

Southeast Coast Victoria



If you want unspoilt wilderness areas and stunning beaches, head this way. The star attraction is the much-loved Wilsons Promontory National Park, but venture further into the sparsely populated corner pocket of this region and discover national parks with rugged mountains, pristine rainforests, raging rivers, isolated beaches and few other travellers. This is Gunai (Kurnai) traditional land, and the Bataluk Cultural Trail that snakes its way through the region leads you to some incredibly beautiful and significant places.

Expect to be impressed by South Gippsland with its lush, green rolling hills and rural back roads, and some of the best scuba diving and snorkelling in Australia along its rugged and spectacular coastline. You can get a glimpse of the wilderness feast to come at Tarra-Bulga National Park, covered in towering mountain ash and valleys of giant tree ferns.

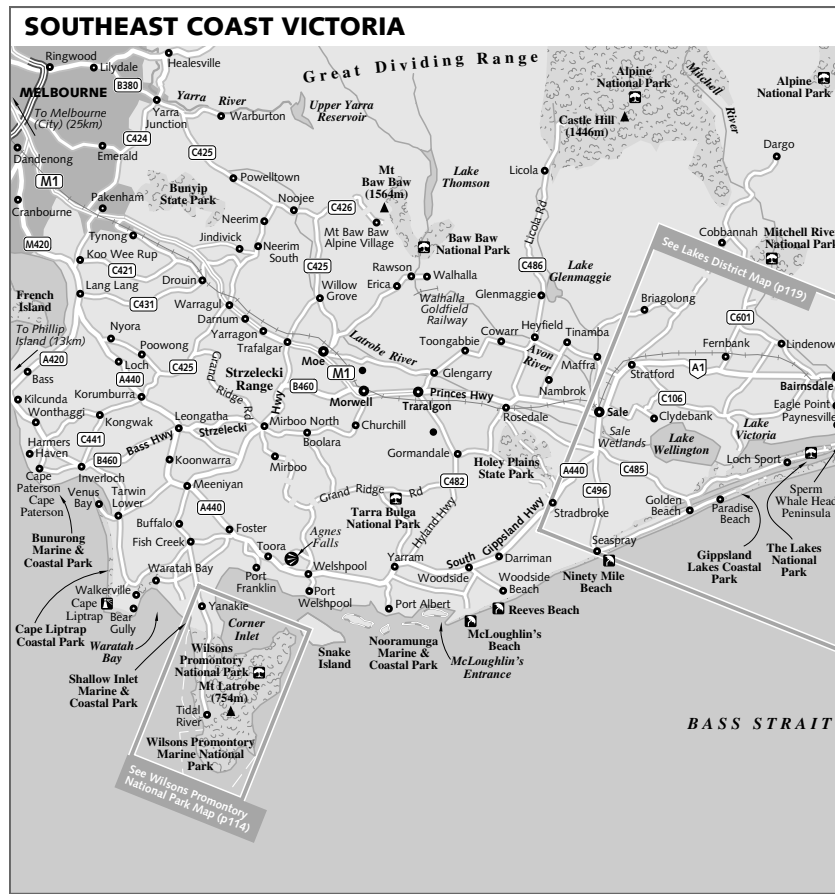
The Lakes District is huge – it's Australia's largest inland waterway system, a rich haven for birds, and a favourite for boating, fishing and swimming. It's separated by coastal dunes from the long stretch of Ninety Mile Beach, which has some superb isolated beaches. The whole region is dotted with small, laid-back towns. Some sleepy little hamlets with only a general store, and some more sophisticated with a range of sleeping, eating and activity options. These towns go off during summer school holidays when holidaying hordes arrives.

And there's some sensational food to be had – fish straight off fishing boats, and plenty of places to stop for locally produced wines, cheeses and fruit.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hiking in wilderness areas and along squeaky beaches at **Wilsons Promontory** (p115)
- Eating dinner lakeside at **Metung** (p125) and chartering a boat to explore the Gippsland Lakes
- Rock hopping, diving and snorkelling at **Bunurong Marine & Coastal Park** (p110)
- Walking, swimming and camping at beautiful **Cape Conran Coastal Park** (p135)
- Exploring the ancient rainforests of **Errinundra National Park** (p133)
- Discovering the idyllic tiny former gold-mining town of **Walhalla** (p120)
- Rafting down the magnificent **Snowy River** (p133)
- Relaxing on the deck of the lighthouse keepers' cottages at **Point Hicks** (p140) and watching migrating whales





Getting There & Around

There's a good supply of public transport from Melbourne as far as Bairnsdale; after that you're limited to a few bus options. You'll get the most out of this region with a car, to check out the national parks and small towns. A 2WD will get you everywhere except the more remote parts of national parks.

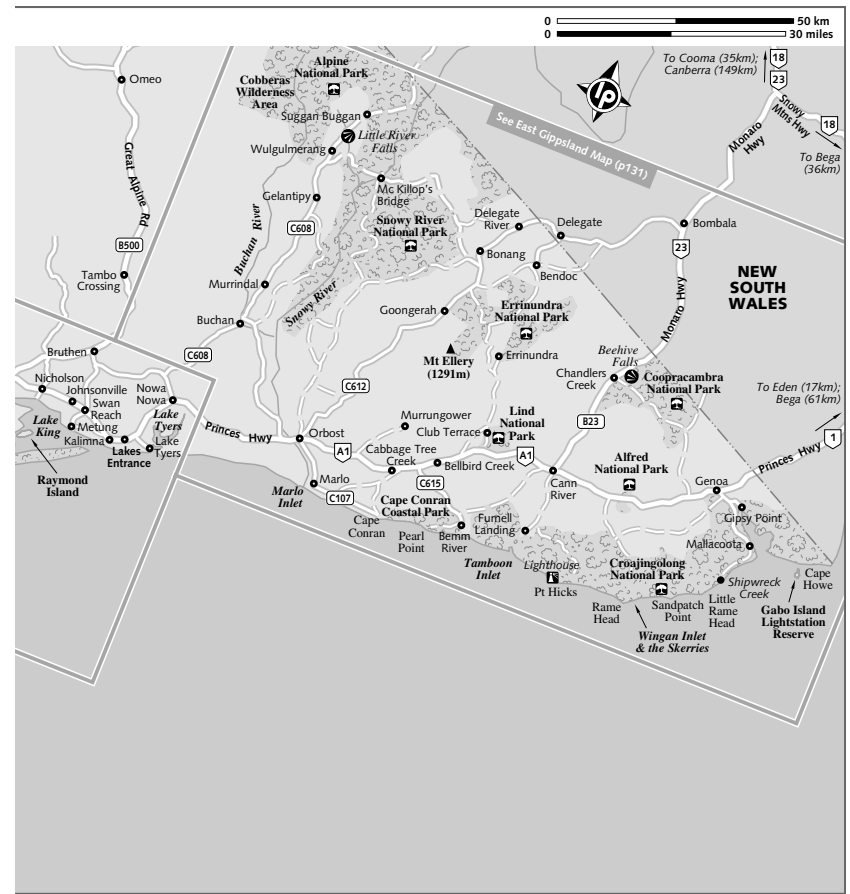
BUS

There are daily services from Melbourne heading up the east coast.

V/Line (☎ 13 61 96; www.vline.com.au) buses pick up where the train leaves off. V/Line has daytime bus services that go along the Princes Hwy (A1) from Bairnsdale to Batemans Bay (\$43, 11 hours) three times a week, and as

far as Narooma (\$43, 10 hours) every other day. Three times a week another service follows the Princes Hwy as far as Cann River, then veers north to Canberra (\$43, 10 hours). **Premier Motor Services** (☎ 13 34 10; www.premiers.com.au) has a daily overnight service/three-month pass (\$79/75) from Melbourne to Sydney along the Princes Hwy, though if you're stopping along the way it means you'll be arriving and leaving in the middle of the night.

Away from the main routes bus services are limited, though Bairnsdale is reasonably well serviced with private buses north to Buchan and south to Paynesville. **Buchan Bus n' Freight** (☎ 5155 0356; www.buchanbusnfreight.com.au) operates a service on Monday, Wednesday and Friday



from Bairnsdale to Gelantipy (one way \$16) via Lakes Entrance, Nowa Nowa, Buchan and W Tree. **Paynesville Bus Lines** (☎ 0418-516 405) runs daily (except Sunday) services between Bairnsdale train station and Paynesville via Eagle Point (one way \$8).

V/Line also has buses running from Traralgon to Sale via Maffra; Melbourne to Yarram, stopping along the South Gippsland Hwy; and Melbourne to Inverloch and Phillip Island, along the Bass Hwy.

