

Stewart Island (Rakiura)

The southernmost part of New Zealand is also its third largest island and newest national park. In 2002, most of Stewart Island became Rakiura National Park, but even with such status the island will probably remain remote, with vast tracts of wilderness and tracks known for having the most unpredictable weather, the most bird life and, unquestionably, the most mud.

The real beauty of the 1650-sq-km island is its 755km coastline, featuring long beaches, impressive sand dunes and crystal-clear bays fringed by lush rainforest. The interior is mostly bush, broken up by steep gullies and ridges, several of which emerge above the bush-line. The highest point on Stewart Island – Mt Anglem/Hananui – is only 980m, but the walking here can be almost as rugged as in mountainous areas elsewhere in the country.

The island has more than 280km of tracks, and most of its tramping isn't easy. To walk beyond the fully planked and benched Rakiura Track, trampers should be experienced and well equipped. You'll encounter mud just steps from Port William Hut and have to deal with it much of the way, rain or shine. It's impossible to avoid on the Northwest Circuit and most trampers just slosh through, ending each evening with a communal washing of boots, socks and feet in the huts' outside sinks. The mud varies from ankle-deep to knee-deep, and is even deeper at some ill-famed spots – such as the track to Mt Anglem/Hananui.

Gaiters are good to have, but if you're planning an extensive trip you just have to accept that socks will be wet, trousers will be mud-splattered and the colour of your boots will never be the same again.

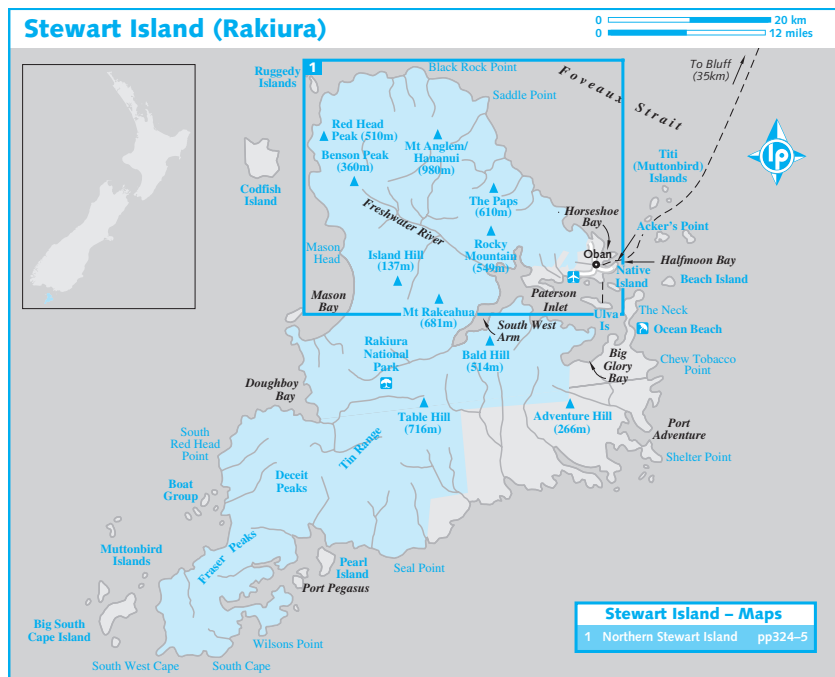
HIGHLIGHTS

- Walking through the **Anchorstone/Te Puka** (p322), a giant chain-link sculpture, to begin the Rakiura Track
- Inspecting the old steam haulers and tramway of Stewart Island's last mill at **Maori Beach** (p322)
- Looking for yellow-eyed penguins at **Long Harry Hut** (p328)
- Trudging up the soft slopes of Big Sandhill for views of **Mason Bay** (p330)

■ TELEPHONE CODE: 03

■ www.stewartisland.co.nz

■ www.visitinvercargillnz.com



HISTORY

Rakiura, the Maori name for Stewart Island, means 'land of the glowing sky', referring perhaps to the aurora australis, which is often seen in this southern sky, or maybe to the spectacular blood-red sunrises and sunsets. Excavations in the area provide evidence that, as early as the 13th century, tribes of Polynesian origin migrated to the island to hunt moa. However, Maori settlements were thin and scattered, because the people were unable to grow *kumara* (sweet potato), the staple food of settlements to the north. They did make annual migrations to the outer islands to seek muttonbird (*titi*), a favourite food, and to the main island to search for eel, shellfish and certain birds.

The first European to sight the island was Captain Cook in 1770, but he left confused about whether it was part of the South Island. He finally decided it was part of the mainland, naming it Cape South. By the early 1800s, sealers were staying for months at a time to collect skins. There is evidence that an American sealer, OF Smith, discovered Foveaux Strait in 1804, because it was

known briefly as Smith's Strait. The island itself derived its European name from William Stewart, the first officer of the English sealer *Pegasus*. Stewart charted large sections of the coast during a sealing trip in 1809, and drafted the first detailed map of the island.

Sealing ended by the late 1820s, to be replaced temporarily by whaling, but the small whaling bases on the island were never profitable. Neither was timber; although the island was almost completely covered in bush, most of it was not millable and little was profitably accessible.

In 1886, gold was discovered at Port William in the wake of the great Otago and west-coast gold rushes. A small-scale rush resulted and further strikes were made at a few beaches on the north and west coasts. The influx of miners was large enough to warrant building a hotel and a post office.

The only enterprise that has endured is fishing. Initially those fishing were few in number, but when a steamer service from Bluff began in 1885 the industry expanded, resulting in the construction of

cleaning sheds on Ruapuke Island and a refrigerating plant in the North Arm of Port Pegasus.

Today, tourism and, to a much lesser extent, fishing for crayfish and abalone (*paua*), are the occupations of most of Oban's 390 residents. In 2002, most of Stewart Island became what DOC officials called the 'world's first national park in the new millennium'. The new Rakiura National Park covers 1500 sq km, making it New Zealand's fourth-largest – and first island – national park.

ENVIRONMENT

For putting up with mud, hilly terrain and indecisive weather, trampers are amply rewarded, beginning with the bush that is unique to the island. Beech, the tree that dominates the rest of New Zealand, is absent from Stewart Island. The predominant lowland bush is podocarp forest, with exceptionally tall rimu, miro, totara and kamahi forming the canopy. Because of mild winters, frequent rainfall and porous soil, most of the island is a lush forest held together by vines and carpeted in ferns and moss. It is so thick and green that the bush appears to be choking the track.

