

SOUTHERN WAYS

It's called the Great Southern Touring Route, but there's more than one way the road-tripper can explore this ruggedly beautiful region of Victoria. Relive the heady gold rush days, marvel at the dramatic peaks of the Grampians and discover character-filled villages on our three-leg journey.



KNOWN FOR
Stunning coastal views, gold rush towns and the magnificent Grampians.

BEST TIME TO GO
November to March for the best of the summer; March to May if you dislike crowds.

ROUTE ONE

MELBOURNE TO THE GRAMPIANS

I've lost count of how many times I glanced out the window as a child on the way to Ballarat to see the odd, bluestone battlements of **Kryal Castle** (121 Forbes Road, Leigh Creek; (03) 5334 7388; kryalcastle.com.au) whiz eerily past. But today, with three children of my own in tow, curiosity finally got the better of me. We approach the 1970s-built medieval adventure park from a dual-lane country road to the soundtrack of *Game of Thrones*. The pedestrian entrance (via moat and drawbridge) looks spooky, but inside it's all fun, from hands-on archery and sword-fighting to gruesome (but informative) torture chambers. A highlight is the daily jousting display, featuring knights wearing 45-kilogram metal armour riding full tilt at each other with long sticks, while Queen's *We Will Rock You* blares over the PA. It's exciting, rather violent, but thoroughly entertaining.

DID YOU KNOW?
In the 1850s, Victoria contributed more than a third of the world's gold output. As a result of the gold rush, the state's population grew from 77,000 to 540,000 in two years.

A 20-minute drive later we are comfortably checked in at the **Comfort Inn Sovereign Hill** (39 Magpie Street, Ballarat; (03) 5337 1199; sovereignhill.com.au). Named Victoria's Major Tourism Attraction at last year's tourism awards, Sovereign Hill is impressive: 25 hectares of meticulously finished buildings and working exhibits that show what life must have been like on Victoria's goldfields in 1851.

We brave the cool evening air to take in 'Blood on the Southern Cross', a fascinating sound-and-light show recounting the dramatic events of the Eureka Rebellion of 1854. The next day, we are lost in this colonial fantasy world – panning (successfully) for gold, exploring dark underground mines and sitting for a hilarious family portrait.

Ballarat, a town of about 100,000 residents, has plenty more on offer, though. Next time, we'll visit the **Ballarat Wildlife Park** (Corner York and Fussell Streets, Ballarat East; (03) 5333 5933; wildlifepark.com.au), where visitors can pat and feed the free-ranging kangaroos, and the **Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka** (102 Stawell Street South, Ballarat; 1800 287 113; made.org), where the original Southern Cross Flag is displayed.

Continuing north-east, expect easy driving along a (newish) road through farming country to Ararat, where natural bushland starts to take over, particularly as you wind your way through the Grampians to Halls Gap – the perfect base for exploring this spectacular area's natural wonders. ▶



(clockwise from top) A street in recreated mining town, Sovereign Hill; Kryal Castle; the Southern Grampians from Dunkeld; Sovereign Hill visitors pan for real gold.





(clockwise from this image) Halls Gap; The Royal Mail Hotel's garden-inspired fare; a meerkat at Halls Gap Zoo.



(below) The Pavilion Cafe at Warrnambool. (right) Werribee Mansion is a living postcard of the past.



ROUTE TWO

HALLS GAP TO PORT FAIRY

"I don't know what it is, but it's a feel-good place," says Josephina McDonald, summing up the appeal of Halls Gap. She and her husband Rohan took over the **Halls Gap Lakeside Tourist Park** (27 Tymna Drive; (03) 5356 4281; hallsgaplakeside.com) nearly four years ago. Used to living in urban areas, Dutch-born Josephina's initial reservations about moving to the village of just over 600 people were quickly forgotten. "You're so at one with nature, you feel so grounded here," she says, explaining that the mix of natural beauty and range of savvy food and hospitality operators keep her happy.

She suggests getting back to nature with a trip to the **Grampians National Park** and Victoria's largest waterfall, **MacKenzie Falls** (13 19 63; parkweb.vic.gov.au), sitting around the campfire or looking for yabbies in local creeks. Other Halls Gap attractions include minigolf at the strikingly landscaped **Grampians Adventure Golf** (475-481 Grampians Road; (03) 5356 4664; grampiansadventuregolf.com.au); **Halls Gap Zoo** (4061 Ararat-Halls Gap Road; (03) 5356 4668; hallsgapzoo.com.au) and the **Brambuk Indigenous National Park and Cultural Centre** (277 Grampians Tourist Road; (03) 5361 4000; brambuk.com.au).