Oz Experience (☎ 1300 300 128; www.ozexperience.com) is a hop-on, hop-off backpackers bus with a party atmosphere, travelling via Wilsons Promontory to Lakes Entrance and Gelantipy before going on to Sydney. A Melbourne-to-Sydney pass costs \$240.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The two major routes through Gippsland are the Princes Hwy (which joins the M1 in Melbourne) and the South Gippsland Hwy. The Princes Hwy is the quickest route through the region, but takes you through Gippsland's unimpressive industrial heartland. The scenic South Gippsland Hwy is the quickest route to Wilsons Promontory. Turn off the South Gippsland Hwy for the Bass Hwy with some stunning ocean views. The South Gippsland Hwy rejoins the Princes Hwy at Sale.

Some areas of national parks and other off-the-beaten-track spots in Gippsland require a 4WD (although 2WD access is often possible during the summer months) as many roads

are unsealed. Check road conditions with visitors information centres and **Parks Victoria** (☎ 13 16 93; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au) before heading on to unsealed roads. Some of the roads are closed during the wetter winter months. Keep an eye out for logging trucks and wildlife; they're both prolific.

TRAIN

The efficient **V/Line** (☎ 13 61 96; www.vline.com.au) service from Melbourne to Bairnsdale (\$25, 3½ hours) stops at all major towns along the Princes Hwy. There are three daily services.

SOUTH GIPPSLAND

South Gippsland's fabulous beaches, surfing, diving and snorkelling make it a popular holiday destination but there are still places where you can find solitude. This is also where you'll find Wilsons Promontory – one of Australia's best national parks.

KILCUNDA

☎ 03 / pop 270

Tiny Kilcunda has a dramatic setting, perched on rugged cliffs overlooking pounding ocean surf. Its legendary pub makes it a popular stop, and there's a general store with a retro-look café serving up wholesome meals.

The **George Bass Coastal Walk**, a two-hour, 7km one-way walk from the town centre along the cliff top west almost to San Remo is a popular trek, with the chance of spotting whales in winter. Don't be tempted to take a dip along the beach sections, as the undertows and rips here are notoriously dangerous. The mouth of the **Powlett River**, 3km east of Kilcunda, enclosed by high sand dunes, is also worth exploring.

Across the road from the pub, **Kilcunda Oceanview Holiday Retreat** (☎ 5678 7260; www.kilcundacarvanpark.com.au; Bass Hwy; unpowered/powerd sites \$25/27, cabins d \$65-120) is a caravan park with sensational ocean views from its cabins and some of the grassy camp sites. There's a path down to the beach where there's a safe children's swimming area and lots of rock pools to explore.

Billowing curtains frame 180-degree ocean views at **Ocean Walk B&B** (☎ 5678 7419; oceanwalk@waterfront.net.au; 8-14 Gilbert St; s & d from \$155, cottages \$200). The light-filled rooms each have their own spa, and it's a short stroll down to the beach.

Ocean View Hotel (☎ 5678 7011; Bass Hwy; mains \$19-31; ☎ lunch & dinner) is popularly known as the Killy Pub. You almost feel like you're in a ship galley in this narrow, wood-lined bistro where the food is excellent. There's a deck to watch the sunset, and live music in summer.

V/Line (☎ 13 61 96; www.vline.com.au) coaches operate daily from Melbourne (\$10, 2½ hours) and continue to Inverloch.

BUNURONG MARINE & COASTAL PARK

This unassuming 12km stretch of marine and coastal park offers some of Australia's best snorkelling and diving and a stunning, cliff-hugging drive. When you see the ancient rocky headlands and amazing formations such as **Eagles Nest**, it's not so hard to believe that dinosaur remains dating back 120 million years were discovered here.

Head down from the car parks along Cape Paterson-Inverloch Rd to the well-signposted coves. Eagles Nest, Shack Bay, The Caves and Twin Reefs are great for **snorkelling**, and Eagles Nest, Shack Bay, Cape Paterson and Flat Rocks are also popular **scuba diving** sites. The Oaks is a popular **surf** beach. The Caves is where the **dinosaur dig** action is; the Bunurong Environment Centre & Shop (opposite) runs tours here in January.

SEAL Diving Services (☎ 5174 3434; www.sealdiving services.com.au; 7/27 Princes Hwy, Traralgon; PADI 4-day course \$575, 1-day double dive \$80, introductory dive \$99) offers PADI open-water dive courses in Inverloch in summer. SEAL also offers one-day dives for beginners and experienced divers, and weekend trips for certified divers at both Wilsons Promontory and Bunurong Marine & Coastal Park.

INVERLOCH

☎ 03 / pop 4140

Fabulous surf, calm inlet beaches, outstanding diving and snorkelling and some top-notch restaurants – ever-expanding Inverloch is understandably popular. The population explodes in summer when visitors flock to the ocean **surf beaches** along the road to Cape Paterson, and families swamp the inlet beaches close to town. Inverloch also draws the crowds when it hosts the popular **Inverloch Jazz Festival** (☎ 5674 3141; www.inverlochjazzfest.org.au) on the Labour Day long weekend each March.

The staff at the very helpful **Inverloch visitors centre** (☎ 1300 762 433; www.visitbasscoast.com; 39 A'Beckett St; ☎ 9am-5pm; ☎) will make accommo-

modation bookings for free. Internet is available for \$1.50 per hour (or free in the library across the road). The **Bunurong Environment Centre & Shop** (☎ 5674 3738; www.sgcs.org.au; cnr The Esplanade & Ramsey Blvd; ☎ 10am-4pm Fri-Mon), home to the South Gippsland Conservation Society, has an abundance of books and brochures on environmental and sustainable living topics, and runs environmental tours during school holidays. The volunteer staff are a fabulous source of knowledge about local environmental issues.

Coffee and light lunches are available in the café section of **Sandsford Antiques** (☎ 5674 3339; 13 A'Beckett St; wi-fi). Wireless internet costs \$4 for 30 minutes.

Activities

Screw Creek Nature Walk starts from the Inverloch Foreshore Camping Reserve car park and is an easy 40-minute return walk via dunes, swamps and grasslands with views from the bluff of the town and across to Eagles Nest.

You can take lessons with **Learn to Surf Offshore Surf School** (☎ 5674 3374; www.surfingaustralia.com.au; 32 Park St; 2hr lesson \$45) at the main surf beach at Inverloch. Everything is provided – you just need to book and turn up at the beach.

Sleeping & Eating

Inverloch Foreshore Camping Reserve (☎ 5674 1236; www.inverlochholidaypark.com.au; cnr Esplanade & Ramsay Blvd; unpowered/powerd sites \$21/24) There's shade and privacy here and it's only a short toddle over the scrub-covered dunes to the beach. The reserve is managed by the neighbouring Inverloch Holiday Park.

Moilong Express (☎ 0439 842 334; www.basscoast.info/moilong; 405 Inverloch-Venus Bay Rd; d/f/\$100) These railway guards' vans, complete with traditional wood panelling and the station railway clock, have been converted into very comfortable accommodation with a kitchen and palatial queen-sized beds. The carriages accommodate up to six people and have soul-lifting views over Anderson's Inlet.

Lofts (☎ 1300 762 4335; www.theloftapartments.com.au; Scarborough St; apt from \$150; ☎) Spread out in these sleek, multilevel apartments with high ceilings and their name-sake lofts. They're handily adjacent to the park, beach and shops. Some of these designer apartments have water views and most have a spa. They're managed by several real estate agents so it's easiest to book through the Inverloch visitors centre.

Kiosk (☎ 5674 3611; 2-4 Abbott St; meals \$4-17.50; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Opposite the beach, 1km from the town centre, this is the perfect breakfast spot. Grab your newspaper and plonk down out the front, or join the chattering patrons inside this little red retro café, complete with bright orange lamps, for a generous breakfast and delicious juices.

Cafe Pajez (☎ 5674 1516; 27 A'Beckett St; lunch \$5-12, dinner \$17-22 ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Sun) The wafting aroma of speciality curries will entice you into this warm, earthy café festooned with rugs. Choose your own level of heat with the five-star curry rating system.

Cafe Gabriel (☎ 5674 1178, 9a A'Beckett St; mains \$21-32; ☎ lunch Sat & Sun, dinner Thu-Sun) Adding an upmarket option to the Inverloch scene is this classy restaurant and bar with a window opening to the street. The tone here is refined – signs advise you to take crying babies outside.

Farmers Market (☎ 5664 0096; The Glade, opposite the Inlet Hotel; ☎ 8am-1pm) For some fresh local produce, try this market on the third Sunday of each month.

Getting There & Away

V/Line (☎ 13 61 96; www.vline.com.au) coaches to/from Melbourne stop on Beach Rd (\$13, 2¾ hours).

VENUS BAY

☎ 03 / pop 510

This sparsely populated but sprawling holiday settlement by Cape Liptrap Coastal Park is popular for its five surf beaches. Watch out for rips if you're swimming here; only one beach, No 1, is patrolled during summer. Families with young children can play at the state's longest spit of sand at nearby Anderson Inlet. Immerse yourself among the teeming bird life here on the **Anderson Inlet Walk** (4km return, starts Lees Rd, 8km from the town shops), which passes alongside the inlet through mudflats and mangroves – home to zillions of crabs.

