



That last KNOLL

Stephen Kent understands well the subtle magic of our Tasmanian wilderness, having chased his own obsession with the island's southwest for over 30 years

Standing on the very far corner of southwest Tasmania. Photo: Stephen Kent

This is a tale of an obsession with getting to a lump of rock sticking out into the southern ocean. It is a story of a rather pathetic middle-aged male type of goal that, at first, didn't seem so hard. As the veils of difficulty of the task were revealed however, the lure became more intense, eating away at the protagonists over many years. Only completion would offer redemption. The kernels of our obsession started 30 years ago. I was hiking the muddy South Coast Track across the bottom of Tasmania and took a detour to some of the bays west of the standard walk. The area was beautiful, less muddy and less trafficked. A hankering to explore the very southwest corner of the massive Southwest National Park of Tasmania resulted.

It's not easy to grasp how isolated this area is. There is an abandoned tin mine on Bathurst Harbour called Melaleuca. This lies within a massive national park taking up almost the lower left corner of Tasmania. The park has no roads through it. The old tin mine has a very short dirt airstrip served by a putt-putt local airline intermittently. This airstrip is literally three or more days walk north to the nearest road. There are no huts on the track (none) and sometimes no tracks.

THE FOCAL POINT

Three of us (Greg, Rick and myself) hatched a plan to walk the southwest cape circuit in 2009 with a side trip to the last knoll of the southwest cape. It seemed straightforward on paper at the time. John Chapman's fabled guidebook of hiking southwest Tasmania said the side trip to the actual cape was 'a long day hike, carry some rope'. Perhaps it should take maybe 10 hours or so as day trip from the last of the southern beaches, Wilsons Bight. We had no idea how difficult this little side jaunt was.

The walk first goes south then west, passing the beautiful and rugged southern beaches to reach Wilsons Bight in two days. Our side trip to the cape seemed in the bag. We started the day trip early with one light pack containing a thin short rope and plenty of bravado. We were greeted by a stiff climb 500-metre climb to the top of Mount Karamu. Finding and keeping the intermittent and overgrown track along the ridge out to the cape was a challenge. We wished a good bushfire would blow through the scrub. It was dawning on us

that the cape and its last knoll were very well guarded. In places we crawled through on hands and knees. We regularly bush-bashed our way forward. The scratches incurred on our arms and legs from the scrub were fierce. Each further scratch on top of the others felt like putting salt in a wound. After several hours we got the top of the second last knoll that has a startling view of the last knoll. It didn't seem far away.

We negotiated several airy descents on the second last knoll towards the last knoll only to be met with the 30-metre cliff. When we saw it up close, we were petrified, almost physically sick. It was all we could do to bring ourselves to look over the edge. The wind had sprung up and it felt like one good gust would send us over the edge. We plastered ourselves against the back wall of a ledge and tried to compose ourselves. We worked up the courage to throw our rope over the edge to see what would happen. Well, the wind whips through the gap between the second and last knolls and the rope went horizontal. We couldn't even work out if it was long enough to get the bottom.



Singing ACDC will make the toughest climb that little bit more bearable

Our plan to get to the last knoll was rapidly unravelling. There was a colony of seals near the rocks at the base of the cliffs. 'Go home and show some respect to the last knoll' they seemed to be barking at us. We turned tail and trudged back through the thick scrub to Mount Karamu and then the long descent to Wilsons Bight, getting in on dusk.

The rest of the southwest cape circuit is an amazing hike. Long days, big climbs, navigational challenges, amazing beaches and campsites, more scrub. Rick and I tried to put the disappointment of the last knoll out of our minds, but Greg felt the failure

particularly strongly and it began to eat away at him. Unfinished business – we had been so close. Surely, just a bit of courage and better preparation is all it would take to surmount. The gnawing feeling strengthened over the following three years. Last knoll fever was taking hold.

The next attempt at the last knoll was a fatally flawed family hiking trip. My children and Greg's children, and to some extent our wives, had become curious about the bizarre lure of hiking in this remote corner of the world. We set off with high hopes, although the weather was drizzly.

