



PICTURES: VISIT VICTORIA; HEDONISTIC HIKING; RICKY FRENCH, INSET

Stone steps lead up through marble-trunked snow gums and mountain pepper trees. Frogs croak and a thousand insects flitter above the cool sphagnum moss in this high-altitude alpine marsh on the Mount Buffalo plateau in Victoria's High Country. Technically we're hiking, but the strange thing about this place, the Corral, is we're not often walking on the ground. Rather, our party of four is boulder-hopping atop giant chunks of granite, following not so much a track as a raised route of least resistance through a vast boulder field.

The late afternoon sun bounces off the rocks, warming our faces as shadows lengthen in the lichen. We reach our destination, a ruin of giant broken pieces of granite called Mahomet's Tomb, and amuse ourselves by clambering between the oversized rocks, squeezing into the caves created below and paying solemn heed to a sign that warns of the folly of proceeding further. A quick peep confirms that one more boulder hop could send us cartwheeling to the bottom of the Buckland Valley, potentially making us late for the promised afternoon canapes.

Our eye-opening afternoon jaunt is part of boutique guided hiking company Hedonistic Hiking's Escape to Bright package. After enduring a long Melbourne winter of lockdown, I'd be happy to escape to anywhere, quite frankly, but this is truly remarkable.

Mount Buffalo is a loner. It stands apart

WALK UP AN APPETITE

Gourmet treats and mountain vistas on a guided hike in Victoria

RICKY FRENCH

from the conga line of softly rounded summits that make up the Australian Alps between southern Victoria and Canberra. Geologically it's an outlier, too, formed of ancient, molten granite below and sedimentary rock on top, almost like a baked Alaska desert. Across time, the sedimentary rock (call it the meringue) has eroded, leaving the granite (ice cream) to solidify. The result is a hulking monster of a mountain with an extensive sub-alpine plateau we're set on exploring.

The mountain is also the site of one of Victoria's earliest tourism ventures, when a man named Buffalo Bill (what else?) started enticing wealthy Melburnians to the High Coun-

try. But Mount Buffalo's most famous guide was a woman. Alice Manfield (who became known simply as Guide Alice) was an early naturalist and photographer from a local pioneering family who went against every societal norm to share the mountain she loved with others as soon as the road to the plateau opened in 1908. She even designed her own hiking clothes, donning pantsuits, woollen knickerbockers and snake-defying puttees around her ankles.

"It was very unusual to have a girl here leading people and wearing trousers," says my guide, Jackie Parsons, one half of Hedonistic Hiking. Parsons grew up in Norfolk, En-

gland, country as flat as it gets. She reckons that's one reason she has always been drawn to the mountains. Jackie was working as a Contiki Tours guide in Italy when she fell in love with a fellow guide, Australian Mick Parsons. They set up Hedonistic Hiking in 2007, splitting their gourmet hiking tours between Italy in the northern hemisphere summer and Australia in our warmer months. Jackie knew it would take somewhere special to convince her to settle in Australia, and in this pocket of the High Country she found it. She carries a photo of Guide Alice in her pocket every time she takes guests on this mountain, literally following in pioneering footsteps.

I tell Parsons my grandmother never approved of hiking. Why would you walk anywhere for no reason? But this afternoon we have a reason, and it's waiting for us on a tablecloth spread over an improvised granite table under an unfathomably balancing mammoth rock called The Sentinel. "Welcome to Buffalo and Bubbles," Parsons says, smiling.

Canapes are laid out, including Harrierville's Mountain Fresh Trout and Salmon Farm pate, a Peaks Cheese chevre and local walnuts tossed in honey and spices. The prosecco is from local winery Billy Button, and a swath of snow gums becomes transparent through the pale-yellow wine as we hold up our glasses to the sun. It's a step up from my usual hiking fare of a muesli bar and sandwich, washed down with dregs from a warm water bottle.

Step by step into our southeast forests

JOHN BLAY

The question of how places are reserved for nature and protected has always fascinated me. It seems there are things that many see as having special qualities. Perhaps an animal or a bird or a plant, a landscape even, and you can't simply isolate one or two species: things need locality, space around them to survive. And there's a human factor. Where one person sees the value, others are likely to agree, and where officialdom also recognises the value, then the locality is likely to be protected.

That "value" or magical ingredient must be one of the great mysteries of nature.