Operating with typical Dutch efficiency, **Venus Bay Caravan Park** (☎ 5663 7723; www.venusbaycaravanpark.com.au; 113a Jupiter Blvd; unpowered/powerd sites \$20/26, cabins d \$62-95; ☎ ☎; wi-fi) is a well-run, family-friendly park, only 800m from the patrolled surf beach, with some off-beat touches such as a giant chess board. Internet access, including wireless, is \$6 for 30 minutes.

WORTH A TRIP: KOONWARRA

This tiny township on the South Gippsland Hwy has a fantastic general store with its own café, a shop selling organic produce, an organic cooking school and a winery.

Koonwarra Food, Wine & Produce Store (☎ 5664 2285; South Gippsland Hwy; items \$6-34; 🍳 breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Fri) is a destination in its own right. Local produce and wines are on sale in the renovated timber building. Also here is a renowned café that serves simple food with flair, and prides itself on using organic, low-impact suppliers and products. Soak up the ambience and bustle in the wooded interior or relax at a table in the shaded cottage gardens, also home to the Outside Bit, a quirky little nursery.

Peaceful Gardens Organic Cooking School (☎ 5664 2480; www.peacefulgardens.com.au; Koala Dr), Victoria's first certified organic cooking school, offers inspired courses in making cakes, bread, traditional pastries and pasta, and runs cooking classes for kids.

Koonwarra Day Spa (☎ 5664 2332; www.koonwarraspa.com.au; 9 Koala Dr; most 30min treatments \$50) is a new centre offering spas, saunas and body treatments ranging from a 30-minute mineral spa (\$30) to a six-hour pamper package (\$465).

The popular **Lyre Bird Hill Winery & Guest House** (☎ 5664 3204; www.lyrebirdhill.com.au; 370 Inverloch Rd; guesthouse s/d \$100/175, cottage d \$120; 🍷 winery 10am-5pm Wed-Mon; 🏠) has an old-fashioned B&B with light-filled rooms overlooking the garden. There are also rooms in a faded country cottage. A three-course dinner can be arranged (\$60) accompanied by house wines.

The timber-lined wooden **Koonwarra Cottages** (☎ 5664 2488; hayward@csi.net.au; South Gippsland Hwy; s/d \$110; 🏠) with spa and wood heater have a cosy, country kitchen feel. They're spotlessly clean and run by friendly owners.

There's a **Farmers Market** (☎ 6569 8208; 🕒 8am-1pm) at Memorial Park on the first Saturday of each month featuring organic everything (fruit, vegetables, berries, coffee) plus hormone-free beef and chemical-free cheeses.

To get here from Inverloch, take the Inverloch-Leongatha Rd for 11km. Take the turn-off for Koonwarra and drive another 10km to reach the township on the South Gippsland Hwy.

The aroma of essential oils wafts through **Sundowner Lodge Guesthouse** (☎ 5663 7099; www.venusbaygetaways.com.au; 128 Inlet Rd; d \$175), a boutique guesthouse that is now also a day spa. The spacious rooms overlook the outdoor hot tub and neighbour the treatment room where massages, private spa or a complete detox are on offer. The guesthouse has its own fully licensed restaurant featuring local seafood.

Never mind the bland décor at **Kenko Bar** (☎ 5663 7899; 114a Jupiter Blvd; lunch \$7-13, dinner \$20-35; 🍷 lunch Thu-Mon, dinner Fri & Sat, daily Dec-Feb) – the smoothies, juices and focaccias served up at lunchtime are worth stopping for.

WARATAH BAY, WALKERVILLE & BEAR GULLY

Peaceful Waratah Bay has a couple of quiet and remote holiday townships and some wonderful long stretches of white-sand beach. The calm bay beaches are popular with families, and there's also some good surf. Lessons are available with the Learn to Surf Offshore Surf School (p110). Food

supplies are limited to a few basics at the caravan parks, so come prepared.

The friendly, well-treed **Waratah Bay Caravan Park** (☎ 5684 1339; www.waratahbaycp.com.au; Freycinet St; unpowered/powerd sites \$20/25, cabins d \$75-115) abuts the coastal park and has surfboard and boogie board hire and a library of books to borrow.

Overlooking Waratah Bay, and part of **Cape Liptrap Coastal Park**, is pretty Walkerville with holiday houses scattered across the hills. There are some great beach walks in this area – check out the historic lime kilns at the Walkerville South beach – and drive to the lighthouse at **Cape Liptrap**.

Vegetation provides privacy at the free Parks Victoria-operated **Bear Gully Camp Site** (BYO water), by the beach in Walkerville South. Just pitch your tent if there's a spot available.

Wake up to a view of Wilsons Promontory in the stylish, self-contained **Bear Gully Coastal Cottages** (☎ 5663 2364; www.beargullycottages.com.au; 33 Maitland Ct, Walkerville South; d from \$230). The light-wooden furnishings and fresh yellow and cream walls give an airy, seaside feel. The

VOLUNTEERING

Interested in doing some volunteer work? National parks and organic farms are two options for travellers.

Parks Victoria (☎ 13 16 93; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au) operates a programme for volunteers at u Promontory National Park, Buchan Caves Reserve and Croajingolong National Park during the Christmas and Easter holidays. Volunteers act as camp ground hosts for a minimum of two weeks and are involved in the day to day operations of the park assisting visitors and rangers. Volunteers camp for free; tents can be provided. Apply through Parks Victoria.

Willing Workers On Organic Farms (WWOOF; ☎ 5155 0218; www.wwoof.com.au; 2615 Gelantipy Rd, W Tree) is a national organisation with its base in East Gippsland. Volunteers work on organic farms that are members of the WWOOF association, in exchange for their meals and accommodation.

cottages front onto a lush green lawn, and it's a few minutes walk down a private track to the beach.

FISH CREEK

☎ 03 / pop 730

You know you've arrived in one quirky, fun little town when you see the giant fish lying on top of the pub (the locals will likely tell you it was washed up in the last flood). The shops have names such as Fishy Tales (a book store), and the park tables and street seats are shaped like fish.

Known as the Fishy Pub (of course), the **Promontory Gate Hotel Motel** (☎ 5683 2404; Old Waratah Rd; s/d hotel \$25/45, motel \$45/65; 🏠) is a budget traveller's delight. The pub rooms are Spartan but clean and have had a relatively recent décor makeover, so the ancient shared bathroom comes as a surprise. The motel rooms (tacked-on in the 1970s) are serviceable and have air-con. The bistro food is excellent.

The sunny **Flying Cow Cafe** (☎ 5683 2338; 9 Falls Rd; lunch \$5-15; 🍷 lunch Fri-Mon) has made a break from the fish theme, and the owners' friends have done an extraordinary job collecting cow mementos for them. Light lunches, and cuppas are served in mandatory cow mugs.

There's a **V/Line** (☎ 13 61 96; www.vline.com.au) bus service from Melbourne (\$14.50, 2½ hours).

YANAKIE

☎ 03 / pop 280

The nearest settlement to Wilsons Promontory, Yanakie – an Aboriginal word meaning 'between waters' – is a tiny place with many indulgent sleeping options.

You can take in glorious views of the Prom without leaving your very-comfortable bed

at **Black Cockatoo Cottages** (☎ 5687 1306; www.blackcockatoo.com; 60 Foley Rd; d \$140) – private, stylish, black-timber, self-contained cottages.

The new, luxury, self-contained accommodation at **Limosa Rise** (☎ 5687 1135; www.limosarise.com.au; 40 Dalgleish Rd; d \$200-270; 🏠) has already won regional and state awards. Not surprising, given the contemporary design of the three tastefully-appointed cottages with their full-length glass windows taking full advantage of sweeping views across Corner Inlet.

You need a car to get to Yanakie, which is 25km from Foster.