The bird life on the island is also special. The ecological disasters (rats and cats) that have greatly affected the mainland have not had as much impact here, so Stewart Island has one of the largest and most diverse bird populations of any area in New Zealand. If you're intent on spotting a kiwi in the wild, you'll have an opportunity while tramping here. There are more kiwis on Stewart Island than there are people, and they are less nocturnal than their cousins to the north. The best areas to spot them are around Mason Bay and Freshwater Landing.

Bush birds – such as bellbirds, tuis, New Zealand pigeons (*kereru*) and fantails – are often seen along the tracks, and you may also see parakeets and forest parrots (*kaka*), which are rare on the mainland. The island is home to several species of penguin too (yellow-eyed, Fiordland crested and little blue) and colonies are often spotted near Long Harry Bay. Ulva Island (see the boxed text on below), in Paterson Inlet, is especially rich with birdlife.

CLIMATE

The weather on Stewart Island wreaks havoc with trampers. The island's overall climate is surprisingly mild, considering the

A ZOO WITHOUT BARS

A spare day in Oban shouldn't be wasted in the pub, as inviting as that sounds after a long tramp on Stewart Island. Just offshore, a quick water-taxi ride from the Golden Bay Wharf, is Ulva Island, an interesting place to spend an afternoon.

Due to its central location in Paterson Inlet, this 267-hectare island was the site of Stewart Island's first post office in 1872, serving the sawmilling, boat-building and fishing camps that dotted the coastline. Whenever the mail boat arrived from across Foveaux Strait, which was infrequent at best, the postmaster would raise a white flag. Families and workers would don their best attire and boat over to Ulva Island to pick up their mail. It was the social event of the week.

Ulva is no longer the social centre of Stewart Island, but one of its wildest corners. As the result of an extensive eradication program, the island was declared rat-free in 1997, and three years later was chosen as the site to release endangered South Island saddlebacks.

Today, Ulva is a relatively unmodified island sanctuary, free of introduced animal pests but with full public access as a scenic reserve. Many call it a 'zoo without bars', due to its rich bird life and lush forest of rimu, southern rata, kamahi and ferns. From its trail system you have the opportunity to see a variety of native birds, including wekas, saddlebacks, kakas, kakariki, kererus, tuis and possibly even brown kiwis, of which there are 30 to 40 living on the island. Fur seals and even elephant seals have been known to haul out on the island's sandy beaches.

Most water taxis will run visitors over to the island, dropping them off at Post Office Cove (return \$20 to \$25). Walking out to West End Beach, where wekas will greet you, and then continuing onto Boulder Beach and Sydney Cove is an easy two- to three-hour tramp, even with plenty of stops along the way to enjoy the tomtits, fantails and Stewart Island robins that always seem to be fluttering around you.

latitude, with pleasant temperatures most of the year – cool in summer and rarely cold in winter. The only place where snow occasionally falls is on the summit of Mt Anglem/Hananui.

Annual rainfall at Halfmoon Bay is only 1600mm, but it occurs over 250 days of the year. As one member of the DOC staff puts it, 'you get a little rain on a lot of days'. At higher altitudes and along the south and west coasts, rainfall averages 5000mm a year, which means a lot of rain on a lot of days. It's important to remember that the daily weather (or, more accurately, the hourly weather) changes frequently – it's not uncommon to experience two or three showers and clear blue skies between one hut and the next.

INFORMATION When to Tramp

It is possible to tramp year-round on Stewart Island, though during winter daylight is very short.

Maps & Books

A good map for planning and for use on the trails is the 1:150,000 Parkmap 336-10 (*Stewart Island*).

Stewart Island: A Rakiura Ramble, by Neville Peat, is a thin book that provides an overview of the island, along with sections on its rare and special flora and fauna. DOC publishes several handy pamphlets about tramps on the island, including *Day Walks – Stewart Island, Rakiura Track* and *North-West Circuit & Southern Circuit Tracks*.

Information Sources

Websites that are useful in planning a trip to Stewart Island include the **Stewart Island Promotion Association** (www.stewartisland.co.nz) and **Venture Southland Tourism** (<http://visit.southlandnz.com>).

GATEWAYS Invercargill

☎ 03 / pop 49,300

Any trip to Stewart Island inevitably includes a stopover in Invercargill, the southernmost city in NZ. Although not as tourism-oriented as many other South Island towns, Invercargill can meet your needs for accommodation, restaurants,

transport and a cold beer at the end of a tramp. This is where you'll want to stock up on supplies before heading to Stewart Island.

INFORMATION

DOC Southland Conservancy (☎ 214 4589; invercargill@doc.govt.nz; 7th fl, State Insurance Bldg, 33 Don St) Sells hut tickets, maps and brochures for Stewart Island and DOC areas at the tip of the South Island.
Invercargill visitor information centre (☎ 214 6243; www.visitinvercargillnz.com; Victoria Ave, Queens Park; ☎ 8am-7pm Dec-Apr, to 8pm May-Nov; ☒) In the same building as the Southland Museum & Art Gallery, this centre offers loads of friendly advice and a pleasant coffee shop.

SUPPLIES & EQUIPMENT

Find tramping equipment and stove fuel at **Southern Adventure** (☎ 218 3239; 31 Tay St; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Thu, to 8pm Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) and food supplies at **Pak'nSave** (☎ 214 4846; 95 Tay St).

SLEEPING & EATING

Invercargill Caravan Park (☎ 218 8787; A&P Showgrounds, 20 Victoria Ave; sites for 2 \$18, cabins \$28) is only 1km from the town centre. Car storage is also available (\$5 per day).

Tuatara Backpackers Lodge (☎ 0800-488 2827, 214 0945; tuatara@xtra.co.nz; 30-32 Dee St; dm/d \$21/50; ☒) is a bright and clean facility with a variety of rooms, free bikes and storage, and a lively café in the heart of the city.

Southern Comfort Backpackers (☎ 218 3838; couppers@xtra.co.nz; 30 Thomson St; dm/d \$23/52) is a consistently excellent hostel, set in a vintage village and offering free luggage storage while you're off tramping on Stewart Island.

Zookeepers Café (☎ 218 3373; 50 Tay St; ☎ 10am-11pm) is the centre of hipness in Invercargill, with wild art on the walls, a bicycle dangling from the ceiling and New Age music in the air. An interesting wine list and loads of pasta on the menu round out the place.