Even foresters will sometimes see the unique qualities of certain trees, and they will be preserved from logging.

Biamanga, NSW: The bloodwoods are in full flower. Their thick eucalypt incense hangs in the air while the sound of bees is just as intense. As we walk our conversation with the countryside flows. There might be thousands of kilometres ahead of us.

We cross the main coast road and walk the Head of Cuttagee Forestry road along the boundary between the nature reserve and the national park. These coastal forests were worked intensely by hungry sleeper cutters and millers, especially during the Great Depression. Few trees of any size escaped their eagle gaze, until times changed and railways no longer required such a quantity of A-grade hardwood sleepers. Sawmills closed as Forestry turned its eyes from selective to more



John Blay at Coolangubra, NSW



industrial logging in the form of clearfelling. Jacqueline [a French-Australian who loves the forests] is especially interested in the fact that koalas still survive in the tract we are entering. We keep an eye out for them, scanning treetops and the ground. In fact, to spot

koalas you keep your eyes not so much towards the branches where they live but on the ground below in search of their scats: little rounded pellets twice the size of rabbit or sheep droppings. The giveaway is that they smell strongly of eucalyptus. I know of one



From far left: the Horn picnic spot; view across Mount Buffalo National Park; walkers on the Hedonistic Hiking tour; light refreshments; vineyard in Buckland Valley; taking in the breathtaking views, inset



The hedonism gives way to hiking for our last section, a 750m grunt up Mount Buffalo's highest point, the Horn, at 1723m. It's a 360-degree view of the High Country from here, a rollcall of the big names: Mount Feathertop, Mount Bogong, the Bogong High Plains, Mount Hotham, Mount Buller and, in the hazy northeast, the Cobberas and Mount Kosciuszko. The boundlessness of the landscape is almost overwhelming after a year of being largely confined to a suburban postcode. The view of Mount Bogong, Victoria's highest peak, prompts discussion about the plight of the bogong moth, billions of which have migrated from NSW and Queensland each summer for millennia to the cool, rock caves of the High Country; in the recent dry years the moths have seemingly, and sadly, disappeared.

Down below us, Parsons has been busy laying out a dinner spread the likes of which the Horn Picnic Area has probably never seen. The sun sinks on cue, behind receding waves of mountain ranges, as we sit down to a three-course meal of homemade asparagus soup, wild-caught venison stew with polenta chips and braised cabbage, finishing off with chocolate brownies. Then, something incredible happens. As the last of the orange light dissolves over the horizon and darkness takes hold, strange shrapnel starts erupting from the void below the stone wall, like debris spat from a volcano, flying upwards past our astonished faces. It takes us a moment to realise what's happening, but it could only be one thing: bogong moths in

their thousands. More than anything, this is the moment I'll remember the longest. I thank Parsons for arranging the show.

After the stirring emotion of the night before, our next morning's hike along a forestry road through a pine plantation serves to raise the heart rate more than tug on heart-strings. But we knock off 12km in no time, disposing of just enough calories and sweat to work up a justifiable appetite. Lunch is served in the shade of pine trees, the familiar face of Mount Buffalo a stern authority above us, and the Castiglion del Bosco vineyard laid out like a patterned rug at our feet.

Parsons sets up camp chairs and I collapse into one like a useless lump while she flits around assembling a gourmet picnic lunch as though it's the easiest thing in the world. Local beer, wine and cider are on offer, but after the morning's sunny hike it's heaven just to gulp down cool glasses of Parsons' homemade elderflower cordial. There's enough food to fuel an Everest expedition, most of it homemade: roasted Dutch carrots, a capsicum salad, cauliflower and broccoli with feta, red onion and roasted hazelnuts, and something I've never had before: venison bresaola, the same meat as last night but cured and rubbed with Moroccan salt. The scrumptious brownies make a reappearance and with that my hiking is done for the trip. But not the hedonism.

My accommodation is Bright's new Art House Townhouses, five slick modern

abodes, each styled around the works of an Australian artist (my two-bedroom incarnation has limited-edition prints by Adelaide Hills artist Margie Sheppard). A full-body massage at Botanic Alps also comes as part of the Escape to Bright package, and it's an inspired inclusion. I'm surprised how tender my calves are and I sink into a blissful stupor as various aches are tenderly poked and prodded into submission, my weary body then rotated like a well-oiled sausage.