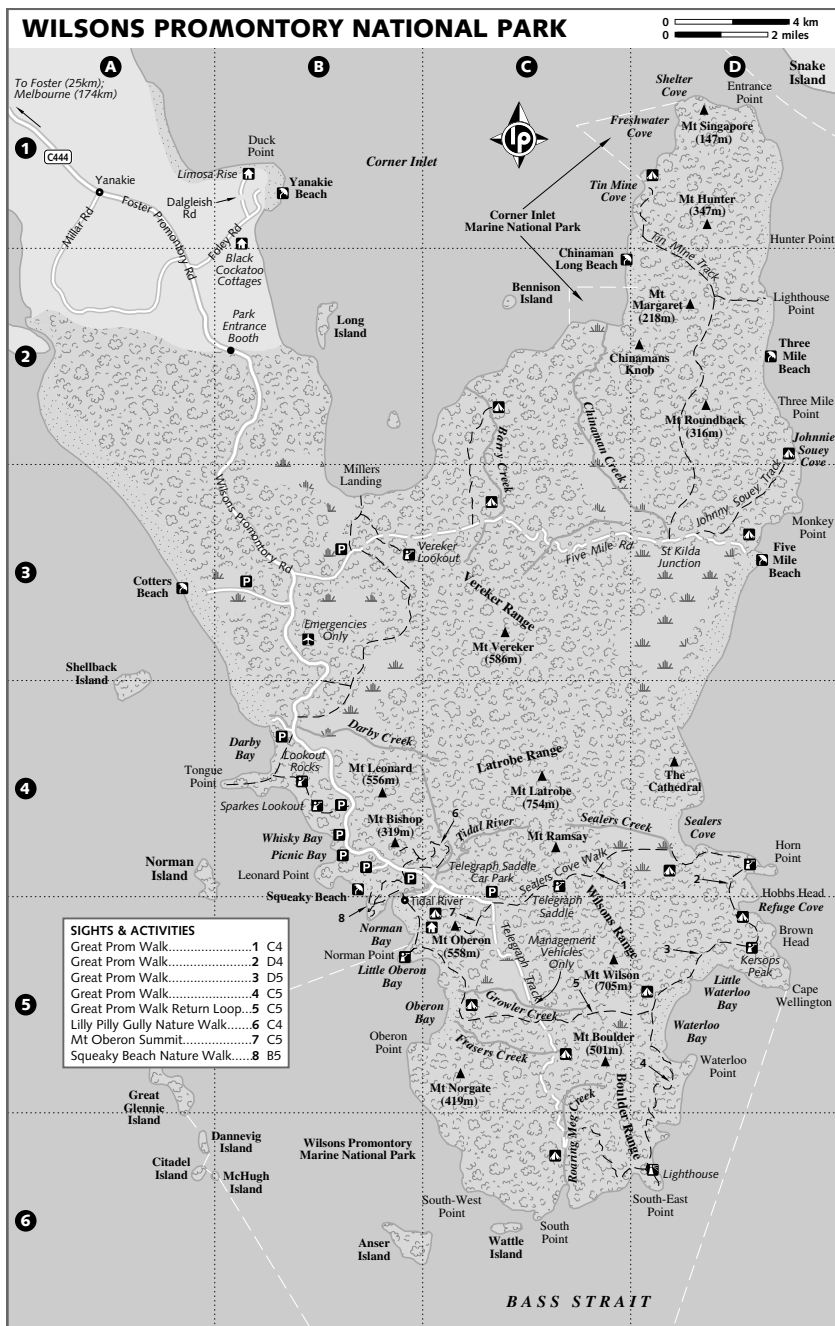
WILSONS PROMONTORY NATIONAL PARK

With more than 80km of walking tracks, wonderful beaches for swimming and surfing, and abundant wildlife, 'the Prom' is one of the most popular national parks in Australia. The park caters to day-trippers looking for short walks, experienced hikers wanting a wilderness experience, and everyone in between. The wildlife around Tidal River is incredibly tame: kookaburras and rosellas lurk expectantly (but you're not allowed to feed them), and wombats nonchalantly waddle out of the undergrowth.

Wilsons Promontory was an important area for the Kurnai and Boonwurrung Aborigines, and middens have been found in many places along the west coast. The southernmost part of mainland Australia, the Prom was once part of a land bridge that allowed people to walk to Tasmania.

Information

The helpful **Parks Victoria** (☎ 1800 350 552, 13 19 63; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au; 🕒 8am-4.30pm) office in Tidal River books all accommodation in the



TOP FIVE PROM WALKS

The Prom's delights are best discovered on foot. Times and distances include walking back.

Sealers Cove Walk

This is the best overnight walk to do at the Prom. Start from the Telegraph Saddle car park and walk down Telegraph Track (it's better than returning uphill via this gnarly track), and stay overnight at beautiful Little Waterloo Bay (12km, 4½ hours). The next day walk on to Sealers Cove via Refuge Cove and return to Telegraph Saddle car park (24km, 7½ hours).

Great Prom Walk

This is the most popular long-distance hike, a moderate 45km circuit across to Sealers Cove, down to Refuge Cove, Waterloo Bay, the lighthouse and back. Allow two to three days and coordinate your walks with tide times, as creek crossings can be hazardous. By prior arrangement with the Parks Victoria office it's possible to visit or stay at the lighthouse.

Lilly Pilly Gully Nature Walk

It's an easy walk (5km, two hours) through heathland and eucalypt forests, with lots of wildlife. Or take the longer route through stringybark forests (6km, two to three hours).

Mt Oberon Summit

Starting from Telegraph Saddle car park, this moderate to hard walk (7km, 2½ hours) is rewarded by excellent panoramic views from the summit. From November to Easter a free shuttle bus operates between Tidal River car park and Mt Oberon car park (a gentle way to start the Great Prom Walk).

Squeaky Beach Nature Walk

Another easy stroll of 5km (two hours) returning through coastal tea trees and banksias to a sensational white-sand beach. Go barefoot on the beach to find out where the name comes from.

park and issues permits for camping away from Tidal River. Bookings can be made up to 12 months in advance.

The only access road into the park leads to **Tidal River**, which has the Parks Victoria office, an education centre, petrol, general store with internet facilities and an open-air cinema (in summer only). A medical centre operates for limited hours in high season. Day entry to the park is \$10 per car (included in the overnight charge if you're camping).

Activities

BUSHWALKING

There's an extensive choice of walking tracks that take you through swamps, forests, marshes, valleys of tree ferns, and long beaches lined with sand dunes. The Parks Victoria office has details of walks, from 15-minute strolls to overnight and longer hikes. For some serious exploration, buy a copy of *Discovering the Prom* (\$15).

The northern area of the park is much less visited – most walks in this wilderness area are overnight or longer, and are mainly for

experienced bushwalkers. Wood fires are not permitted anywhere in the park.

SURFING & DIVING

SEAL Diving Services (p110) offer dives for certified divers, and **Learn to Surf Offshore Surf School** (p111) run surfing lessons here.

Tours

Bunyip Tours (☎ 1300 286 947, 9650 9680; www.bunyiptours.com; 1-/3-day tours \$110/\$160) One-day guided tours to the Prom, departing from Melbourne, with the option of staying another two unguided days. Camping costs and gear are included in the three-day trip. There's a discount for YHA members.

First Track Adventures (☎ 5634 2761; www.firsttrackadventures.com.au; per day \$99, overnight \$189, incl meals) This Gippsland based company organises bushwalking and abseiling trips to the Prom.

Hiking Plus (☎ 9431 1050; www.hikingplus.com; 5-day hikes \$1420-1712) This tour company organises hikes to the Prom from nearby Foster where it has comfortable guesthouse accommodation (including spa) for the start and end of each trip. Packages include two- to three-day hikes, meals, a massage and spa.

Sleeping

TIDAL RIVER & AROUND

The following accommodation (huts, cabins, camp sites and cottages) should be booked well in advance through **Parks Victoria** (☎ 1800 350 552, 13 19 63; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au).

Camp Sites (unpowered sites per car & 3 adults (or 2 adults & 2 children) \$21.50, extra adult/child/car \$5/2.50/6.50) Tidal River has 480 camp sites. For the Christmas school holiday period there's a ballot for sites (apply online by 31 July at www.parkweb.vic.gov.au). For this peak time Parks Victoria reserves some sites for overseas and interstate visitors; there's a two-night maximum stay for these, and the sites can be booked in advance. There are another 11 bush-camping areas around the Prom, all with pit or compost toilets, but nothing else in the way of facilities; you need to carry in your own drinking water. Overnight hikers need camping permits (adult/child \$7.50/3.50 per night), which should be booked ahead through Parks Victoria.

Huts & Cabins (4-/6-bed huts \$60/92, cabins d \$158) Tidal River's cosy wooden huts have bunks and kitchenettes but no bathroom. There are also spacious and private self-contained timber cabins here, with large sliding-glass doors and decking overlook the bush or river. They're simple but ultra-comfortable, and have the luxury of a bathtub. The smaller 1960s motel-style units have been bulldozed and will be replaced with more contemporary units from 2010.

Safari Tents (d/f \$240/280) Nestled in bushland at Tidal River, these plush tents (which sleep up to four) are the latest addition to the park's accommodation. Besides comfortable queen-size beds, they also have bathrooms, and there's a shared tent kitchen.

Lighthouse Keepers' Cottages (8-12-bed cottage per person \$47-74) Magnificent, heritage-listed, 1850s cottages with thick stone walls, on a pile of land that juts out into the wild ocean. Kick back after the 19km hike here and watch ships or whales passing by. You can usually visit the lighthouse itself, depending on ranger availability. Prices increase 50% on Saturday nights.