The first two days were slow going and it became clear Wilsons Bight was going to be out of reach for our group so we set up camp at Ketchum Bay, two hours hiking from Wilsons Bight. Any thoughts of reaching the last knoll were extinguished by poor weather and some tired hikers out of their comfort zone. The trip was a success at most levels, a great family adventure, but the last knoll had stared us down again.

The next year saw another assault on the last knoll with colleagues Jon and Ross. We practiced at Mount Macedon to navigate the 30-metre cliff, learning a lot about securing ropes and using an ascender (note that the ascender does not actually take you up the rope, it just stops you from going back down it). We realised our upper body strength was suboptimal, bordering on pathetic. More boot camps, push-ups, pull-ups etc. were in order. Jon's bleating from the pain of the training regimen spurred us on.

THIRD TIME'S A CHARM?

The group made good time to Wilsons Bight in two days and the weather looked favorable the next day. We were excited. We were on our way to the last knoll by 6:30am. The stiff climb

up Mount Karamu was assisted by a group rendition of ACDC's "A long way to the top". The scrub down the spine of the cape had become even further overgrown in the intervening years. We filled up with water at a little spring three hours from the second last knoll and applied sun-screen up as the sun rose higher in the sky on the warm still day. At 1pm, after over six hours walking, we made it to the 30-metre cliff. A cheer went up when we realised our rope would actually make it to the knife-edge like landing below. Greg orchestrated tying off of the ropes, cross-examined by Jon. Just after 2pm we abseiled down successfully.

Unfortunately, it quickly became apparent there was no easy scramble up to the top of the last knoll. There was an immediate problem of a 10-metre vertical wall in front of us. Steve scouted the eroded west side and almost fell down the 100-metre cliff. The east side wasn't much better, but it was possible to pick one's way around the scrub on the east side to eventually ascend to the top of the 10-metre cliff. Surely it would be an easy scramble beyond that obstacle. No, there was a five-metre cliff down the other side. We later realised that ascending the last knoll was

going to be like going up the serrations of a bread knife – all the time on the thin edge of a ridge with steep cliffs either side. We now faced the urgent issue of time. It was after 3pm and the 2:30pm “turn-around time” was well gone. We knew we had at least five-and-a-half hours or more of hiking to get back to our campsite before dark. We had barely made 50 metres of the 400 metres or so distance to the top of the last knoll. We made the only decision open to us – turn back. We tried to console ourselves by saying we were “on” the last knoll, but we could hardly

say we had conquered it. Indeed, it felt like the last knoll had conquered us. The familiar gnawing feeling was coming back. They say more people die on Everest coming down than going up and we realised we had a big task ahead of us getting back to camp. We'd already been on the track for nine hours. We were tired, scratched up, getting a lot of sun, hungry and fairly thirsty. We all eventually ascended the 30-metre cliff and flopped up onto the ledge exhausted. We proceeded to bash our way through the disintegrating forests of the cape.