I'm advised to stay hydrated after my massage so it's off to the Bright Brewery for a beer on the deck overlooking the river as the humidity soars and storm clouds march up the Ovens Valley. I wake next morning to damp, silent streets. Rain has scrubbed the air clean, and mist pools in the valleys and surrounds the base of Mount Buffalo so that only the top is visible, floating on a soupy grey sea. An island in the sky.

IN THE KNOW

Hedonistic Hiking runs guided hikes in the Victorian High Country, Grampians, Goldfields Track and the Great Ocean Walk throughout summer. All multi-day tours include accommodation, gourmet meals, local wine and beer, guides and transfers. The Escape to Bright package includes boutique accommodation for three nights, a massage, Buffalo and Bubbles hike and a Bright hike, but excludes dinners. From \$1850 for two people.

hedonistichiking.com

Ricky French was a guest of Visit Victoria.
visitvictoria.com

regular colony overlooking Cuttagee Creek that favoured the woolly butt trees. There are rumours of more.



Our forest koalas, although sometimes still subject to the disabling chlamydia disease, can move to a new location at the drop of a hat, literally, for they spook easily. I'll see them at one place and next day they've gone. They seem to have a regular way of travelling, a kind of koala trail they follow from near the foot of Gulaga, beside Wallaga Lake, up Narira Creek inland of Bermagui, and then through this area some 20km south to the Murrah catchment and Tanja.

Soon, still along the border between the Bermagui Nature Reserve to the north and Biamanga National Park southwards, there are bloodwoods, then stringybarks, before we come into the majestic spotted gums with their much-patterned bark. A few woolly butts.

And so we walk, eyes mostly to the ground, searching for koalas and potoroos. Pencil cedars tower over a jungle gully, then the first, but definitely not the last, wombat

scat of our journey. Wombats were once a rarity near the coast. Only in recent years have their numbers grown.

As we turn downhill along a ridgeline and come closer to the creek, I point out the gullies where I had spent the dawn month after month recording early morning calls of the lyre-bird, the most remarkable songbird on earth. It has dialects that vary from district to district, and in one of Cuttagee's most remote, hardscrabble gullies I recorded one lyrebird that in an early morning oratorio mimicked over 42 species of birds I could identify.

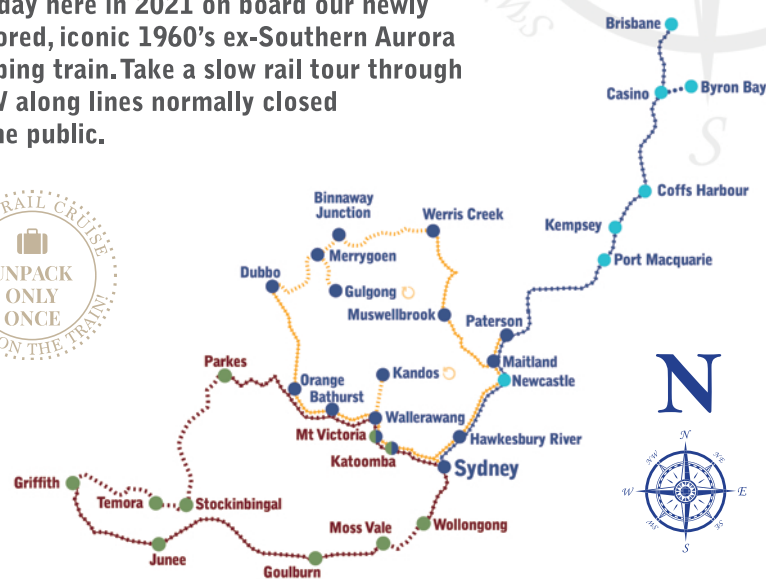
Included in this were details like mimicking the beginning of an eight-kookaburra chorus that ended mid-note to sweep into the tones of a whistling kite. We would cross the trails of many such chroniclers during our walking.

This is an edited extract from *Wild Nature: Walking Australia's Southeast Forests* by John Blay (NewSouth Books, \$39.99). The book is the latest in his trilogy on the history and human stories of the forests of the region, from Canberra to Wilsons Promontory.

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For more information and a full copy of the itinerary, please visit vintagerailjourneys.com.au

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