FOSTER

Prom Coast Backpackers (☎ 5682 2171; www.yha.com.au; 40 Station Rd; dm/d/f \$25/60/80; ☑) There are no hostels in the park, but nearby Foster has this cosy renovated cottage with contemporary

wooden furnishings that sleeps 10. It's close to the shops and across the road from a good playground. The friendly owners can usually organise a lift to the Prom for \$20. Prices are about 10% higher for non-YHA members.

Warralee Holiday Apartments (☎ 5682 2171; www.gippsland.com/web/warraleeholidayapartments; d/f \$120/130; ☑) Next door to Prom Coast Backpackers and under the same management are these comfortable, two-bedroom apartments, some with air-con.

Eating

Stock up in Foster, which has supermarkets and a fruit shop, on your way to the Prom. In Tidal River, the general store has supplies of all the basics, there's a takeaway shop and the recent addition of a **café** (mains \$12-19; ☑ breakfast, lunch & dinner), serving light lunches and bistro-style meals.

Getting There & Away

There isn't any direct public transport between Melbourne and the Prom, though there are day trips and organised tours.

There is a new **bus service** (☎ 0428-672 833) operating on Friday evenings from Foster to Tidal River via Fish Creek (\$6.30, 1¼ hours) at 7pm, with a return service on Sundays (departs 2.35pm). Each service connects with V/Line's Melbourne service at Fish Creek.

PORT ALBERT

☎ 03 / pop 250

Port Albert is still a quaint old fishing village, but it's fast reinventing itself with old buildings being converted into contemporary accommodation, cafés and galleries. Port Albert proudly pronounces itself as Victoria's first established port. The many historic timber buildings in the main street date from its busy 1850s port days – each has a brass plaque outlining its history.

Maritime Museum (☎ 5183 2520; Tarraville Rd; adult/child \$5/1; ☑ 10.30am-4pm daily Sep-May, Sat & Sun Jun-Aug) The enthusiasm of the volunteer staff here is contagious, as they give you some quick highlights of Port Albert's maritime history before leaving you to your own devices. Check out stories of shipwrecks, the town's whaling and sealing days, and local Aboriginal legends.

Port Albert Hotel/Motel (☎ 5183 2212; fax 5183 2429; 37 Wharf St; s/d \$55/75; ☑) Victoria's oldest continually licensed pub still draws the crowds.

Not surprisingly, with its friendly staff, quality bistro (mains \$15 to 30) and takeaway fish and chips (just ring the bell at the outdoor counter and someone will take your order). The motel rooms are clean but faded.

Rodondo (☎ 5183 2688; susan333@optusnet.com.au; 74 Tarraville Rd; cottage \$75, B&B d/f \$140/160) The contemporary blends seamlessly with the historic in this 1871 renovated home. Crisp white linen and comfortable furnishings give the rooms a homely but luxurious feel, and the friendly hospitality adds to the satisfaction of staying here. There's also a cosy self-contained cabin in the former wash-house.

Port Albert Wharf Fish & Chips (☎ 5183 2434, Port Albert Wharf; meals from \$6; ☑ lunch & dinner) The fish and chips here are renowned, and are also available eat-in at their new wharfside restaurant (which should be open by the time you read this).

General Store (☎ 5183 2291; 71 Tarraville Rd; mains \$10-22; ☑ breakfast & lunch Tue-Sun) This café-gallery inside in an 1856 general store has fast attracted a following. People travel a long way for the (limited) gourmet menu complemented with Gippsland wines (try the Gippsland cheese platter with crusty bread, marinated olives and fig relish). The Asian-influenced gallery stocks unexpected treasures such as Chinese peasant chairs and wooden croaking frogs, while the shop sells an eclectic range of books and gourmet local produce.

V/Line (☎ 13 61 96; www.vline.com.au) coach drop-off is possible at the turn-off to Port Albert on the South Gippsland Hwy, but it's another 7km to Port Albert.

MCLOUGHLIN'S BEACH

☎ 03 / pop 290

Somehow tourism development seems to have bypassed this tiny holiday-shack settlement. Surprisingly, there's not a single accommodation option or shop here – just a sleepy town edged by the salt marshes, mangroves, low-lying scrub and quiet waters of Nooramunga Marine & Coastal Park.

There's a lovely 40-minute return **walk** to Ninety Mile Beach. From the jetty take the boardwalk across an area of salt marsh and mangroves. Look out for orange-bellied parrots flying through the air and birds wading in the mudflats. Cross the wide arm of the inlet at an old wooden bridge to meet a sandy track that passes through banksia forest, then down steep sand dunes to the ocean.

The banksia track intersects with a walk east to **Reeve's Beach** (13km, four hours return) on Ninety Mile Beach (where bush camping is possible); or west to **McLoughlin's Entrance** (6km, two hours return).

WEST GIPPSLAND – TYNONG TO YARRAGON

This is the quickest route from Melbourne to Sale, though it's easy to get distracted stopping at creative Yarragon, detouring to historic Walhalla or along Grand Ridge Rd. Drive straight through and you'll see Gippsland's industrial heartland with the smoking chimney stacks that power most of Victoria.

YARRAGON

☎ 03 / pop 1,140

Yarragon has taken advantage of the highway passing through and evolved into something of a mecca for gifts and gourmet goodies. Innovative glassware and woodwork are a feature of the **Town & Country Gallery** (☎ 5634 2229; www.townandcountrygallery.com.au; 111 Princes Hwy; ☑ 10am-5pm), showcasing some of Gippsland's finest artists. **Gippsland Food & Wine** (☎ 5634 2451; http://gippsland.com/web/GippslandFoodWine/; 123 Princes Hwy; ☑ 7.30am-5pm) has a wide selection of local wines and produce, including a large deli. It's also a visitors centre.

Sticado (☎ 5634 2101; The Village Walk; breakfast \$7-16, lunch mains \$5.50-22; ☑ breakfast & lunch Wed-Mon) offers the best food in town and specialises in beef dishes from its own cattle farm.

Signposted off the highway from nearby Trafalgar South is **Sunny Creek Fruit & Berry Farm** (☎ 5634 7526; 69 Tudor Rd, Childers; ☑ 9am-5pm Sat & Sun Nov-Jul). It's a beautiful 7km drive from the highway through some remnant rainforest to pick a bucketful of organic raspberries, strawberries or gooseberries.

LAKES DISTRICT

The Gippsland Lakes comprise the largest inland waterway system in Australia. There are three main lakes that interconnect: Lake King, Lake Victoria and Lake Wellington. The 'lakes' are actually shallow lagoons, separated from the ocean by a narrow strip of sand dunes known as Ninety Mile Beach. Despite nearby bustling Bairnsdale and the Princes Hwy, the 400 sq km Lakes District is remote, with just a half-dozen access points, including Metung, Paynesville, Loch Sport and Lakes

DETOUR: GRAND RIDGE ROAD

The spectacular 132km mostly gravel Grand Ridge Rd winds along the top of the Strzelecki Ranges, running from midway between Warragul and Korumburra to midway between Traralgon and Yarram, providing a fabulous excursion through fertile farmland that was once covered with forests of giant mountain ash trees. There are still valleys of tree ferns – you'll likely see more on this drive than you will the rest of your life. If you're going to travel the length of the road, allow the best part of a day – it makes a good alternative to the Princes Hwy. Pick it up south of Warragul, then leave it and travel through the Tarra-Bulga National Park to Yarram on the South Gippsland Hwy, then pick up the main east coast route again.

Only 3km in from the Princes Hwy, you could make your first stop the excellent **Wild Dog Winery** (☎ 5623 1117; www.wilddogwinery.com.au; Warragul-Korumburra Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm), one of Gippsland's first wineries. It produces a great range of wines, all grown and bottled on its 30 acres, and has fabulous views across the Strzeleckis. The only place of any size along the route is the pretty township of **Mirboo North**, home to Gippsland's only brewery, the award-winning **Grand Ridge Brewery & Restaurant** (☎ 5668 2222; www.grand-ridge.com.au; Main St; mains \$16-29; ☎ lunch & dinner) producing chemical- and preservative-free beer. The restaurant food is fresh and prepared from local produce, including steaks from the local beef farm. Vegetarians are catered for too – try the slow-cooked lentil curry, made from scratch each time.

You'll pass through the rainforest gully of **Tarra-Bulga National Park**, one of the last remnants of the magnificent forests that once covered all of South Gippsland. There are some good short walks here, including the **Tarra Valley Rainforest Walk** (1.5km, 35 minutes return) to **Cyathia Falls**. Also here is a **visitors centre** (☎ 5196 6166; ☎ 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) and the easy **Fern Gully Nature Walk** (750m, 15 minutes return). Camping is not permitted in the park, but you can stay at the nearby **Tarra Valley Tourist Park** (☎ 5186 1283; www.tarra-valley.com; 1906 Tarra Valley Rd; unpowered/powerd sites \$24/28; cabins with/without bathroom from \$100/75), nestled in rainforest with camping in a pretty riverside setting or cabin accommodation.