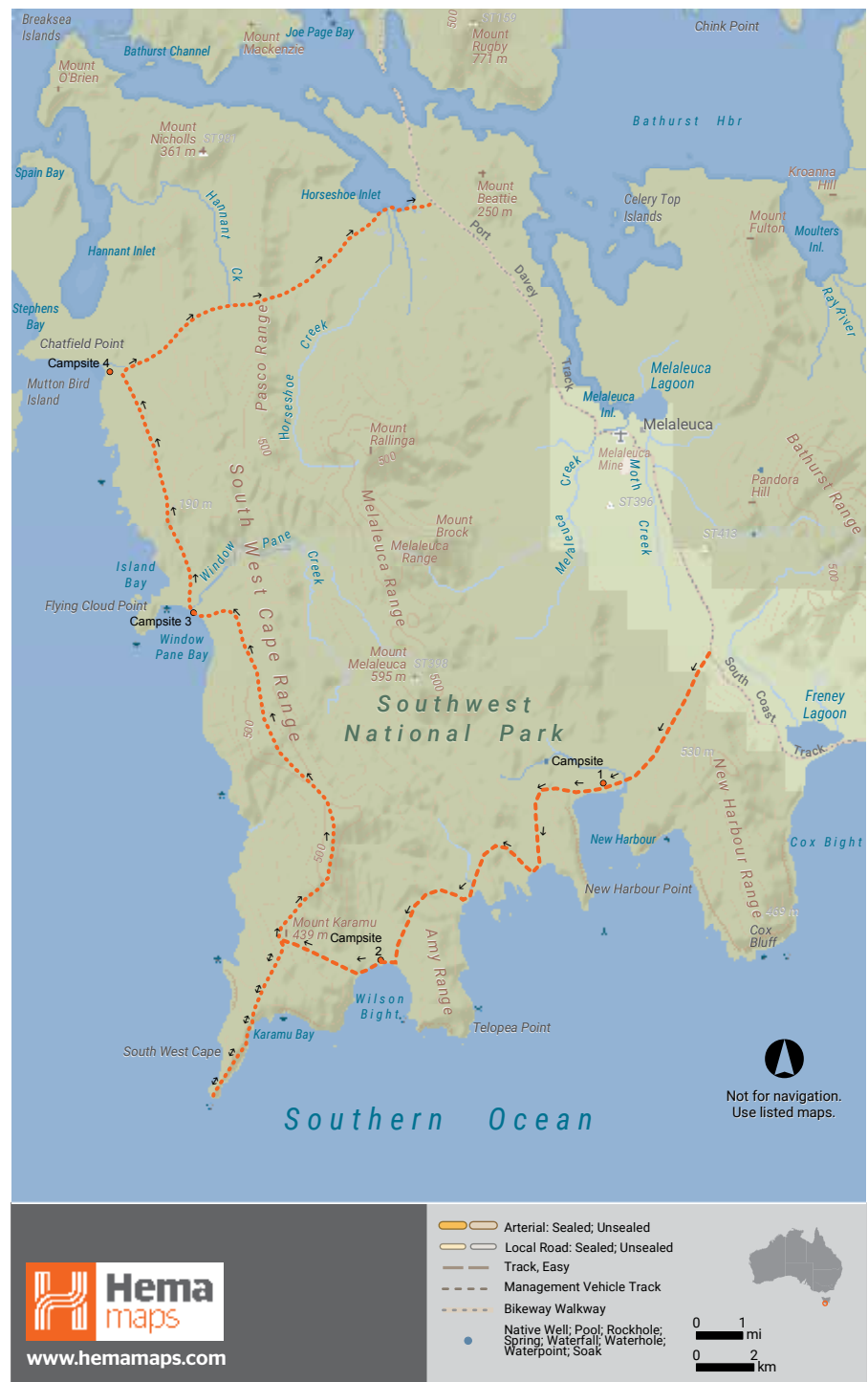
The South West Cape doesn't seem like such a challenge from a distance...



Our immediate problem was finding water. We found a briny gulch 30 minutes out of our way. We trudged on to the long ascent to Mount Karamu before the turn off to Wilsons Bight and our campsite. We were thirsty and sunburnt – Jon a particularly red hue. We were sweating profusely. As the sun lowered, the breeze picked up and the evening cooled rapidly, a bad combination with our sweat-soaked clothing. As we approached Mount Karamu, Jon took a swig of water and was going to put the water bottle back in the pack we had, except he couldn't manipulate the zipper

of the pack successfully after several attempts. Actually, he couldn't converse sensibly either and wasn't in much control of his other faculties. He was confused, disorientated – not well at all. Jon had fallen prey to a bad combination of sunstroke, dehydration, and exhaustion. By this time it was 7pm, still two hours of hiking to reach the campsite. We found a spot to sit him down behind a rock out of the breeze and put some more clothes on him. We also gave him our last bits of food and water. Ominously, he said he just wanted to lie down and sleep for a while.