Thai Saigon (☎ 218 3048; 122 Dee St; ☎ 5-9.30pm) offers creative cuisine from Vietnam and Thailand. Reawaken your taste buds after a week of trail food with its hottest dish: Jungle Curry.

The **Fat Indian Curryhouse** (☎ 218 9933; Piccadilly Lane, 38 Dee St; ☎ 4.30-10pm) is tucked away in an alley, but you can smell the curry all the way to Dee St. It has great vegetarian selections.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air New Zealand (☎ 0800-737 000, 215 0000; www.airnz.co.nz) has daily flights to and from Christchurch (from \$130), with connections to most other cities in New Zealand.

The visitor information centre can book passage for any bus company that services the city. **InterCity** (☎ 471 7143; www.intercitycoach.co.nz) buses depart from the railway station on Leven St and go to Christchurch (\$66, 10 hours), Te Anau (\$45, three hours) and Queenstown (\$50, 2½ hours). **Atomic Shuttles** (☎ 322 8883; www.atomictravel.co.nz) has a bus to Dunedin (\$30, 3½ hours) and Queenstown (\$35, 2½ hours). **Scenic Shuttle** (☎ 0800-277 483, 249 7654; scenicshuttle@xtra.co.nz) provides transport between Invercargill and Te Anau (\$40, 2½ hours).

Oban

☎ 03 / pop 420

Most of Stewart Island's small population lives in the settlement of Oban on Halfmoon Bay. Most trampers arrive here from the mainland, and often spend a night in town before heading into the bush.

INFORMATION

DOC Stewart Island Visitor Centre (☎ 219 0002; stewartisland@doc.govt.nz; Main Rd; ☎ 8am-8.30pm) has useful information on the island, good displays on flora and fauna, and you can store gear here while you're tramping (\$2.50 for a small locker, \$5 for a large one).

SUPPLIES & EQUIPMENT

Ship to Shore (☎ 219 1069; Elgin Tce; ☎ 7.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6.30pm Sat & Sun) has a good selection of camper needs, including white spirits and freeze-dried meals, but as you might expect, prices are higher on this side of Foveaux Strait. There's a limited selection of outdoor equipment at **Stewart Island Adventure Centre** (☎ 219 1439; Elgin Tce; ☎ 9.30am-6pm).

SLEEPING & EATING

Stewart Island Backpackers (☎ 219 1114; cnr Dundee & Ayr Sts; camp sites for 2 \$16, dm/d \$20/44; ☒) is the largest hostel on the island, with a central location, a comfortable common area, clean rooms and a well-equipped kitchen.

The **View** (☎ 219 1328; Nichol Rd; dm/d \$25/65) occupies three rooms in a home – one set up as a dorm – and has a great view of the harbour.

South Sea Hotel (☎ 219 1059; www.stewart-island.co.nz; cnr Argyle St & Elgin Tce; s \$60-90, d \$80-100) is perfect for the end of a long tramp around the island, with comfortable rooms and quick access to a bar and restaurant.

Church Hill Café Bar (☎ 219 1323; 36 Kamahi Rd; ☎ 10.30am-10pm) is a stylish restaurant with fresh seafood, stone-grilled meats and a nice view of Halfmoon Bay from an outdoor deck.

Kai Kart (☎ 219 1225; Ayr St; ☎ 11am-2pm & 5-9pm) is a caravan takeaway that not only has the best fish and chips on Stewart Island, but many think the best throughout the South Island.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Stewart Island Flights (☎ 218 9129; www.stewartislandflights.com) flies from Invercargill to Stewart Island (adult/child \$90/65, return \$155/85, 20 minutes, three daily). It also has a special stand-by rate (one-way/return \$55/95), for which you must have a YHA or BBH hostel card and be at the airport 30 minutes before departure.

In Invercargill, the only way to reach the airport is by taxi (\$8 to \$10). On Stewart Island, Stewart Island Flights runs a mini-bus between the airstrip and Oban, which is included in the airfare. The baggage allowance is only 15kg per person – not much if you're carrying tramping gear – and if you exceed that weight the excess stuff may have to come on a later flight.

Stewart Island Experience (☎ 0800-000 511, 212 7660; www.stewartislandexperience.co.nz) operates the ferry from Bluff to Stewart Island (adult/child \$47/23.50, one hour). There are three departures daily, with additional runs during the summer. Foveaux Strait is often stormy, so carry some seasickness pills. If waves make your knees wobble, seriously consider flying.

Stewart Island Experience runs a bus to Bluff that leaves the visitor information centre one hour before each ferry departs (adult/child \$14/7). It will also pick up from many accommodation places in Invercargill. The company also works with **Tracknet** (☎ 0800-483 262, 249 7777; www.greatwalksnz.com), meeting its 7.30am bus from Queenstown and its 7.45am bus from Te Anau for a transfer to the 9.30am ferry. The fare from either town to Bluff is \$50 per adult and \$35 per child.

RAKIURA TRACK

Duration	3 days
Distance	36km
Track Standard	Great Walk
Difficulty	moderate
Start/Finish	Oban (p321)
Transport	boat, plane

Summary Connecting the beginning and the end of the Northwest Circuit, this Great Walk provides a shorter and easier loop, and features the sheltered shores of Paterson Inlet and beautiful beaches on the way to Port William.

Built in 1986, the Rakiura Track lacks the powerful scenery – alpine crossings, palm-lined beaches, thermal hot springs etc – that are the trademarks of many other Great Walks, but the track is one of only two Great Walks that doesn't require advance bookings, and it's the most affordable.

Rakiura Track is actually only 29km long, but the entire circuit – when you include the roads in and out of Oban – is a 36km tramp. Because it provides the only short loop in Rakiura National Park (all the others require seven to 10 days), the track is the most popular Stewart Island tramp, with around 2500 people walking it annually. Also, because it is a Great Walk, it has been planked and benched to eliminate most of the mud for which the island is famous.

This tramp is described here as crossing from Port William to North Arm, the easiest direction to walk it. Those tramping from North Arm to Port William should be mentally prepared for the uphill climb first thing in the morning.

PLANNING

What to Bring

The huts have wood stoves for heat, but no gas rings for cooking. Pack a stove and some form of lighting.