For sheer indulgence, make your last stop the **Tarra Valley Rainforest Retreat** (☎ 5186 1313; www.tarra-valleyrainforestretreat.com; 1788 Tarra Valley Rd; s/d 145/170; ☎). This elegant Swiss chalet-style accommodation doubles as a chocolate school. Chocolate appreciation courses with the resident Swiss chocolatier cost \$50/55 for guests/nonguests.

Entrance. You need a boat to truly appreciate this remarkable lakes system. Part of the 17,200-hectare Gippsland Lakes Coastal Park includes the Lakes National Park, which protects 2400 hectares of native habitat (p122).

SALE

☎ 03 / pop 13,340

Sale is the gateway to the Lakes District and a great lunch spot. For those who'd like to linger longer, there's also some fabulous accommodation and classy restaurants and bars here, and a striking entertainment centre.

Information

Central Gippsland visitors centre (☎ 5144 1108; www.tourismwellington.com.au; 8 Foster St; ☎ 9am-5pm) Has internet facilities and a free accommodation booking service.

Parks Victoria (☎ 13 19 63; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au; 1 Lacey St; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 1-3.30pm Tue & Fri) Turn right at Foster St into Guthridge St then right into Lacey St.

Sights & Activities

The 4km **Sale Wetlands Walk**, which skirts around Lake Guthridge and Lake Guyatt, incorporates an Indigenous Art Trail commemorating the importance of the wetlands to the local Gunai/Kurnai population. Stop off for a coffee overlooking the lake, or take a dip, at the new state-of-the-art **Aqua Energy** (☎ 5142 3700; 1 McIntosh Dr; pool admission adult/child \$4.70/3.20; ☎ 6am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) with its six swimming pools. For the kids, take the extended trail past a very cool playground and a fauna park with furry favourites.

Sale Common, a 300 hectare wildlife refuge with bird hides, an observatory, waterhole, boardwalks and other walking tracks is part of an internationally recognised wetlands system. The wildlife refuge is 2km south of Sale on the South Gippsland Hwy. The best time to see lots of bird life is early morning or late evening (wear some mosquito repellent).

The **Gippsland Art Gallery** (☎ 5142 3372; www.wellington.vic.gov.au/gallery; Civic Centre, 68 Foster St; adult/child \$3/1.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 1-5pm Sat & Sun) is always worth a look, exhibiting work by locally and nationally renowned artists and hosting touring exhibitions.

Sleeping & Eating

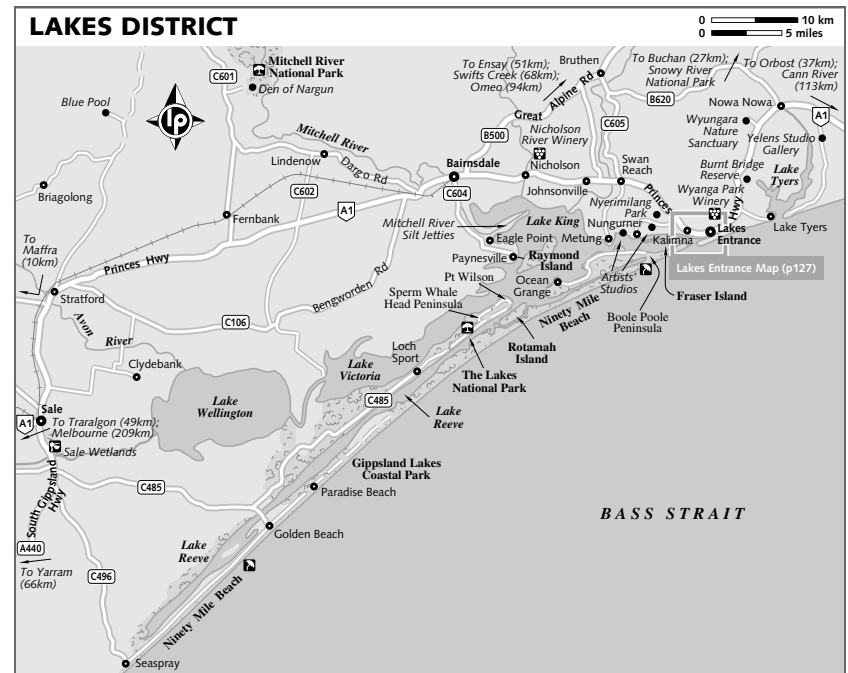
Free camping is permitted (no facilities) in the Lake Wellington wetlands area (excluding Sale Common), as long as you're at least 20m away from the water.

Cambrai Hostel (☎ 5147 1600; www.maffra.net.au/hostel/backpackers.htm; 117 Johnson St, Maffra; dm/d incl breakfast \$25/60; ☎) There are no backpackers in Sale, but in nearby Maffra this place is a budget haven. It's in a 120-year-old building that was once a doctor's residence and is now a relaxed hostel with licensed bar, open fire and pool table in the cosy lounge. There's a tiny self-catering kitchen and clean, cheerful rooms. Between October and April, loads of backpackers seize the opportunity to work on local vegetable farms. Book well ahead if you want a double or family room as they're snapped up by the long-termers.

minnies (☎ 5144 3344; www.minnies.com.au; 202 Gibsons Rd; s/d \$150/160; ☎) It takes some flair to make an outlandish purple-and-green colour scheme not only work but look inspired. This modern B&B does both in its huge lounge area. Choose between the funky green room and the more traditional rose room, with its antique-look bed head complete with rose imprints.

Relish@the Gallery (☎ 5144 5044; Gippsland Art Gallery, 68-70 Foster St; dishes \$4-30; ☎ breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Wed-Sat) Take a table by the window and check out the old port of Sale while you tuck into dishes such as the salmon, spinach, capers, red onion and goats cheese omelette in this bustling café. There's an extensive kids menu, and baby change facilities are available.

bis cucina (☎ 5144 3388; Wellington Entertainment Centre, 100 Foster St; breakfast & lunch \$6-22, dinner \$19-34; ☎ breakfast Sat & Sun, lunch daily, dinner Tue-Sat) Relaxed and attentive service combined with carefully chosen modern Australian cuisine makes this a fine choice for both the serious foodie and the theatre goer wanting a quick pre-show meal. Sit on the deck with a glass of wine from



DETOUR: WALHALLA

📍 03 / pop 18

Tiny Walhalla, 46km northeast of Moe, is one of Victoria's most historic and charming towns. Gold was discovered here in 1862 by Ned Stringer and the population exploded. However, by the time the railway from Moe came into service in 1910, the gold supplies and population were (and still are) in decline. There's still plenty to see in Walhalla, and the drive up to the town is beautiful. Stringers Creek runs through the centre of the town, which is in an idyllic valley encircled by a cluster of historic buildings set into the hillsides. Online, check out www.walhalla.org.au.

Sights & Activities

Many of Walhalla's attractions are open year-round, but there's more happening on weekends and during high season. The best way to see the town is on foot – take the **circuit walk** (45 minutes) anticlockwise from the information shelter as you enter town. This passes the main sights before climbing up the hill to follow the old timber tramway, then heads back down to the car park. The tramway also leads to the **Australian Alps Walking Track** (www.austrianalps.deh.gov.au/parks/walktrack), which leads all the way to Canberra. There are other walks to Thomson Bridge, Poverty Point or on to the Baw Baw Plateau.

Guided tours of the **Long Tunnel Extended Gold Mine** (📞 5165 6259; adult/child/family \$15/12/36; 🕒 tours 1.30pm Mon-Fri, noon, 2pm & 3pm Sat & Sun), off Walhalla-Beardmore Rd, give you a look at Cohens Reef, once one of Australia's top reef gold producers.

You can take a very scenic 20-minute ride between Thomson Station (on the main road 3.5km before Walhalla) and Walhalla on the **Walhalla Goldfields Railway** (📞 9513 3969; return adult/child/family \$17/12/37; 🕒 from Thomson station 11.40am, 1.40pm & 3.40pm, from Walhalla station 12.10pm, 2pm & 3.50pm, Wed, Sat & Sun). The train snakes along Stringers Creek Gorge, passing lovely forested gorge country and crosses a number of trestle bridges.

Back in town, steps lead up a steep hillside to **Walhalla Cricket Ground**, a spectacular place to hit a six.

Walhalla Cemetery gives a more sombre insight into the history of the area; the terrain here is so steep that some souls were buried sideways!

There's a group of restored shops on the main street, including **Walhalla Post Office & Museum** (📞 5165 6250; admission \$2; 🕒 10am-4pm), which offers ghost tours (\$22, 1½ hours) on the first three Saturdays of each month (7.30pm April to October, 8.30pm October to April) and shares some of the local legends.

