Spectacular wilderness and edgy art, fine food and wonderful wine, sleepy historic villages and deserted beaches, urban chic and boatbuilding: as one-time resident of the region Sean Hogben discovers, there’s an awful lot to see in southernmost Tasmania.
Tasmania is easy. Flying in is easy, airports are understressed and driving is straightforward. Especially easy is the southern region, which includes the thriving capital of Hobart and its surrounds. Tourists often corral this area into a few days of a broader Tasmanian sojourn. Yet it deserves so much more attention.

Life is different down south. The ramparts of the World Heritage wilderness, dynamic weather and remoteness starkly contrast city life. Bewildering urban choice is narrowed down to essentials. There’s the sea. Experienced yachtsmen will tell you that the waters of Hobart – south down the D’Entrecasteaux Channel separating Bruny Island and then north-west up the magnificent Huon River estuary – are among the world’s finest cruising grounds. The weather may get wild, but there are safe havens everywhere. It is these waters that continue to harbour a maritime industry that gave us high-speed, wave-piercing multihull ships, exquisite yachts and the colonial outpost of Melbourne, which was settled from Tasmania.

Now more recreational, the maritime delights of southern Tasmania are exemplified every two years at the four-day Australian Wooden Boat Festival in Hobart (the next one is in 2015). Not merely an orgy of high-gloss varnish and eggshell-smooth hulls, the festival draws tens of thousands to a multiplicity of maritime pursuits, from quay-strolling research to sea-shanty singing and talks by experts.

Hobart, named by Lonely Planet as one of the world’s top 10 cities to visit in 2013, is earning a reputation for its fine food, thanks to highly regarded restaurants such as Garagistes in Murray Street. Co-owner and award-winning chef Luke Burgess – whose CV includes a stint at the two-Michelin-star Noma in Copenhagen – offers diners a choice of a three- or five-course set menu. Octopus cooked over coals, Flinders Island milk-fed lamb and parsnip burnt cream with walnut ice-cream are matched by an extensive list of organic and natural wines.

The famous Museum of Old & New Art (MONA) sits on the banks of the Derwent River. Spend a few days soaking up what the founder, multimillionaire David Walsh calls a “subversive Disneyland”, a constant whirl of provocative exhibitions and events. Beyond MONA’s cool pavilion accommodation, fine and casual dining and drinking, it celebrates a peerless location encouraging visitors to search out more of the same. The natural respite from the gallery’s intense internal experience is to wind down the windows and hit the road.

FROM HOBART, go south through the serene south-eastern suburbs, hugging the shore from Sandy Bay to Kingston. It’s still city, but undeniably spectacular, with houses perched on the heights of Taroona overlooking Storm Bay, entrance to the Derwent River estuary. Then...
before you drop down to the beach at Kingston. There are more cliffs and views on the high road loop around Tinderbox.

Thinking about a break and a comfortable bed? Accommodation in a wide variety of styles, standards and locations is on offer through the channel villages, either rustic cabin or something more incongruous—such as the French Riviera-style Villa Howden, authentic in every detail, right down to the indoor pool pavilion.

This ability to really mix up experiences is the key to a southern Tasmanian trip. Just 20km south of Howden is the charming channel-side village of Kettering—and the 15-minute ferry ride to Bruny Island. Bruny ranges from serious grazing farms past quiet oyster coves to high forests and remote wild beaches. The world’s largest sawn timber plank (44.5m of southern blue gum) sailed from the island to the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. Swim on the channel side (the water is not that cold) at Lunawanna Cemetery or Mickey’s Bay, and surf Coal Point near Adventure Bay, or Cloudy Bay. Privacy seekers should go here.

One of Tasmania’s most spectacular tourism adventures is Bruny Island Cruises’ three-hour boat ride to the southern tip and back (www.brunycruises.com.au). On a perfect day of low swell, no wind and bright sunshine, the boat sails almost within touching distance of the soaring cliffs of south-east Bruny. Blowholes blast, muttonbirds race across wave tops and a crystal-clear sea sparkles in the sun.
At the tip of Bruny Island, where the Southern Ocean swells are never still, lie the jagged rocks of the Friars; and on them lie large Australian and New Zealand fur seals. Expert skippers navigate their RIBs (rigid inflatable boats) right into the Friars’ crannies and the seals seem perfectly relaxed with the attention. Speeding back to Adventure Bay, the reality of what this imposing coast with its sheer cliffs would be like in even a slight swell dawns. There is little wilder or less forgiving than this shore.

Bruny is known for its food products – oysters, cheese, smoked smallgoods, beef and berries. When you see just how clean is this environment, the fabulous flavours frequently available at roadside establishments need no explanation. Even pub grub is of a high standard and good Tasmanian wines are available.

BACK ON THE BIG ISLAND of Tasmania and further south on the Channel Highway is artisan land. Woodbridge, Birchs Bay, Middleton and Gordon are small villages housing luthiers, furniture-makers and boatbuilders. Ned Trewartha is all three. He welcomes visitors to his shed on the Channel Highway at Gordon, which produces everything from museum-quality traditional sailing craft in Tasmania’s world-renowned timbers to ukuleles and custom furniture. Trewartha says he could not do this work anywhere else.

Around the bottom of the peninsula, near Verona Sands, the glory of the wide Huon estuary is revealed. The history of this river – its near 200-year-old settlements, apple trade, timber cutting and fishing – infuses every community. Early architecture endures, including vertical-board apple packing sheds by the hundreds.