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DON'T MISS

A refreshing swim in the all-year-round wood-heated outdoor pool at Halls Gap Lakeside Tourist Park.

The grandly picturesque drive south to Dunkeld takes about an hour, but you'll be rewarded by a stop at one of the state's most celebrated food and wine destinations. The historic **Royal Mail Hotel** (98 Parker Street, Dunkeld; (03) 5577 2241; royalmail.com.au) has won a swag of awards, thanks largely to the investment of its owner, Dunkeld-born multimillionaire Allan Myers, QC.

British-born chef Robin Wickens makes fine use of the restaurant's garden, producing nature-inspired, cutting-edge food, which you can wash down with a drop (or two) of wine from the Royal Mail's 26,000-bottle cellar.

Stock up on local produce at **Dunkeld General Store** (93 Parker Street, Dunkeld; (03) 5577 2418), grab a takeaway coffee and then continue your drive south for about an hour to Port Fairy, through the region's volcanic plains and fertile farmland.

ROUTE THREE

PORT FAIRY TO MELBOURNE

The seaside village of Port Fairy is best known for its large fishing fleet, Norfolk pine trees and **Port Fairy Folk Festival** (portfairyfolkfestival.com). It's also a perfect beginning for the next leg of your journey along the Great Ocean Road.

Start with a half-hour drive to Warrnambool, or turn off to explore nature reserve and inactive volcano **Tower Hill** ((03) 5565 9202; warrnambool.vic.gov.au/tower-hill). Local Jon Watson, who operates the nearby four-star **Lady Bay Resort** (2 Pertobe Road, Warrnambool; (03) 5562 1662; ladybayresort.com.au) is a big fan.

"You drive down inside this extinct volcano and it's full of Australian wildlife: kangaroos, koalas, echidnas and snakes in summer," he says. "It's the greatest free park you could visit."

After a caffeine fix at the **Pavilion Café & Bar** (50 Viaduct Road, Warrnambool; (03) 5561 1551; pavilion.net.au), seek out more animal action (at least from May to October) at the **Logans Beach Whale Watching Platform** (7 Logans Beach Road, Warrnambool; visitwarrnambool.com.au).

From here, the driving is all about rugged, take-your-breath-away scenery. Everyone knows rock-star spots such as Loch Ard Gorge and the Twelve Apostles, but for something more off-the-beaten track, says Watson, try **Childers Cove**. "It's like the Twelve Apostles, except you walk on a beach that looks like no-one's been there for 1,000 years."

Resume your journey with the smashing waves of the Southern Ocean on one side and rolling, green dairy country on the other. Veer inland through the

DO DETOUR

The drive from Queenscliff to Portarlington via St Leonards is regarded by some locals as Port Phillip Bay's 'Great Ocean Road'. Expect picturesque coastline, winding roads and plenty of beach activity.

Great Otway National Park, then back along the coast to stop for a bite at the **Wye General Store and Café** (35 Great Ocean Road, Wye River; (03) 5289 0247; wyerivergeneralstore.com.au).

For a taste of the Bellarine Peninsula's rich maritime history, explore the **Queenscliff Maritime Museum** (Wharf Street, Queenscliff; (03) 5258 3440; maritimequeenscliff.org.au) or, if you're brave, take a boat trip out into the notorious rip with **South Bay Eco Adventures** (Shop 1B, 4 Wharf Street East, Queenscliff; (03) 5258 4019; southbayecoventures.com).

Twenty minutes north are the famous mussel farms of Portarlington. Try your luck buying direct from the Portarlington jetty, the local fish shop **Jenkins & Son** (42 Geelong Road; (03) 5259 2889; jenkinsandson.com.au), or eat them in style at **Jack Rabbit Vineyard** (85 McAdams Lane, Bellarine; (03) 5251 2223; jackrabbitvineyard.com.au).

With the well-serviced ring road, it's easy to skip Geelong, but you'd be missing more culinary delights. The industrial town has been reinventing itself, attracting acclaimed restaurateurs such as chef Aaron Turner, who recently opened **The Hot Chicken Project** (84A Little Malop Street, Geelong; (03) 5221 9831) and is working on another, **Igni**.

Finally, as you drive back on the slick Princes Freeway, why not be tempted by the dual detours of **Werribee Mansion** (Gate 2, K Road; (03) 8734 5100; werribeepark.com.au) and **Werribee Open Range Zoo** (K Road; (03) 9731 9600; zoo.org.au/werribee). Go on. Give yourself permission. **GP**

WORDS: PETER BARRETT PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES, THE PAVILION; TOURISM VICTORIA