

SHORT BREAK

# THE HIGH LIFE

Trekking in the Victorian Alps needn't be a taxing affair. For those partial to excellent food and fine wine, there is a way to walk in style, writes **Judith Elen**.

**F**rom the high narrow ridge we're walking, grassed rocky slopes fall away dramatically to both right and left. We proceed as if threading our way along the spine of the world. Deep swathes of valley, brushed with layers of frosted-grey mountain ash remind us of silverback gorillas. These ghostly trees are the relics of the fires of 2003, which devastated the landscape but not its beauty. Monochrome slopes

indicate snow country, but further on we brush through new fleshy mauve-grey snow-gum leaves and mountain grasses scattered with wildflowers.

I'm in the Victorian Alps with Jackie and Mick Parsons of Hedonistic Hiking (the reason for the name will become clear). Along with a friend and one of the owners of Rundells Alpine Lodge, we file across the rugged, spectacular sweep of Razorback Ridge from Mt

Hotham to Mt Feathertop, which is still streaked with snow.

After three hours' walking rock-strewn rises and falls interspersed with level track, we arrive at a platform of grass and rock facing Mt Feathertop, iced with snow rivulets. Jackie sets up lunch: homemade olive bread, asparagus frittata, a blood orange and fennel salad, plus plates of local cheeses, walnuts, a chocolate hazelnut dessert and King Valley wines.



The breathtaking view from Mt Buffalo. **RIGHT, TOP** Lake Catani, Mt Buffalo National Park. **RIGHT, BOTTOM** Mick points out some interesting plants along the trail.

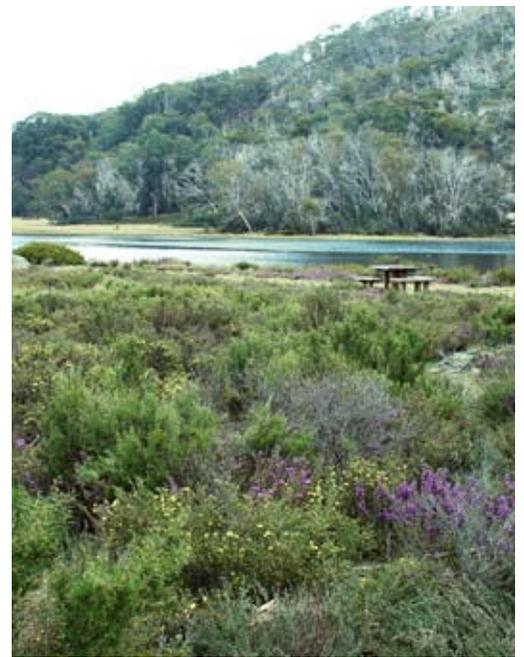
Hedonistic Hiking specialises in the best of things: on the trail – with Mick’s thorough knowledge of the terrain, Aboriginal past and cattle-driving history – and (on weekend walks) après hike, when walkers indulge in the region’s excellent food, wine and sumptuous accommodation. The team’s day walks also include gourmet picnics, but it’s the full pack of hedonism for me.

On the first night we stayed at Rundells Alpine Lodge in Dinner Plain village, where comfy, modern rooms induce sound sleep. My dinner at the Lodge’s restaurant, Graze, was an excellent five-course degustation. Caramelised beef fillet, mushrooms, spinach and kipfler potatoes are the satisfying focus. Local walnuts, Mt Buffalo olive oil, Wandiligong apples (saffron-poached, served with cinnamon mascarpone) were also on the menu, and the spicy hummus starter with house-made bread was addictive. Regional wines were from Dal Zotto in the King Valley and Pennyweight Gold from Beechworth; others, but one, were Victorian.

After our Razorback hike, it’s an alfresco dinner at Ringer Reef winery – a treat because its wines are only available at the cellar door or local restaurants. Mick cooks hefty local Angus steaks, which he slices wafer-thin to make a warm salad with rocket and parmesan – the perfect follow-up to an entrée of trout pâté and a glass of bubbly. The magnificent sunset, mountain-framed valley view and cascading waterfall on Mt Buffalo are the icing on the cake.

The second night’s lodging is the flamboyant Villa Gusto in the Buckland Valley where, soothed by splashing fountains, I soak in a spa laced with lavender and epsom salts – a concoction mixed especially for walkers.

I’ve negotiated an easy next day, and we wander in Mt Buffalo National Park to a soundtrack of birdcalls and water gurgling and tumbling, sometimes underfoot, in spongy grasses. It’s a lovely way to end an energetic yet indulgent long weekend. **H&G**



### PACK IT IN

Hedonistic Hiking offers walking weekends, day walks, winery walks and tailored itineraries for couples to groups of 10 in Victoria’s high country from November to April. The Alpine Walking Weekend; two nights each at Quay West Resort, Falls Creek, and Rundells Alpine Lodge, Dinner Plain, three days’ hiking, all meals, is \$1665 per person (Albury airport pick up). Gourmet Weekend at Dinner Plain: two nights at Rundells, breakfasts, dinners (one five-course degustation), picnic lunches, two days’ hiking, is \$595 per person.