Up through Cygnet – where the Wilson family has been building wooden boats for five generations – on to Huonville, then down the Huon Highway to Franklin, cherry and apple orchards drape the hills rising into tall forests. Franklin, which was once a bustling port, is now home to the Wooden Boat Centre and Living Boat Trust.

Andy Gamlin, timber boat tragic and one of the founders of the Australian Wooden Boat Festival, recently bought and now manages the centre, once known as the Shipwright’s Point School of Wooden Boat Building. It has turned out many fine craftsmen; Trewartha was one of the first diploma-course graduates.

Past this foreshore the mighty Huon flows lazily, but its tea-stained rapids of mountain water are an easy 40-minute drive up the Arve Road from the timber town of Geeveston. Tahune Forest Airwalk, near the junction of the Picton and Huon Rivers, takes you into the treetops and cantilevers out 48m above the Huon. The grandeur of these forests is matched by the intensity of the fight for their future. Upstream on the Picton, World Heritage forest sits on one side of a logging road – clear-felled and burned wasteland on the other.

The pull of the south is irresistible. Being so close to the bottom of the last substantial landmass before Antarctica is strong motivation to go to the end of the road. Wind around Esperance Coast Road through Police Point and Surveyors Bay, drinking in the impossibly beautiful estuary views; or twist down the Huon Highway. Either way, the next stop is Dover, once home to a large crayfish and abalone fishing fleet, now surrounded by Atlantic salmon farms.

Dover backs on to forested hills and, just south, the ever-present river estuary landform. This is where the first European explorers assessed Tasmania’s colonial value, and where pioneers built scores of sawmills, thousands of vessels and cut hundreds of thousands of trees. Adamson’s Peak, frequently snow-capped, looms above.

THERE’S MORE. Southport, a beachcomber’s haven with its bayside shacks and one-man cray boats, is the last settlement of size. There’s an eerie power to the cliff-top graveyard and the bull kelp-infested Roaring Beach point beneath it. A solid right-hand wave breaks on the thick kelp. Surfers usually strap on a saw-tooth knife to cut themselves free if entangled – and they don’t surf alone.
Just south is a level track out from the Ida Bay Railway terminus at Deep Hole to Southport Bluff and Lagoon, with its estuary beach. It’s a two- to three-hour walk, smothered in wildflowers in early summer. The beaches are open to swell, and canoeing on the lagoon can be blissful or challenging.

South again to the last stop, Recherche Bay, named after French explorer Bruny d’Entrecasteaux’s ship Recherche. The expedition fetched fresh water here in 1792-93 and many of the local placenames commemorate his voyage. Huon de Kermadec commanded the expedition’s other vessel, Esperance. Now, Catamaran and Cockle Creek, within Recherche Bay, are quiet settlements. These areas are the jumping-off point for the final leg – the track to South Cape Bay.

It’s a boardwalk stroll through marsh and forest, but the rugged grandeur of the coast is riveting. The sea is nearly always breaking, the rocks are jagged, but the sand below the lookout is an inviting blond. Westward, where roads do not go, are vast stretches of wild beach and mountainous headlands along the South Coast Track.

Hobart is only a couple of hours’ drive away. Along the way there are limestone caves at Hastings near Southport, an invigorating climb to Hartz Peak with its stupendous views over World Heritage wilderness above Geeveston, vineyards at Cradoc and Ranelagh, and any number of B&Bs, tea houses and rustic pubs.

A visit to Tasmania’s deep south is a journey rather than a jaunt, but one that will reward the explorer with the essentials of great travel – surprise, delight and adventure.

**STAY**

**MONA PAVILIONS**
655 Main Road, Berriedale (Hobart).
(03) 6977 9900; mona.net.au
Striking, capacious and party perfect, the pavilions feature art works from MONA and are jammed with electronic systems and high-threadcount luxury. Private without being insulated, they embrace the River Derwent view. From $600.

**HENRY JONES ART HOTEL**
25 Hunter Street, Hobart.
(03) 6210 7700; thehenryjones.com
A converted historic warehouse, this roomy and chilled-out dedicated art hotel looks over Constitution Dock, site of the Wooden Boat Festival. Absolutely central, it is perfect for exploring downtown and Sydney–Hobart arrivals. Deluxe spa harbour-view room from $550.

**VILLA HOWDEN**
77 Howden Road, Howden.
(03) 6267 1161; villahowden.com.au
Villa Howden is a luxurious rendering of European style in a boutique hotel. Attention to detail is exacting, the service warm and attentive, rooms are styled individually and the lounges are fit for a princess – Grace. No need to leave the grounds. Suites from $395.

**43 DEGREES ECO APARTMENTS**
948 Adventure Bay Road, Adventure Bay, Bruny Island.
(03) 6293 1018; 43degrees.com.au
Built to handle the sometimes-blustery winds of Bruny, these thoughtfully designed chalets nestle into the hill right on the beach at Adventure Bay. Comfort level is high, as are green-star factors. Beachside studio spa apartment from $190.

**DRIFTWOOD COTTAGES**
51 Bay View Road, Dover.
(03) 6298 1441; driftwoodcottages.com.au
High tide is two metres from the boundary of the immaculately restored family-sized cottage Tides Reach. Sunrise pours in the front windows, as does the spectacular view. It’s the archetypal seashore cottage with all mod cons. The sister accommodation is Chapel Lane Hall, a 100-year-old Baltic pine former church, perfect for a party with its massive common room. On the south knoll of Lady Bay at Southport is The Shackeau, a dreamy two-bedroom cottage. From $280 (Hall and Shackeau) to $360 (Tides Reach).

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