Maps

The Rakiura Track is covered on the 1:95,000 Parkmap 336-10 (*Stewart Island/Rakiura*). For greater detail there is the 1:50,000 Topomap 260-D48/E48 (*Half-moon Bay*), which is now a single map.

Huts

You will need a date-stamped Great Walks pass for this trip, available from the **DOC Stewart Island Visitor Centre** (☎ 219 0002; stewartisland@doc.govt.nz; Main Rd, Oban). There are **huts** (adult/child \$10/5) at Port William and North Arm and **camp sites** (adult/child \$2.50/1.25) at Port William, Maori Beach and Sawdust Bay.

Backcountry hut tickets and annual hut passes cannot be used on the Rakiura Track. Space in the huts is claimed on a first-come-first-served basis, and there is a two-night limit in each hut.

THE TRAMP

Map pp324–5

Day 1: Oban to Port William

4–5 hours, 12km

Begin at the Ship to Shore store, and walk 5km north along Horseshoe Bay Rd and Lee Bay Rd to Lee Bay, where the track officially begins. To eliminate the walk to Lee Bay you can organise a shuttle-bus ride (up to four people \$24) with **Stewart Island Experience** (☎ 219 0056).

At beautiful Lee Bay, walk through the **Anchorstone/Te Puka**. This giant chain-link sculpture symbolises what the Maori believe was a spiritual connection between Stewart Island/Rakiura (the anchor) and Bluff/Motu Pohue (the stern post of the South Island, which is the canoe).

The track enters the bush and crosses a bridge over Little River to skirt the tidal area on the edge of the forest. You then follow the coast around Peters Point to Maori Beach. Within 2km the track descends onto the southern end of **Maori Beach**, where you immediately come to a creek that can easily be waded at low tide. If the tide is in, stay on the track to quickly reach a footbridge inland. North of the creek is a camp site, with a toilet and shelter, in a grassy clearing near the beach. For most trampers, however, this is far too early to quit for the day.

A sawmill began operations at Maori Beach in 1913, and at one time a large wharf, a second sawmill and a network of tramways were constructed to extract the rimu. By 1920 there were enough families living here to warrant opening a school. The onset of the Depression led to the closure of Stewart Island's last mill in 1931, but a rusting **steam boiler** from that logging era can still be seen by following a short track near the footbridge.

Continue north along the smooth sand of Maori Beach to reach a large swing bridge at the far end, one hour from Little River. From the swing bridge the track heads inland to skirt a headland, and within 1km arrives at a signposted junction to North Arm Hut. Continue north on the track to Port William, quickly descending the headland and dropping down to the camp site at **Magnetic Beach**. Port William Hut is just a few minutes walk beyond the camp site.

Port William Hut, at the beach's northern end, is one of the largest huts on the island with 20 bunks. In 1876, the government had grand plans for a settlement here, offering 50 families free land to develop the timber resources and offshore fisheries. The settlement was a dismal failure as the utopia the government had hoped to foster was plagued by isolation and loneliness. All that remains of the settlement are the large gum trees next to the hut.

Occasionally a fishing boat will dock at the jetty and the crew will clean their catch of blue cod. If that happens, you should be able to barter for a few fillets, which makes for an unexpected and delicious dinner.

Day 2: Port William to North Arm Hut

6 hours, 12km

Backtrack almost 2km (45 minutes) to the headland just south of Magnetic Beach. Here the Rakiura Track departs west (right fork) and heads inland. You climb a hill and then descend to a swing bridge over a branch of the unnamed stream that empties onto Maori Beach. The track skirts the valley above the stream's true left (north) side for more than 1km, then descends to a second bridge and crosses to the true right (south) side.

The walk becomes tedious here, as the track climbs over a number of hills as it heads south, fords another branch of the stream, then swings west. At this point it makes a 1.5km climb to the summit ridge, the high point being at 305m. The signposted **lookout tower** allows you to see Paterson Inlet and the Tin Range to the south.

From here the track descends sharply, climbs again briefly, and then continues the drop, passing the signposted junction with the track from Freshwater Landing Hut. Another sharp drop bottoms out at a path to the edge of **North Arm**. The track

becomes a stairway here, and leads you to **North Arm Hut**, reached one to 1½ hours from the lookout.

This 24-bunk hut is surrounded by bush, with only a small slice of the North Arm visible from its deck, but a trail and stairway lead down to the rocky shoreline where there are better views, particularly at sunset.

Day 3: North Arm Hut to Oban

4–5 hours, 12km

The first 1km of track from North Arm Hut is almost totally across boardwalk, setting the tone for the first half of the day: lots of steps. The track heads south then southeast, following the coast above North Arm. You get a few glimpses of the water through the trees but have to descend to **Sawdust Bay** (one to 1½ hours from the hut) before you're actually standing on the shoreline looking at the extensive mudflats of the Freshwater River delta.