For some seriously rugged mountain adventuring, **Mountain Top Experience** (📞 5134 6876; www.mountaintopexperience.com; adult & child \$20, family \$60) operates a 1½-hour 4WD Copper Mine Adventure trip most weekends and Wednesdays, along old coach roads to a disused mine.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping in Walhalla is free, and there are good bush camping areas along Stringer's Creek and the designated North Gardens camping area with toilets at the top of the town.

Windsor House (📞 9882 5985, 5165 6237; www.windsorhouse.com.au; Main Rd; d from \$160) The clock turns back more than a century when you step into this B&B with four-poster beds, fires and a library of old books. This 1878 building was a guesthouse during Walhalla's heyday and has been restored to its former glory. It's only open weekends and school holidays. No children under 12.

Walhalla Star Hotel (📞 5165 6262; www.starhotel.com.au; Main Rd; s & d \$199, tr \$229) The rebuilt historic Star Hotel offers stylish boutique-hotel accommodation with sophisticated designer décor and king-sized beds. The hotel has an equally upmarket restaurant, Parker's, for some fine dining (mains \$25 to \$27, open for dinner). No children under 12.

Walhalla Lodge Family Hotel (📞 5165 6226; Main Rd; mains \$14-22; 🕒 lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) A cosy one-room pub decked out with prints of old Walhalla, and serving reasonable pub grub.

BATALUK CULTURAL TRAIL

The Princes Hwy forms the backbone of the **Bataluk (Lizard) Cultural Trail** (www.maffra.net.au/bataluk/sites.htm), which follows a network of Gunai/Kurnai sites of significance. The trail was designed by the Gunai/Kurnai community in Gippsland to offer a greater appreciation and understanding of their traditional and contemporary lifestyles. The **Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation** (📞 5143 1644; www.ramahyuck.org; 117 Foster St, Sale; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) has an information brochure on the trail.

Sites along the Bataluk Cultural Trail include:

Sale Wetlands (p118)

Knob Reserve (p122)

The Den of Nargun (p124)

Howitt Park (p123)

Krowathunkoolong Keeping Place (p123)

Legend Rock (p126)

Buchan Caves (p130)

Burnt Bridge Reserve This reserve adjoins the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Reserve and has information boards about the reserve's history. When it was declared in 1971, it was the first time a State Government had given unconditional freehold title to residents of an Aboriginal reserve.

Salmon Rocks (p135)

All the sights are signposted from the Princes Hwy.

the extensive wine list. The bis has the most sumptuous children's menu in Gippsland with offerings such as organic chicken.

Drinking & Entertainment

Kaz Bah Lounge (📞 5143 3324; 118 Raymond St; 🕒 5pm-midnight Wed-Thu, 5pm-3am Fri, 7pm-3am Sat) Pull up a bar stool and admire the ceiling murals, massive pillars and chandelier in this Art Deco building while you wait for your cocktail.

Wellington Entertainment Centre (📞 5143 3200; www.wellington.vic.gov.au/entertainment; 100 Foster St; tickets \$28-50) Top-class state and national theatre productions, comedy shows and music performances make brief appearances at the centre.

Getting There & Away

V/Line (📞 13 61 96; www.vline.com.au) has seven train and train/coach services daily between Melbourne and Sale (\$20, 2½ hours).

NINETY MILE BEACH

Isolated Ninety Mile Beach is a long, narrow strip of beach backed by dunes, swamplands and lagoons, stretching from McLoughlin's Beach to Marlo. Beaches are great for surf-fishing and walking, though they can be dangerous for swimming, except where patrolled at Seaspray, Woodside and Lakes Entrance.

From Seaspray to Lakes Entrance is the Gippsland Lakes Coastal Park with oodles of low-lying coastal shrubs, banksias and

tea tree, and bursts of native wildflowers in spring. It's also home to plenty of kangaroos and black wallabies, so take it easy when driving, especially at night.

The main access roads are from Yarram to Woodside Beach, and from Sale to Seaspray, Golden Beach and Loch Sport. Stock up on supplies in Sale or Yarram, as the townships along here are small and facilities are limited.

If you're interested in the challenge of hiking the length of the Ninety Mile Beach, permission for remote camping can be obtained from **Parks Victoria** (📞 13 19 63; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au).

At the western end of Ninety Mile Beach, **Reeves Beach** has a camping ground with pit toilets. For a retro blast, go to **Seaspray** (population 190), which has somehow escaped the rampant development along the coast and is packed full of old holiday shacks – it's how Victorian coastal towns used to be in the 1970s. There's one shop that acts as the takeaway, minisupermarket and post office. The long narrow strip of caravans and camp sites in the main street comprises the **Seaspray Caravan Park** (📞 5146 4364; Main St; unpowered & powered sites \$20), and it's a short stroll over the dunes to the patrolled beach. **Ronnie's Tea Rooms** (📞 5146 4420; 13 Trood St; Devonshire teas \$7; 🕒 morning & afternoon tea Sat & Sun) offers respite from the beach scene. A cuppa and a scone often come accompanied with a chat with Ronnie in the sunny tea room overlooking his neat garden.

On the road between Seaspray and Golden Beach, there are free Parks Victoria **camp sites**, nestled in on the beach side and shaded by tea tree – they're hugely popular over summer. Some sites have barbecues and pit toilets, but you need to bring your own water and firewood. Hot showers are available at Golden Beach for \$2.

Loch Sport (population 780) is a small, bushy town sprawling along a narrow spit of land with a lake on one side and the ocean on the other. There are some good swimming areas here for children. The **Marina Hotel** (☎ 5146 0666; mains \$15-23; ☎ lunch & dinner) is perched by the lake and has a friendly vibe and superb sunset views. The bistro menu, featuring fish, isn't bad either. A Loch Sport real estate agent manages 40 **holiday houses** (☎ 5146 0411; www.garypowersrealestate.com; Lot 217, Lake St; houses per night \$110-250), ranging from ordinary to luxury, available for nightly or weekly rental.

90 Mile Beach Holiday Retreat (☎ 5146 0320; www.90milebeachholidayretreat.com; Track 10, off Golden Beach-Loch Sport Rd; unpowered/powerd sites \$26/28, caravans/bunk rooms d \$60/75, lodge & cottage d & f \$155-165) on a huge chunk of land a few kilometres from Loch Sport, has 2.4km of pristine beach frontage. It's separated from the rest of the world by 6km of dirt track, leading off the road from Golden Beach to Loch Sport. There are plenty of shady, grassy areas for camping, small ex-Melbourne Olympic Village bunkrooms and spacious, light and airy lodges. The comfortable self-contained cottage is nestled into the dunes, and only a minute from the beach. Take insect repellent to ward off the mosquitoes.

The Lakes National Park

This narrow strip of coastal bushland is surrounded by lakes and ocean. It's a beautiful and quiet little spot to set up camp, except in January when everyone else has the same idea. You can reach this national park by road from adjoining Loch Sport, or by boat from Paynesville (5km).

Banksia and eucalypt woodland abound with areas of low-lying heathland and some swampy salt-marsh scrub. In spring the park is carpeted with native wildflowers and has one of Australia's best displays of native orchids. You're likely to spot kangaroos, as well as wallabies, possums, emus and possibly koalas. There's plenty of bird life too – more than 190 species have been sighted, includ-

ing the rare white-bellied sea eagle and the endangered little tern.

A loop road through the park provides good car access, and there are well-marked **walking trails**, including some short walks, and several picnic areas (BYO water). **Point Wilson**, at the eastern tip of the mainland section of the park is the best picnic spot and a popular gathering spot for kangaroos (no feeding them of course). The only camping is at **Emu Bight** (sites up to 6 people \$11.50), nestled in bushland with pit toilets and fireplaces available; BYO water. Sites can be booked through the Sale office of Parks Victoria (p118).

STRATFORD

☎ 03 / pop 1440

Stratford is a pretty little town on the Princes Hwy, a 15-minute drive north from Sale, and has retained its authenticity and appeal without going tourist-kitsch. There's an amazing diversity of shops here: a Turkish rug shop, hobby shop for train lovers, and a lolly shop. The contemporary **Red River Designs Gallery** (☎/fax 5145 6769; Tyers St; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Fri-Sun) is worth a browse for some distinctive local jewellery and woodwork. The **Shakespeare on the River Festival** (☎ 5145 6133; www.stratfordshakepeare.com.au) is held here annually in April/May, with community and professional theatre productions, and some fabulous activities for children as well as adults.

One of the stops of the Bataluk Cultural Trail, the forested **Knob Reserve**, on a bend in the River Avon, has a deeply calming effect. It feels a world away from the buzz of the highway and has sensational views across the river flats. It was once a meeting place for local Aboriginal clans who gathered here for corroborees and ceremonies. There are lots of picnic tables and a refreshingly old-style playground. The reserve is signposted from the highway.

At **Overland Gold Adventures** (☎ 5145 6701; www.maffra.net.au/overlandgoldadventures; 15 Dawson St; day trip for up to 6 people incl lunch \$330), Graham, a friendly third-generation gold miner, operates 4WD tours exploring the gold-mining areas of Gippsland, tailor-made to suit the needs of the group. Visit old mines and prospect for gold. Overnight trips are also possible.

