



# road less travelled



The pleasure of hiking in some of the most picturesque parts of Victoria is an indulgence not to be missed.

LEFT: In 1824, explorers Hume and Hovell passed through the area and named the mountain Buffalo because of its resemblance to the animal.

WE have walked and talked all morning climbing the slopes of Mount Buffalo enjoying wonderful scenery and staring up at towering granite tors.

We have stopped and looked at wildflowers, snow gums and amazing scenery but I have a nagging feeling that there's something missing.

I can't help smiling when I realise what it is — we are alone and haven't passed another sole since we left.

It seems we have the slopes of Mount Buffalo to ourselves today.

It is the path less travelled we take, led by Jackie and Mick Parsons who make a living out of guiding, wining and dining and offering lots of treats along the way to those interested in discovering the pleasures of hiking in some of the most picturesque parts of Victoria.

They also head to Italy during our winter and take guided walks in some of the country's most scenic regions but always off the beaten track.

"Yes; you could say we have the best of both worlds," says Mick, who grew up at Wagga with the outdoors on his doorstep.

He met Jackie, from England, a trained linguist, while leading tours in Europe where they both fell in love with Italy.

They love good food, fine wines, wonderful scenery and exercise, so they decided to create their own business, Hedonistic Hiking, which encompasses all their passions.

"Hedonistic, which means devoted to pleasure, just seemed to fit with our idea of hiking — it's all about getting a nice amount of exercise and enjoying the good things in life," Jackie says.

By now I admit I am puffing a little as the gradient increases and I offer a feeble excuse about my daily walks along flat roads. But I have a hunch about what's up ahead so I know it will be worth it.



sue wallace

Just a few more rocks to climb and we come to a cliff where Jackie is waiting for us with a wonderful spread of regional produce. There's homemade buns (made by Mick, who was a chef in another life), delicious cheeses, meats, pates, crisp fresh salads, fruit and biscuits as well as local wine and suddenly that climb doesn't seem too bad at all.

We spread out on the rocks and catch our breath while we soak up the amazing views that stretch out in front of us across the Buckland and Buffalo valleys.

There's still no one in sight, just the majestic mountains and bushland studded with brightly coloured wildflowers amid peppermint gums and snow grass meadows.

Our chatter turns to the unique flora and fauna of the area and its history and Mick, who has an interest in history, is eager to share his knowledge.

Aboriginals were the first to make summer ascents to Mount Buffalo to gather and feast on protein-rich Bogong moths, which cluster in rock crevices, and also to meet and hold ceremonies.

In 1824, explorers Hume and Hovell passed this way and named the mountain Buffalo because of a resemblance to the animal.

Gold miners and botanists later followed, finding routes up to the plateau, and tourism started in the 1880s.

The area around the spectacular Mount Buffalo Gorge was reserved as a national park in 1898. The park has been extended several times since and

now takes in all the plateau and surrounding slopes.

Sadly, the historic Mt Buffalo Chalet, which was built in 1910, is now closed.

Walking through the 31,000ha park we see evidence of the fires of 2006 and 2007, but it's the vivid colours of regeneration that catches our eye as Mother Nature bounces back with a vengeance.

Everywhere we look, new life is sprouting.

As we stop for a break I realise we are no longer alone as a flock of eastern rosellas fly around and we spot evidence of a wombat's burrow.

We walk another 8km, mostly downhill, and stand in awe as we see massive bluffs and near vertical granite rock faces that soar a thousand metres high among stands of alpine ash and snow gum. It is a spectacular sight and one we won't forget.

There's a magic about being here and I suddenly discover what's also missing. There is no noise, except for the birds.

It has been a moderate hike according to Mick and Jackie, who tailor their walks to suit all ages and fitness levels.

"Our gourmet walking holidays both in Victoria and Italy are eco-friendly and designed for maximum enjoyment with minimum impact," Jackie says.

"We take small groups and our itineraries are meticulously researched to make sure we take the best routes.

"The trips are not just about walking, we bring alive the culture, nature and history of each area and make each meal a culinary journey."

Jackie, who speaks fluent French, Spanish and Italian, has specialised in walking tours of Italy since 2000 while Mick has led tours in Italy for the past seven years including the 240km pilgrim route walk from Siena to Rome.

They offer longer continuous walks for those who want a challenge plus more leisurely trips for the less energetic.

They are ready for any emergency having completed the acclaimed Leaders Wilderness Advanced First Aid course with the Wilderness Medical Institute of Australia.

After our hike we return to the Buckland Studios, a luxury eco-friendly secluded retreat created by German-born couple Sabine Helsper and Eddie Dufrenne, who fell in love with this part of the world.

The four studios and new eco-friendly pod, Number 5, blend into the landscape and have the most amazing views of the mountains and the valley.

"Watch out for the resident wombat," Sabine says and not long after we see him wandering across the road — or at least we think it's him.

As we take off our boots and shower, there's a knock on the door. It's the masseuse from Bright ready to massage away our aches and pains.

That night Mick and Jackie return to cook a gourmet meal in our studio with an impressive array of regional produce from the North East valleys.