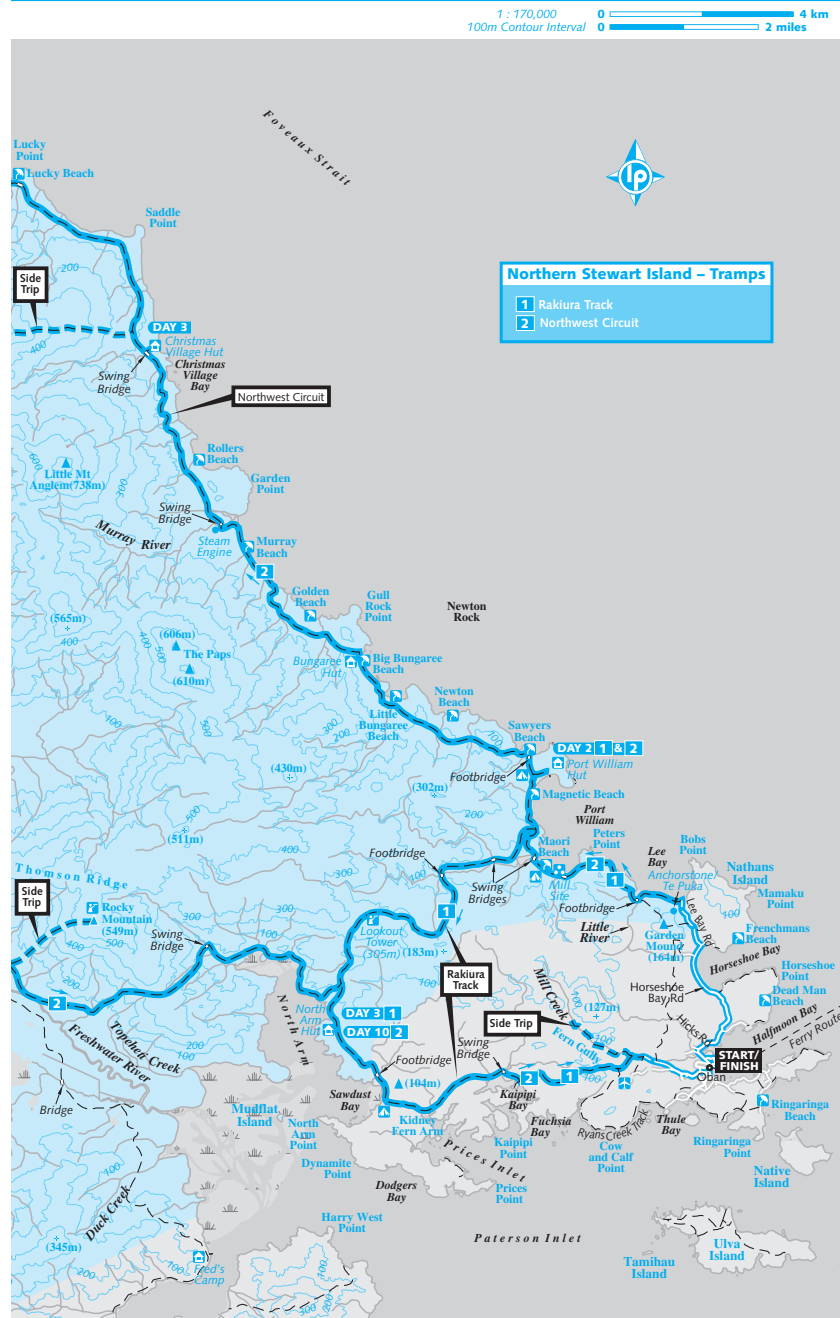
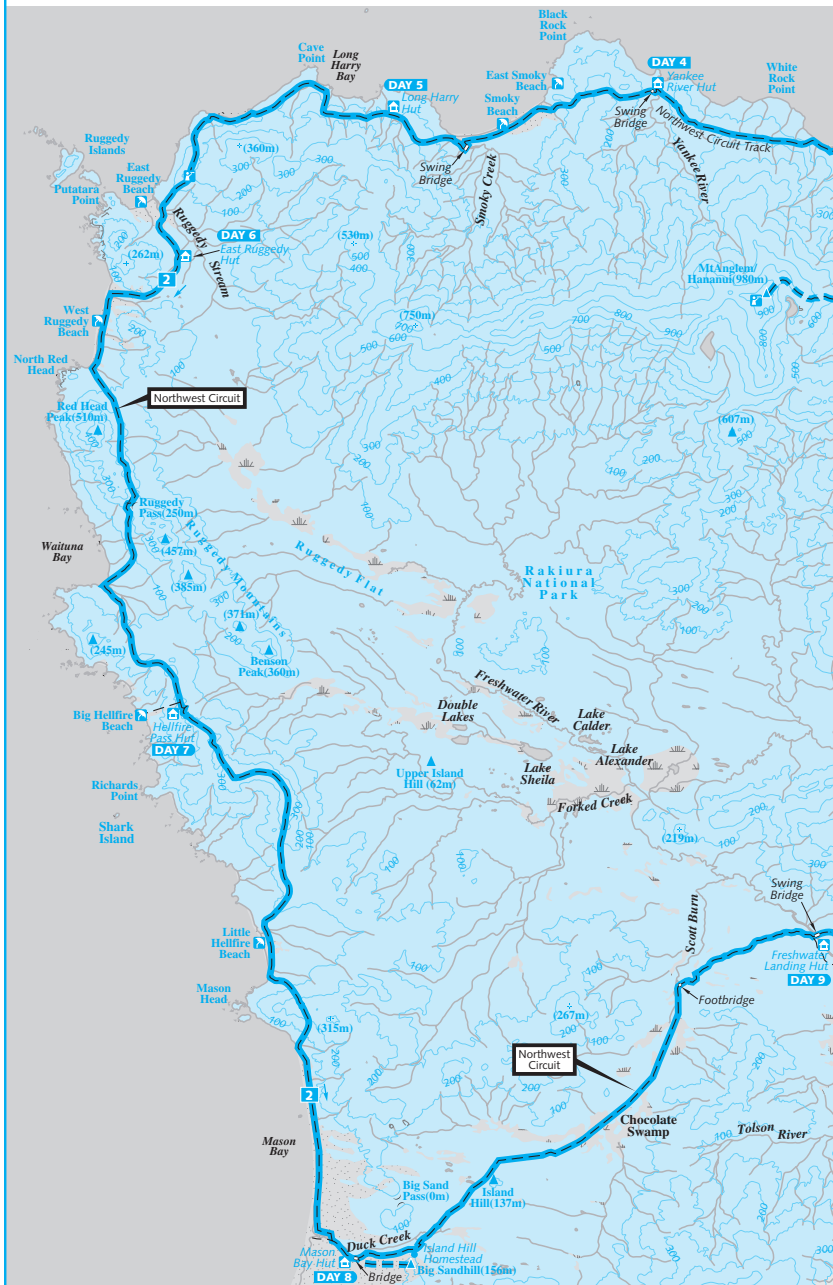
The track crosses a bridge over a creek that drains into the bay, which was a sawmill site between 1914 and 1918. Just before departing this pleasant beach, you pass Sawdust Bay camp site, with a shelter and toilet.

From the camp site the track swings in a more easterly direction, and after 1km reaches the shores of **Kidney Fern Arm**. You climb through kamahi and rimu forest over another peninsula ridge, this time descending to the tidal headwaters of **Kaipipi Bay**, and cross the sluggish river on the longest bridge of the track. After a short climb you arrive at a marked junction to the sheltered bay, which is only two minutes down a side trail. In the 1860s, two sawmills at this bay employed more than 100 people.

The track between Kaipipi Bay and Oban is the former Kaipipi Rd, which was once the best-maintained and most heavily used road on the island. The old logging road makes for quick tramping, and in 2.5km you arrive at a junction with Ryan's Creek Track. Head south on this track and it's a scenic two-hour detour into Oban.

