



Wild wonders on Tasmania's west coast

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The railway that runs from Strahan to Queenstown was built in defiance of common sense — that there were no indigenous tracks was a clue to the impenetrable terrain. But Irishman Bowes Kelly, a founder of BHP, wanted a train to link his Mount Lyell copper mine in Queenstown to the port in Strahan and he was not a man to cross.

Such colourful legends and engineering wonders make for entertaining commentary as we clickety-clack through dense rainforest on the West Coast Wilderness Railway, as it's known today. Kelly fired the first lot of surveyors who told him it couldn't be done. No explosives were used to cut the passage through rocks, "just picks and elbow grease". When it opened 1897, cutting-edge rack and pinion railway technology was deployed on the steepest section. Kelly had got his way.

The old railway closed in 1963, was reborn in 2002 for tourists and has been in fully refurbished swing since 2014. "Try to look at this rainforest not through the eyes of someone enjoying a nice day out," our guide suggests. "Look at it through the eyes of someone thinking, 'We have to get a railway through there.'" Leatherwood blossoms scatter like confetti or float in the up-drafts with other seeds on the wing.

I'm about to join them. Having experienced the full journey to Queenstown and back before, today I hop off at the first stop and climb aboard a flashy new ride.

The WCWR's new helicopter add-on option is the whirring Bell Jetranger to the train's sonorous steam whistle. Passengers can take a genteel journey back in time followed by a thrilling flight over the wilderness in the chopper, popping out above Macquarie Harbour to land at the terminus in Strahan, the tiny port town on Tasmania's west coast.

The chopper ride is smooth joy, and I'm reminded of the warnings I'd heard about the road into Strahan, allegedly a tangle of turns. Scaremongers. When I first came here a couple of years ago, I discovered the drive is easy and beautiful; I've driven twistier trails in suburban Sydney.

There's a deep sense of history and place in this storybook village: the early 1800s convict history, the pioneering heritage of the piners and miners in the late 1800s, and the dams blockades of the 1980s all leap to life.

Two purpose-built catamarans run day cruises from Strahan — a good way to get your bearings for the wonders of Tasmania's west coast. They head out on Macquarie Harbour, poke their noses into the Southern Ocean if weather permits, drop passengers for a terrific walking tour of Sarah Island penal settlement and then head up the world-famous river. World Heritage Cruises and Gordon River Cruises ply the same route; the latter has a newer ship and departs half an hour earlier for the first crack at the reflections of the rainforest in the tannin-dark waters of the Gordon, sailing under electric motor to minimise noise, wash and pollution in the World Heritage-listed area.

At Heritage Landing, step into ancient wil-



STEAMING AHEAD



West Coast Wilderness Railway, above; Hell's Gates lighthouse, top left; Sarah Island penal settlement ruins in Macquarie Harbour, below right; Gordon River, below left; Strahan waterfront, left



IN THE KNOW

The drive from Hobart to Strahan is 300km and takes about 4 ½ hours. From Devonport, it's 220km by the A10. Par Avion flies to Strahan from Hobart three times a week. The Bonnet Island Experience can be booked in season through Gordon River Cruises. West Coast Wilderness Railway Heli-Steam helicopter experiences are available on selected River and Rainforest train tours from October to Easter. It's one of the WCWR's new Tracks to Adventure packages; others depart Queenstown and combine rafting on the rapids down the King River and the steam train back (Raft and Steam, November to Easter), or with a morning train ride and afternoon tour of the Lake Margaret hydro power station and village (Steam and Hydro, available year round).

- discoverTasmania.com.au
- westernWilds.com.au
- WCWR.com.au
- gordonrivercruises.com.au
- bushmanscafe.com.au
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derness on a boardwalk loop, marvelling at Huon pines more than 1000 years old. Take note of endemic species such as the rare whitely wood, honey's great friend leatherwood, ferns, mosses and lichen for a fairytale feel,

and myrtle beech, which evolved on the supercontinent of Gondwana.

