

A ROCKY ROAD

When it comes to towering mountain views, Tasmanians are spoiled for choice. YD Bar-Ness takes a look at some spectacular landscapes that are less well-known, but still within driving distance and a short, easy walk away.

In Australia's most rugged state, we are spoiled for spectacular mountain views from our towns. At the waterfront of Hobart, Mt Wellington/*kunanyi* dominates overhead, and on the hills of Launceston, the massive plateau of Ben Lomond looms on the horizon. But these easily approachable ranges, made of dark, heavy, volcanic dolerite, are not the only types of mountain on the island. The famous photographs of shining white peaks: Frenchman's Cap, the Arthur Range, and Federation Peak – these are remote quartzite mountains with an entirely different character. They're harder to reach and defended by boggy trails and storm-filled clouds. If you want to have a look up close at the quartzite, you're going to need to choose your route carefully.

What is quartzite?

The quintessential landscape of the south-west of Tasmania is surreal and beautiful – the ice-carved white mountains shine with crystals over the sodden moorlands of buttongrass. The white quartzite began more than a billion years ago as sand grains washed off of long-eroded mountains. These accumulated grains have been tortured and twisted by titanic forces, baked by geological pressure, and then exposed to again to the wind and rains.

Why is it hidden out of reach?

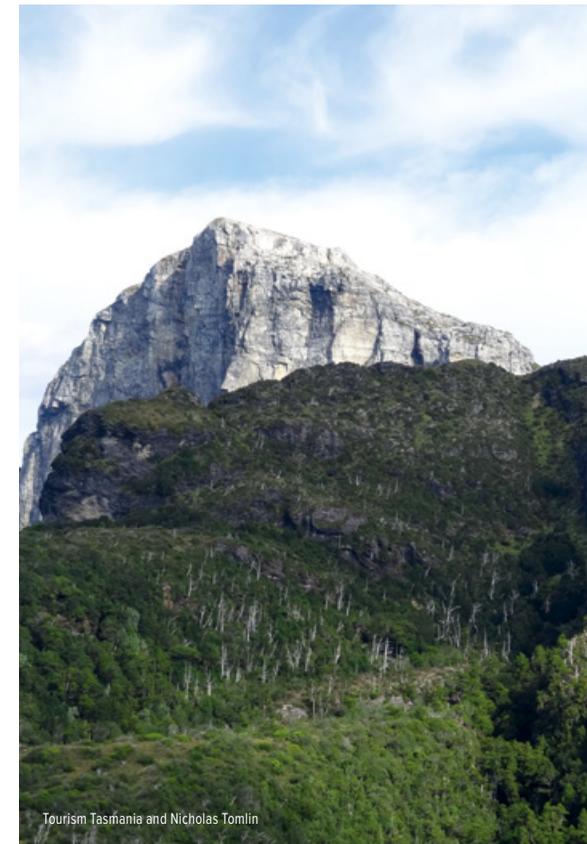
In very recent geological times, glaciers have carved spires and pinnacles, and deposited material to valleys below. The valleys are less fertile and more marshy than the volcanic rocks of south-eastern Tasmania, and therefore instead of towering eucalyptus trees grow buttongrass moorlands. Agriculture and animal husbandry are a tremendous challenge in these storm-drenched landscapes, and so only mining and hydroelectric road networks have developed.

Where can I see it without hiking on steep muddy trails?

Fortunately for the mountain-scenery enthusiast, there are a few locations where you can get a good look and feel of the quartzite landscape.



YD Bar-Ness



Tourism Tasmania and Nicholas Tomlin

The Sentinel Ranges (left) in the south and Frenchman's Cap (right) in the west are just some of the remarkable quartzite peaks Tasmania has to offer.

North-west: If you are on the north-west coast of the state, there is a remarkable range of sloping quartzite cliffs at Rocky Cape National Park. While the vegetation is much more familiar than that of the south-west, the shining white cliffs have the same starkness of form as the inland mountains. These are the oldest exposed rocks known in Tasmania – at least 1.3 billion years old! You can approach it by motor vehicle from either side, and very short beachside trails touch the base of the cliffs.

South: From southern Tasmania, travel up the Derwent Valley and past Maydena – you will soon reach a mountain pass where the rainforests give way to an open vista of buttongrass. Continue driving towards Strathgordon, a hydroelectric workers' village now transformed into a base for anglers and bushwalkers.

As you travel onto the dry land separating the giant artificial Lakes Pedder and Gordon, you will turn a corner and be presented with a jaw-dropping vista: the Sentinels Range. As the road descends toward the range, the white slabs tower overhead. A small picnic shelter at the base of the range can provide protection from any storms that come past, and also marks the beginning of the summit trail.

If you are looking for a marvellous wilderness day trip, this is an excellent option: cross a bubbling creek, continue on the muddy trails, enter a steep gorge between quartzite towers, and attain the summit ridge. You'll be treated with views over the flat waters to either side. Just a few kilometres away, lost beneath the still waters of New Lake Pedder impoundment to the south, are the famous quartzite sand beaches of the original (and much smaller) Lake Pedder. Here, you are in the very heart of quartzite country, in the heart of south-west Tasmania.



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