The main track continues east as an old road, and in 10 minutes you reach a signposted junction to Fern Gully (p326). From the junction, follow the track south-east, soon arriving at a car park at the end of Main Rd. From here it's 3km (about 45

Northern Stewart Island



minutes) to Oban. You can follow Main Rd to either the South Sea Hotel or the general store, depending on what your taste buds are craving most.

SIDE TRIP: FERN GULLY

30 minutes, 2km return

Fern Gully is a popular side trip to a beautiful profusion of ferns. The gully is north-west of the junction near the end of the former Kaipipi Rd. Fern Gully Track is an old sawmill track that winds along Mill Creek, crossing the stream three times on bridges. At the end of the track a bench has been set up in a clearing.

NORTHWEST CIRCUIT

Duration	10 days
Distance	125.5km
Track Standard	tramping track
Difficulty	demanding
Start/Finish	Oban (p321)
Transport	boat, plane
Summary	This is Stewart Island's classic tramp. The famous mud and bogs make the track a challenge, but for trampers who have the time and energy to take it on, the isolated beaches, sand dunes and bird life make it worthwhile.

The Northwest Circuit is something of a legendary tramp around the northern half of Stewart Island. The trip includes the island's western beaches, where prevailing winds have formed a spectacular set of sand dunes. The beaches themselves are an impressive sight, and on stormy days can have surf breaking hundreds of metres out to sea and roaring onto the sand and rocks.

But it's the deep mud, which can be encountered anywhere on this tramp, that makes the Northwest Circuit such a legendary trail, and one for only experienced and well-equipped trampers. The most difficult sections are between East Ruggedy Hut and Mason Bay, where you are often slip-sliding through mud or up steep ridges.

There are several ways to shorten the tramp for those with a time limit, by incorporating a chartered flight or a water taxi (see right). Mason Bay is the most popular spot to fly out from, while many people arrange a water-taxi drop-off/pick-up at

Freshwater Landing, turning the impressive bay into an relatively easy two-day tramp.

PLANNING What to Bring

Pack a stove for use in the huts, and gaiters to help combat the mud on the tracks. Many trampers also pack an emergency shelter. Sandflies can be voracious at times, so insect repellent is important. You might also invest in some lightweight freeze-dried food – 10 days' grub is a lot to carry. Finally, rent a personal locator beacon (\$40) from the **DOC Stewart Island Visitor Centre** (☎ 219 0002; Main Rd, Oban); if you ever have to use it, it'll be the best investment you ever made.

Maps

The 1:95,000 Parkmap 336-10 (*Stewart Island/Rakiura*) covers the entire tramp but its scale does not contain enough detail for a route this challenging. It's better to purchase the 1:50,000 Topomap 260-D48/E48 (*Halfmoon Bay*).

Huts

Nearly all huts on Stewart Island, with the exception of the Rakiura Great Walk's huts (Port William and North Arm), are Standard (\$5). To stay at **Port William Hut** (\$10) or **North Arm Hut** (\$10) you'll need to purchase a dated Great Walks pass. There is also a **Northwest Circuit pass** (\$45), which is good for up to 10 nights in the huts, including the Great Walks huts.

GETTING TO/FROM THE TRAMP

The Northwest Circuit begins and ends in Oban, but you can easily shorten the tramp by incorporating a chartered flight to or from Mason Bay from Invercargill (\$105, minimum three people) with **Stewart Island Flights** (☎ 218 9129; www.stewartislandflights.com). This option allows you to spend seven to eight days tramping to the bay along the best portions of the track. The company also has a fly/hike ticket (\$195), with which you fly out to Mason Bay and return to Invercargill on a flight from Oban.

There are also a number of water taxis in Oban offering transport that can shorten the tramp. **Stewart Island Water Taxi** (☎ 219 1394; www.portofcall.co.nz) takes trampers to Port William Hut (\$40), North Arm Hut (\$45), Freshwater Landing (\$50), Bungaree Hut

(\$50), Christmas Village Hut (\$70) and even Yankee River Hut (\$100). Other water-taxi operators are **Seabuzz Water Taxi** (☎ 219 1282; www.seabuzz.co.nz), **Rakiura Adventures** (☎ 219 1013) and **Seaview Water Taxi** (☎ 219 1014).

THE TRAMP

Map pp324–5

Day 1: Oban to Port William

4–5 hours, 12km

Follow Day 1 (p322) of the Rakiura Track.

Day 2: Port William to Christmas Village Hut

8–9 hours, 17.5km

Return along the trail over the small hump to the main track, and head north. Climb a small saddle, cross a bridge to **Sawyers Beach** and then head inland, where the famous mud-bashing of Stewart Island begins.

After 40 minutes of slipping and sliding you are rewarded with a view of the Titi (Muttonbird) Islands to the east. It's 3km through the bush before the track begins a steady drop to **Little Bungaree Beach**.

From the beach you cross a small headland and descend to **Big Bungaree Beach**, following the golden curve of sand for 1km to the hut at the far end. **Bungaree Hut** (16 bunks) is only 6km (three hours) from Port William, but is a scenic place to spend the rest of a short tramping day.

The track resumes climbing from the hut, crossing a series of hills and gullies as it works its way inland across Gull Rock Point. After 3km the track descends sharply onto **Murray Beach** for a 2km stretch of golden sand. This is a good spot to swim and to collect shells, paua and mussels, but if you attempt to stretch out in the sun the sandflies will quickly drive you back into your clothes.

At the northern end of the beach, cross the swing bridge over Murray River to reach a side track that leads 100m upstream to a well-preserved **steam engine**, half-covered by bush. The engine is a remnant of mill operations from 1912. A number of tramways were also built, and the main track heads along one of them for 1km. The track undulates and crosses numerous streams. In 3.5km you pass a spur track to a hunters' camp, the site of the old Christmas Village Hut.

The track climbs a hill and then descends to a swing bridge over a stream. On the

northern side, near the pebbled beach just north of Christmas Village Bay, is **Christmas Village Hut** (12 bunks). It was built in 1986 and is a vast improvement on the original.

SIDE TRIP: MT ANGLEM/HANANUI

6–8 hours, 11km return, 800m ascent

Some trampers pause a day at Christmas Village Hut in order to climb Mt Anglem/Hananui (980m), the highest point on Stewart Island. The junction to the summit track is 500m beyond the hut. The track starts out muddy and pretty much stays that way most of the climb. Less than 30 minutes from the top you reach a subalpine meadow where you can view a large tarn, and from there the tramp to the peak is easier. On a clear day the views from the top are excellent – you can see the northern half of Stewart Island all the way to Mason Bay, as well as the South Island.

