walks.

South West on foot:

The 85km South Coast Track is a 6-8 day walk that departs from Melaleuca and takes in the beaches and rugged mountains of Tasmania's far south. This is remote walking, and requires some experience and fitness. Another walk is the 70km, 5 day Port Davey Track from Scotts Peak to Melaleuca – some walkers do the walks back to back, as a two week epic, though many take advantage of food drops by the light planes flying into Melaleuca. For more information see: <http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/recreation/tracknotes/scoast.html>

Guide me:

For those who prefer to have their walking adventures guided, several operators run fully catered and guided walking trips in the South West. Tasmanian Expeditions, www.tas-ex.com (03) 6339 3999, leads South Coast Track and Port Davey plus South Coast Track Trips, as well as the 12 day Western Arthurs Traverse, though the interior of the South West – one of the toughest bushwalks anywhere.

remarkable Spring River, and the shallow Manwoneer Inlet, peppered with hundreds of black swans. As we glide by, they take flight, circling and honking loudly, until we pass through their territory. Up the Spring River feels like real exploring country. If ever anything was pristine, this certainly looks it. It's hard to imagine men once came here to harvest sought-after Huon pine – an ancient, slow growing species that has wood the colour of honey, laden with a natural oil so potent, it takes hundreds of years to rot.

The sat-phone weather forecasts have been promising wind, and sure enough, as we head for our camp spot, we're racing to surf waves. The wind's behind us, which makes our paddling easier, though we hold tightly to our paddles, as the breeze catches them and threatens to tear them away. Paddling in wind and waves is when sea kayaking becomes its most elemental, and when we arrive at camp, we're disheveled and exhilarated, with grins wide enough to swallow the harbour.

That night as the storm blows through, we talk about the people who once lived here. We marvel at the toughness of the Tasmanian aborigines who for thousands of years made this domain their home, barely clothed in wallaby skin while we're swathed in layers of polypropylene and Goretex. Then came the pioneers like Deny King, when this place was still several days' sailing or a week's walk from anywhere.

The small mounds of white quartzite gravel and workings of the earth that we'd noticed on our approach to the airstrip had been Deny's: the remains of the tin mining that had sustained his family's life down here. Well into his eighties, Deny mined here, and regularly made the treacherous voyage out of Port Davey to Hobart with weighty sacks of tin. The Wilsons are the only residents in the South West now. An elderly couple, they, like Deny, make their living from tin. One afternoon, we see their beamy wooden ketch steaming into Port Davey, homeward bound on the finishing leg of a rough voyage from Hobart.

When the weather allows, we make a break for the outer realms of these waterways and we paddle through the long, narrow channel between inland Bathurst Harbour and Port Davey, open to the sea. Though the winds have calmed, and the sea is no longer wave-whipped, kayaking here can be treacherous for those with less than iron stomachs. Long, slow swells roll in here from half way around the planet, and it's not long before several of our group are feeling the first effects of sea sickness. We distract ourselves with exploration of cliffs and sea caves, and watch albatross and gannets on the cliffs. Whales and dolphins are often seen here; today we spot seals, one coming close to the boats to get a good look at us. In the middle of Port Davey are the rocky Breaksea Islands, which, appropriately named, protect us

from the worst of the open ocean swell. With more wind threatening, and rain squalls approaching, we turn our backs to the swell and head inland. The air smells of sea, and rain begins to scud fiercely around us. The Tasmanian South West is beautiful – and powerful – even like this. Before our days in this wilderness run out, there's time for a walk, and we head for nearby Mount Beattie, where the wind fills our waterproofs and blows us up like Michelin men. The view is expansive – we can see right out to sea, all of the vast curve of Bathurst Harbour and back to Melaleuca and the white smudge of the airstrip. From here, there's a sense of the enormity of this wilderness – it's hard not to be overawed by its great volume and remoteness.

The paddle back to Melaleuca is a wild one once again. We're given a final wind-and-rain polish as we travel up the inlet, and then, just before we pull up to the jetty, the scene's sun-drenched once again, and we steam off in the warmth of it, under the boldest rainbow we've ever seen.

This has been true wilderness immersion in one of the wildest places on earth. When the Cessna bounces onto the gravel, and we'll soon be in the man-made world, the peace we've all found from sea kayaking this place feels like a remarkable gift. A place remoter, wilder and more wonderful than this Tasmanian wilderness on water, we can hardly imagine.

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