We dine on the deck and watch kangaroos watching us and Sabine's inquisitive goats frolicking in the fields.

Tonight's three-course dinner features terrine of smoked Harrietville trout, smoked salmon and fresh dill, followed by tagliata — locally reared aged angus beef seared on the barbecue and served on a bed of rocket with shaved parmesan.

The finale is individual homemade pavlova topped with fresh berries served with a Michelin 2006 sangiovese.

For once I have no qualms about desert. I feel I have earned it today.

The night before at Villa Gusto, a guest house and restaurant close by, we enjoyed a five-course degustation menu — we are so impressed by the fine food and wines of the region.

Jackie admits she wasn't too keen

LEFT: The chestnut tree-lined drive to the Buckland Studio Retreat.

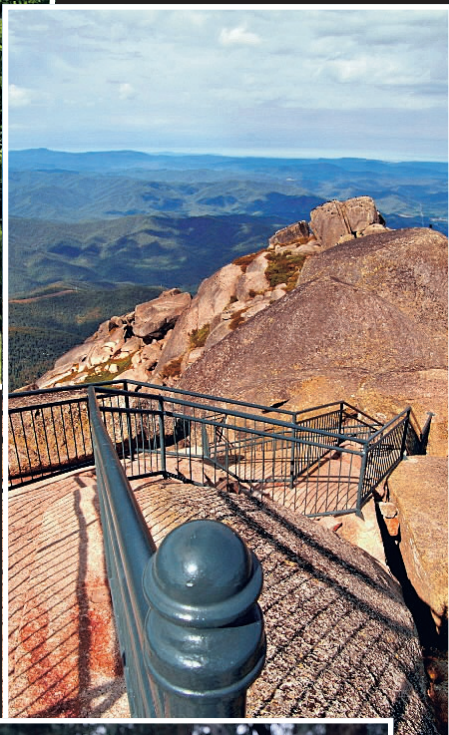
FAR LEFT: Mount Buffalo National Park has been referred to as a "garden of the gods."

BELOW: The view from the Horn at Mount Buffalo National Park.



LEFT: Hiking in the Mount Buffalo National Park leaves you in awe of nature.

BELOW: Jackie and Mick Parsons always take the road less travelled and show nature at its best.



## fast facts

### HEDONISTIC HIKING

Offers tailor-made short break packages for one to seven days hiking in the North East including Bright, Buckland Valley, Kiewa Valley, Falls Creek and the Bogong High Plains, Beechworth, the King Valley and Milawa Gourmet region. Available from November to Easter. Packages include three nights luxury boutique accommodation, three dinners with fine local wines, guided hike with gourmet picnic, one free indulgent or adventure activity and other options. Buckland Studio Retreat package is \$2595 for two people. Packages are also available for the Great Ocean Road and can be tailor-made. Phone (03) 5755 2307, 0406 500 979 or visit [www.hedonistichiking.com.au](http://www.hedonistichiking.com.au)

### Europe — Italy

Guided walking holidays in Tuscany, the Cinque Terre, Piedmont and Emilia Romagna. Hiking is tailored to fitness levels and interests. Available after Easter to November. Phone Italy +39 333 319 4203 Email [info@hedonistichiking.com.au](mailto:info@hedonistichiking.com.au)

### WHERE TO STAY:

Buckland Studio Retreat, McCormacks Lane, Buckland Valley, phone 0419 133318, [www.thebuckland.com.au](http://www.thebuckland.com.au)

Four studios and the new Number 5 one-bedroom luxury eco-friendly "pod". Great views and cafe serves breakfast.

Massage — Bright Beauty Beautique offers mobile pampering and massage packages. Shop 3, Riverside Walk, Bright and 1-7 Albert Street, Myrtleford [www.brightbeauty.com.au](http://www.brightbeauty.com.au) Phone (03) 5750 1977.

### WHERE TO EAT

Villa Gusto, 630 Buckland Valley Road, Buckland Valley, accommodation and dining, phone: (03) 5756 2000, [www.villagusto.com.au](http://www.villagusto.com.au)

Simone's of Bright, 98 Gavan Street, Bright. Award-winning restaurant run by George and Patrizia Simone. Phone (03) 5755 2266, [www.simonesrestaurant.com.au](http://www.simonesrestaurant.com.au)

Ceccanti Kiewa Valley, 285 Bay Creek Lane, Mongans Bridge (near Mount Beauty). Phone (03) 5754 5236, [www.ceccanti.com.au](http://www.ceccanti.com.au) Great wines and Italian-style cellar door restaurant features a la carte menu and a five-course Tuscan banquet, \$45 per person.

### ACTIVITIES

Eagle Micro Flights. Tandem flights provide a bird's eye view of Mount Buffalo and the region. Porepunkah Airfield, Buckland Valley Road, Buckland Valley, Phone (03) 5750 1174 [www.eagleschool.com.au](http://www.eagleschool.com.au)

## Nepal — Land of Legends

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- Tour guide Stevie Mclean has been leading groups to Nepal since 1991

For a full itinerary -  
**KEAN TRAVEL & TOURS**

1300 793744 or [michael@keantravelandtours.com.au](mailto:michael@keantravelandtours.com.au)