Day 3: Christmas Village Hut to Yankee River Hut

5–6 hours, 12km

It's a steep climb from the hut to the junction with Mt Anglem/Hananui Track (left fork). The main track heads north as it works its way through a rimu forest, and remains dry for 5km until it descends to a swing bridge and onto **Lucky Beach**. There is little sand and a lot of sandflies, so you won't be enticed to linger.

Follow the beach briefly and then pick up the track again at the western end, where it climbs steeply through dense ferns and bush. For 4km (two hours) you cover undulating terrain, then begin a long descent to the sluggish **Yankee River**. Just in time (and usually with a sigh of relief) you arrive at a signpost pointing to **Yankee River Hut**.

The 16-bunk hut is just five minutes downstream. This is the first place to begin looking for a variety of wildlife, including kiwis, penguins and seals, which often dip into the mouth of the river.

Day 4: Yankee River Hut to Long Harry Hut

5 hours, 9.5km

Backtrack to the main trail, which crosses the Yankee River on a swing bridge, rises steadily for 200m over the ridge of Black Rock Point, and then descends to **Smoky Beach**, a somewhat blackened beach (thus

its name) reached two hours from the hut. The climb is a knee-bender and the track is often muddy, but the beach and the huge sand dunes are very scenic.

The track continues along the beach for 2km to its western end, before heading inland to cross **Smoky Creek** on a swing bridge. If it's not high tide, and excessive rain hasn't flooded Smoky Creek, it's far easier to skip the bridge and simply ford the stream.

On leaving the creek, the track ascends high above the beach and begins a tough stretch. You actually see Long Harry Hut 30 minutes before you reach it, because the track then descends into and climbs out of a deep gully. Less than 3km from Smoky Beach you reach the new **Long Harry Hut** (12 bunks), high above the ocean in a much-improved location compared to the old one.

The hut was built in 2003, and is now 1½km closer to Yankee River Hut than before. This site more evenly splits the two-day stretch from Yankee River to East Ruggedy Hut. The old hut, a six-bunker from the days of the NZ Forest Service, was moved to Doughboy Bay to replace a hunters' bivvy.

Day 5: Long Harry Hut to East Ruggedy Hut

5–6 hours, 8.5km

The tough tramping continues as you climb in and out of four more bush-clad gullies and streams for 1½km, until descending near the northern end of **Long Harry Bay**. The scenic beach along the bay is perhaps the best spot on the tramp to view a penguin colony. Fiordland crested and yellow-eyed penguins can be seen together here, something not possible outside Stewart Island. The offshore fishing for blue cod is also excellent, if you scramble onto a rocky point to get away from the kelp beds.

From Long Harry Bay, the track follows a terrace for a short distance, then climbs along Cave Point Ridge. There are good views along the ridge before the track descends to the broken coast, reached one hour from the bay. Follow the coast for 30 minutes, then enter the low scrub at a signpost. The track makes a steep 200m climb over a ridge, topping out at a spot with an

excellent view of East Ruggedy Beach and its offshore islands.

Drop down to Ruggedy Stream, with scenic **East Ruggedy Beach** beyond it. The track moves inland from the beach, and is marked by poles through the sand dunes and scrub. About 1km (15 minutes) from the beach you reach **East Ruggedy Hut** (12 bunks).

A sign outside East Ruggedy Hut calls it 'the Ritz' and, as far as most trampers are concerned, it is. Bunks are separated into two rooms, while its large veranda is a good place to soak up the afternoon sun. Being only 40 minutes from scenic West Ruggedy Beach, this could be a good place to spend a spare day.

Day 6: East Ruggedy Hut to Hellfire Pass Hut

7–8 hours, 14km

Get an early start, as this stretch can be a long day with plenty of mud. From East Ruggedy Hut follow the track west, reaching **West Ruggedy Beach** in 40 minutes to an hour. This is one of the circuit's most scenic beaches – a long stretch of coarse sand, framed to the east by the Ruggedy Mountains and to the north by the Ruggedy Islands.

The track follows the beach for 2km, but trampers need to be cautious. If there is an extreme high tide this stretch will be difficult to follow, in which case it is better to sit and wait for the tide to recede. At the southern end of the beach the track re-enters bush and begins climbing, working its way to the eastern side of the Ruggedy Mountains.

The track sidles the eastern side of the range, around Red Head Peak (510m), and climbs to **Ruggedy Pass** (250m) before descending to Waituna Bay. Boulders line the shore of this remote bay, which is about three hours from West Ruggedy Beach.

The final segment of the day is a two-hour tramp to Hellfire Pass. It begins with a 200m climb to the ridge looming above the southern end of Waituna Bay, and then sidles it for 3km to the pass. You remain in the bush for the entire time, and the mud is deeper and more widespread than any mud you have already slogged through. For all your effort you are rewarded with

KIWI SPOTTING *Jim DuFresne*

Sara, of Kiwi Wilderness Walks, stopped along the track east of Mason Bay Hut, listened to the high-pitched shrills emerging from the bush and said, "that's a pair calling to each other". We could clearly hear the kiwis but couldn't see them. It was too long past dusk to go stumbling into the bush looking for New Zealand's favourite bird. And when you go kiwi spotting on Stewart Island that's what you want to do, spot them.

There are an estimated 20,000 brown kiwis on the island, so trampers spot them far more often here than anywhere else in the country. Plus, these kiwis are far less nocturnal than their cousins on the North and South Islands. You constantly hear stories of stunned trampers encountering kiwis in the middle of the track, the birds strolling right past them in the mid-morning. Still, DOC officials estimate that only around 10% of trampers who make it to Mason Bay, which is deemed to be prime kiwi-spotting country, actually ever get to see one of the little critters.

To enhance kiwi spotting, DOC has issued the following guidelines, which are designed to minimise disturbance to the birds:

- Stay 5m from the birds at all times; do not follow them.
- At no time handle or try to touch the birds.
- Keep noise to a minimum.
- When using a torch, screen the light with your hand.
- Do not shine a torch directly at them and do not use flash photography. Kiwis cannot tolerate strong light.