We were worried he would never wake up. Slowly he perked up with the rest, food, water and warmth enough to keep upright and walking. The trip down Mount Karamu was slow and we got into camp just on 9pm. Jon rolled into his tent traumatised but intact. There were plenty of adventures on the rest of the circuit. We put on a brave face about the overall success of the trip. We fooled no one, especially that hollow feeling deep inside. We reflected soberly on our failed attempts at the last knoll. It was becoming like an Indiana Jones





A Tasmanian sunset can momentarily alleviate any pain

adventure, with a series of significant obstacles:

1. The potential for nasty weather
2. The intense scrub
3. The 30-metre cliff between the second and last knolls
4. The ascent of the knoll itself with its further series of smaller cliffs
5. Water on the trip – unreliable for the last three or four hours from Mount Karamu to the last knoll
6. Time

Time was a big factor protecting the last knoll. It's really too long a day trip from Wilsons Bight. We'd twice hiked for more than 14 hours and were still two hours short of time. Not enough hours of daylight. There are, however, no decent campsites and minimal water along the ridge to the cape. We would have to find some fine weather and brave an exposed campsite closer to the last knoll.

THE FOURTH ATTEMPT

Next year Greg and I lay siege again to the last knoll, even more determined. We got into the Melaleuca airstrip at around 11am. Some settled weather was coming so we walked for 9 hours to Wilsons Bight in one day. A quick meal and we collapsed into the tent, needing to be up at 5am.

The weather in the morning showed minimal wind and high cloud. Our fourth attempt at the last knoll was on. We ascended Mount Karamu with full packs, getting to the top by 8am. We picked out an exposed campsite near the top and set up our tent. If the wind

started to blow we were in deep trouble.

We set off down the ridge towards the last knoll. No matter how many times you walk this "track" the scrub was still brutal. We made reasonable time and despite the obligatory loss of the track in a couple of spots and got to the 30-metre cliff by 1pm. We were quicker setting up the ropes this time, without Jon's wise counsel.

We managed a spot of lunch, before abseiling down the 30-metre cliff safely. We scrambled around to the first serration of the last knoll to the spot we got to a year earlier. We eventually found a route around this obstacle by descending further on the east side of the ridge. There were four or five similar serrations up the last knoll. Many involved airy passes around cliffs and scrambling around very eroded scrub. Potential handholds readily gave way. Even the ground felt like it could give way, sending you tumbling hundreds of metres into the surf below.

After about an hour we neared the top. We could taste it. Five long years and multiple previous failed attempts blurred away. To be honest, we became a little emotional – we had made it. There was much high-fiving and sheer exultation at the top of the last knoll. The view was incredible, basically 360 degrees of ocean looking back to the wilds of southwest Tasmania, interrupted by the jagged ridge of the southwest cape. Greg celebrated so fervently he nearly fell off the last knoll. We placed a note in a bottle wedged into a small cairn at the top. It read: "We made it, a triumph of stupidity over adversity." Reality slowly set in though. It was past

3pm again and we now faced the same time problem as on our previous attempt. We scurried down the last knoll carefully. There was plenty of contact with sandpaper-like eroded granite as we slid our way down towards the 30-metre cliff. That's when we found one further obstacle guarding the last knoll: a large, black tiger snake curled up right on the line of the ridge. We probably nearly stepped on it on the way up and Greg nearly put his hand on it on the way down. We pondered the chances of surviving a snakebite on the last knoll (negligible).

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Back up the cliff and the long trek to Mount Karamu. Despite hiking this route multiple times by now, we got horribly lost again and bashed our way through two-to-three-metre-high scrub for an hour before stumbling across the "track". We were sweating profusely (luckily we were carrying more water this time). The shadows got longer and sunset was fast approaching. We became a little worried about actually finding our makeshift tent-site in the dark.

Just on dusk at 9pm we found the tent, which totals a solid 15 hours of hiking for the day. We slept well, our minds cleared of this goal for the first time in many years. For the rest of the southwest cape circuit we were on a high from the achievement. The relief of not having to go back and try again was palpable for the rest of the trip and beyond. Absolution was ours; the obsession was over. Now we'll just have to start working on the next one. W

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