Before coming to Strahan, you may like to reacquaint yourself with Robert Hughes's *The Fatal Shore* and pick up *The Ship That Never Was*, a new history by Adam Courtenay (son of the master of the ripping yarn, Bryce). Courtenay's book is the convict escape story told in the play of the same name, which has been on stage in Strahan for 25 years. The actors double as guides on Sarah Island for both Gordon River cruises, which is a brilliant use of their thespian skills. As we walk around the ruins of the penal settlement, I can almost hear the lashes from the souped-up cat-o-nine tails they used on convicts here.

The Macquarie Harbour entrance was not christened Hell's Gates because it was a treacherous passage, although the stories of shipwreck drownings within earshot of loved-ones on land are achingly sad. No, it's because the spectacularly beautiful Sarah Island was the most wretched convict outpost in the land. When a prisoner sailed through those narrow heads, it was said they passed into hell.

On a tour to tiny Bonnet Island, near the mouth of Hell's Gates, the sky puts on a Technicolor sunset show. We're aboard MV Sophia, Gordon River Cruises's 10-person speedboat (book well ahead in summer months). A generous platter of Tasmanian cheeses and meats with a glass of Stefano Lubiana pinot noir makes time pass quickly as we wait for it to be dark enough to visit the resident colony of little penguins. It's moulting season, so the birds have doubled their weight to 2kg, enough stored fat for them to

grow new feathers ashore, going fishing again once they're waterproof.

Back on board after silently delighting in watching a chubby penguin toddle around its nest, it's hot chocolates all round and a heaped platter of sweet treats to fatten us all up, too. We put away mobile phones, cameras and any other artificial light sources so the skipper can safely navigate the 20km or so back across Macquarie Harbour in the gloaming. In the glittering canopy of stars we spy a satellite zipping past; is it helping to track our position on the planet?

Place is very much chef Steve Bennett's mission in Strahan at two restaurants, Frederick's, which opened in the grand old Ormiston House early this year, and Bushman's Cafe, which he and wife Leslie Price set up when they came to Strahan four years ago.

"I want to represent the west coast with local produce and by putting the story of the area into the food," says Bennett, who knows his farmers and producers by name.

He spent months conceiving and perfecting his fine-dining menu for Frederick's, which is a parade of delightful imagination and culinary invention. Red-velvet crab tacos arrive perched in niches on a small piece of driftwood. The shells, the menu tells me, are made from cutting grass. Say what? "It's a tussock grass native to Tasmania, traditionally used by Aboriginal islanders for basket-weaving and rope-making," explains Bennett. "The seeds are pounded and ground into flour to make bread, or in our case taco dough."

Bennett has planted Ormiston House's kitchen garden with Tasmanian natives and he forages for ingredients such as ice plant from Ocean Beach, pine and slippery jack mushrooms from the pine forests surrounding Strahan, seaweeds from the rock pools of Trial Harbour, Macquarie Vine from Sarah Island — "the berries have a lychee flavour" — and Tasmanian flax lily — "the seeds give the fruits an almost chilli aftertaste".

His flavour combinations are sublime and each dish is presented by the waitress with the story of its local inspiration. A rich chocolate mousse dessert is called Pine Gardens after a popular barbecue spot just outside town. Bennett tells us blackberries grow wild there, and he has crystallised reindeer moss and made a green-tea sponge to represent the lichen.

There is much to explore here — the heritage train, cruises, walks, waterfalls, giant sand dunes you can toboggan down, and spectacular beaches. Add to that Frederick's, a restaurant worth driving across the state for. "We find a way or make it" was the motto underpinning the seemingly impossible task of building that railway up mountains, down valleys and across rivers through the virgin rainforest. Once you make your way to Strahan, it beckons you to stay a little longer.

Jane Nicholls was a guest of Tourism Tasmania, West Coast Wilderness Railway and Gordon River Cruises.