If you don't see a kiwi while tramping, consider a kiwi-spotting tour from Oban. **Bravo Adventure Cruises** (☎ 219 1144) offers evening tours (\$95) that include water transport and a guided walk to look for the birds.

We were on the verge of calling it a night, when Sara stopped again. No shrill whistle this time, just a gentle rustling close to the track. But the seasoned kiwi spotter smiled and turned on her dim torch. And there, just a few metres off the track, were three kiwis. One was a huge female who continued feeding, poking her long beak into the soft ground, for more than 15 minutes, to the amazement of three kiwi spotters.

a great view from **Hellfire Pass**, which includes much of the interior of the island.

Hellfire Pass Hut (16 bunks) is an excellent place to spend the night. Despite being around 200m above sea level, there is a sand dune right outside the door that stretches to **Big Hellfire Beach**. From the hut you're treated to incredible views of the Ruggedy Mountains and Codfish Island, home of the endangered kakapo, to the northwest. There is also a track that descends the sand dune to the beach, a scenic stretch of shoreline well worth the 30-minute climb back to the hut. East of the hut is Benson Peak (360m) but there is no longer a track to it.

Day 7: Hellfire Pass Hut to Mason Bay Hut

7 hours, 15km

Despite what some maps show, there are no creeks near the track between Big Hellfire

and Little Hellfire Beaches, so make sure your water bottles are full when you depart the hut.

From Hellfire Pass Hut the track continues inland, where it ascends 100m up a ridge and then follows its crest. Once on top you are rewarded with views of Ruggedy Flat to the east, and Little Hellfire Beach and Mason Bay to the south. The track sidles off the ridge, crosses a number of gullies, and three to four hours from Hellfire Pass emerges at **Little Hellfire Beach**. Both the ascent of the ridge and the descent can be extremely muddy at times.

Follow the beach for 1km to its southern end, picking up the signposted track. It quickly moves inland to climb a bush-and-scrub saddle around Mason Head, before descending to the northern end of **Mason Bay**. The climb to the saddle is very steep, and if it's been raining it will also be very muddy. Ropes offer assistance in some

sections, but it is slow going and the majority of people need two hours to climb around Mason Head to Mason Beach.

If the tide is low or receding (you can check the tide timetable at the DOC Visitor Centre prior to leaving Oban) you can follow the hard sandy beach for one of the most scenic walks on the island. At high tide this section can be difficult, forcing you to climb awkwardly over trees and boulders along the beach. Also, walking through soft sand is considerably more strenuous than following the hard pack at low tide. If the tide is in, it would pay to take an extended break until it begins to retreat.

After a 4.5km (two-hour) beach stroll, you cross the mouth of Duck Creek and arrive at a large pole with orange triangles, which marks the track to **Mason Bay Hut** (20 bunks). The track skirts the stream all through the sand dunes and arrives at the hut in 10 to 15 minutes.

Built in 1968, the hut received a major facelift in 2006, due to the growing popularity of Mason Bay, and now features three bunkrooms and a large kitchen/dining area. DOC estimates that more than 2500 people visit the remote bay every year. The scenic **sand dunes** of Mason Bay, and the opportunity at night to look (or just listen) for kiwis, has many visitors spending an extra night at the hut.

SIDE TRIP: BIG SANDHILL

1 hour, 2km return

At 156m, Big Sandhill is the tallest sand dune along Mason Bay and is an easy climb for great views, or to watch the sunset. Just east of the hut on the main track is a bridge over Duck Creek, and on the other side you take a side trail that winds through the scrub. Within minutes you'll be on the open sand of the giant dune, where a route to its grassy peak is easy to see.

Day 8: Mason Bay Hut to Freshwater Landing Hut

3–4 hours, 14km

The next stretch, to North Arm Hut, is described here as a two-day tramp, but strong trampers could elect to combine these stages into one long eight- to nine-hour day, stopping for lunch at Freshwater Landing Hut. But keep in mind that Freshwater Valley is very flat and is often

muddy. During periods of rain it can flood quickly.

To the east of Mason Bay Hut, the track is an old tractor path all the way to Freshwater Landing, making for easy and fast travel during normal conditions.

Within 20 minutes of leaving Mason Bay Hut you reach **Island Hill Homestead**, a centre of farming activity in the 1880s, and now a base for DOC staff. The track continues through red tussock and flax, and in 2km skirts the base of **Island Hill** (137m), the only slight bit of elevation in this otherwise flat landscape.

Beyond the hill you begin cutting across the famed **Chocolate Swamp**, where the track is one long boardwalk. Despite the planks, you'll still be sloshing your way east during rainy periods. Within 30 minutes, or two hours from Mason Bay Hut, you cross the swamp and move into a forest of manuka and scrub where, for the next 3km, the track parallels a ditch – an extension of Scott Burn.

Eventually you cross Scott Burn on a footbridge, and from here it's less than one hour to **Freshwater Landing Hut**. You arrive on the south side of Freshwater River, where there's a jetty for water taxis, and cross a swing bridge to reach the 16-bunk hut on the north side.

SIDE TRIP: ROCKY MOUNTAIN

3 hours, 5km return, 539m ascent

The track to Rocky Mountain (549m) rewards you with good views. The climb begins behind Freshwater Landing Hut, and passes through forest and subalpine vegetation, to rocky outcrops with good views of Paterson Inlet.

Day 9: Freshwater Landing Hut to North Arm Hut

6–7 hours, 11km

This day is a difficult tramp, with a good bit of climbing up muddy slopes. Three unbridged creeks are crossed at the Freshwater Landing end, which may be difficult fords during periods of heavy rain.

The track begins by skirting **Freshwater River** for a spell, and then swings east to climb **Thomson Ridge**. After 2.5km the climb becomes considerably steeper, wetter and more slippery. At the top, much of the ridge is planked to avoid boggy areas, but

for the effort spent getting there, the views are dismal.

The descent off the ridge is just as steep, and after one hour the track reaches a swing bridge and begins sidling the head of **North Arm**. Looking at a map you'd think this would be a scenic stretch, but in reality it's a constant up-and-down trudge, during which you never see the bay through the thick bush.

Within one to 1½ hours you climb away from North Arm and finally reach the sign-posted junction with the Rakiura Track. Head south (right) and after 20 to 30 minutes you arrive at **North Arm Hut** (24 bunks), the end of what is a long day for many.

Day 10: North Arm Hut to Oban

4–5 hours, 12km

Follow Day 3 (p323) of the Rakiura Track.

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