Sleeping & Eating

Tranquil B&B (☎ 5145 6094; bethrip@s140.aone.net.au; 4 Merrick St; r \$95) The accommodation in this

historic home is quirky and vibrant, a bit like its friendly owner Beth, a local identity. The artistic multicoloured rooms are uplifting, and one has its own bathroom and kitchen.

Stratford Bakehouse (☎ 5145 6003; 35 Tyers St; items \$2-6; ☎ 6am-6pm Mon-Fri, 6am-4pm Sat-Sun) Justifiably popular for its pies and cakes (try the 'pear slam'), this is a nice no-frills spot for a quick bite or espresso.

Wa-De-Lock Cellar Door (☎ 5145 7050; 76 Tyers St; dishes \$3-13; ☎ breakfast & lunch, dinner by appointment) Kick back with a glass of Gippsland chardonnay in the leafy wine garden while you're served up Wa-De-Lock's own focaccias or pizza bases topped with gourmet local produce. Save room for some of the handmade truffles, and as you toddle out, pick up some Gippsland cheeses, wines and jams.

BAIRNSDALE

☎ 03 / pop 11,290

On the banks of the Mitchell River, Bairnsdale is East Gippsland's commercial hub with a bustling main street and a sprinkling of attractions. Here you'll find an absorbing insight into Aboriginal history, art galleries and the Macleod Morass wetlands – a real contrast to the hubbub of the main street.

Information

Bairnsdale visitors centre (☎ 1800 637 060, 5152 3444; www.lakesandwilderness.com.au; 240 Main St; ☎ 9am-5pm; ☎)

East Gippsland Shire Library (☎ 5152 4225; Service St; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon, 10am-1pm Tue, 9am-6pm Wed & Fri, 9am-7pm Thu, 9.30am-12pm Sat; ☎) Free internet access.

Parks Victoria (☎ 5152 0600; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au; 73 Calvert St; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri)

Sights & Activities

Krowathunkoolong Keeping Place (☎ 5152 1891; 37-53 Dalmahoy St; adult/child \$3.50/2.50; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) It's almost impossible not to be stirred by this Koorie cultural exhibition space that explores Gunai/Kurnai life from the Dreamtime until after white settlement. The exhibition traces the Gunai/Kurnai clan from their Dreamtime ancestors, Borun the pelican and his wife Tuk the musk duck. Also covered is life at Lake Tyers Mission, east of Lakes Entrance, which is now a trust privately owned by Aboriginal shareholders. Items such as an impressive 2.5m bark canoe and a trumpet-like eel-and-fish basket reveal the Kurnai's skill in fishing the waterways of the area. The unmitigated mas-

sacres of the Kurnai during 1839-49 are also detailed. The Keeping Place is signposted from the highway and is behind the train station.

On the edge of town (signposted from the highway at the roundabout as you arrive in Bairnsdale from the west) the **MacLeod Morass Boardwalk** is a stunning internationally recognised wetland reserve with walking tracks and bird hides.

East Gippsland Aboriginal Arts Corporation (☎ 5153 1002; www.austrialiacouncil.gov.au; 222 Nicholson St; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) is an art gallery featuring the work of local Aboriginal artists.

East Gippsland Art Gallery (☎ 5153 1988; www.eastgippslandartgallery.org.au; 2 Nicholson St; admission free; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) is a bright, open space that has regular exhibitions, mostly the work of East Gippsland artists.

The grand red-brick **St Mary's Catholic Church** (☎ 5152 3106; Princes Hwy; tours 1pm Mon-Fri, 2.30pm Sat & Sun) towers over the western end of the shopping strip, beside the visitors centre, and is notable for its opulent ceiling murals of rosy-cheeked cherubs.

Howitt Park is a popular playground stop on the highway with a flying fox and giant slide. Just near the slide is a **Scarred Tree**, significant to the local Aboriginal community, which has had bark removed to make canoes or food and infant carriers. Across the road from the park is the starting point for the popular bike and walking track, the **East Gippsland Rail Trail** leading northeast 95km to Orbost. You can also detour and take the **Discovery Trail** via state forest to Lakes Entrance.

About 4km northeast of the town of Nicholson and signposted from the highway, **Nicholson River Winery** (☎ 5156 8241; www.nicholsonriverwinery.com.au; 57 Liddells Rd, Nicholson; ☎ 10am-4pm), best known for its award-winning whites, has tastings in a garden with a brilliant location overlooking its namesake river (\$2 per person refundable with purchase). Phone ahead in winter and nonholiday times to make sure it is open.

Sleeping & Eating

There are numerous motel options on the highway (Main St).

Mitchell Gardens Holiday Park (☎ 5152 4654; www.mitchellgardens.com.au; unpowered/powerd sites \$20/23, cabins d \$50-86; ☎) East of the town centre on the banks of the Mitchell River, this is a friendly park with plenty of shade for cabins and a little for tents. The deluxe cabins overlook the river.

WORTH A TRIP: MITCHELL RIVER NATIONAL PARK

About 42km northwest of Bairnsdale, this park has some beautiful green valleys, rocky outcrops, camping areas and lovely hiking, including the two-day, 18km **Mitchell River Walking Track**. Its best-known feature is the **Den of Nargun**, a small cave that, according to Aboriginal stories, is haunted by a strange, half-stone creature, the Nargun.

Access tracks lead into the park off Dargo Rd. There are four free camp sites (all with toilets) within the park, but bring your own drinking water and firewood. Park notes are available at www.parkweb.vic.gov.au, or from the Parks Victoria office in Bairnsdale.

Riversleigh Country Hotel (☎ 5152 6966; www.riversleigh.info; 1 Nicholson St; s/d incl breakfast from \$112/122; ♻️) This Victorian-era boutique hotel of ferns elegant rooms with heritage furnishings. Breakfast is served in the sunny conservatory and there's a formal restaurant here as well (mains \$10 to \$33, open for lunch and dinner Monday to Saturday), maximising the use of local ingredients in inventive modern cuisine. Disabled facilities are available.

Peppers (☎ 5152 3217; 222 Main St; fish & chips \$8; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm) This contemporary fish-and-chip shop adds flair to the usual offerings. Try its popular fish souvlaki (\$6.50) smothered with tzatziki.

Gourmet Deli (☎ 5152 1544; 144 Main St; dishes \$6-10; ☎ lunch Mon-Fri) They take their coffee seriously here, and you're encouraged to specify precisely how you like it. Tea lovers are also well catered for. Gourmet sandwich ingredients are on display in their deli and served up in thick crusty bread.

River Grill (☎ 5153 1421; 2 Wood St; mains \$27-36; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) You know you're in for an indulgent experience when you walk into this renovated 1880s building and see the white linen, balloon wine glasses and the four-page menu (with three pages of wine). The newest addition to East Gippsland's culinary scene, River Grill offers contemporary fine dining with Mediterranean flair.

Getting There & Away

Bairnsdale's **V/Line** (☎ 13 61 96; www.vline.com.au) station is on McLeod St, one block south of the

town centre. There are three daily train services between Melbourne and Bairnsdale (\$25, 3½ hours). From Bairnsdale, **V/Line buses** (☎ 5152 1711) operate daily to Lakes Entrance (\$5.50, 30 minutes) and Orbost (\$13, 1¼ hours).

EAGLE POINT

☎ 03 / pop 950

The small hamlet of Eagle Point is humbly home to the natural wonder of the 8km-long **Mitchell River Silt Jetties**, the second longest silt jetties in the world (after the Mississippi). You can view them from **Eagle Point Lookout**, and take a drive out on to them as well. The area is a prime fishing and bird-watching spot and a favourite with families for the safe swimming along the lakeside beach. There's also the 6-hectare **Eagle Point Reserve**, which is great bushland for walks and wildlife spotting.

Eagle Point Caravan Park (☎ /fax 5156 6232; Bay Rd; unpowered/powerd sites \$17/18, cabins \$58-78; ♻️) The caravan park is well-positioned with camp sites and deluxe cabins right by the lake, bordered on one side by Eagle Point Reserve. The park has the town's only shop.

Beachside Loft (☎ 5156 6345; beachside_loft@bigpond.com; cnr Bay & Boatramp Rd; r \$140; ♻️) This self-contained loft accommodation has a modern, airy, seaside feel with views over the water. A basket of breakfast goodies is provided.

Eagle Point is a 10km drive from Bairnsdale. Follow the signs from Bairnsdale to Paynesville and then take the Eagle Point turn-off. **Paynesville Bus Lines** (☎ 0418-516 405) runs daily (except Sunday) services from Bairnsdale train station and will drop off at Eagle Point Caravan Park on request (one way \$7).

PAYNESVILLE & RAYMOND ISLAND

Paynesville (population 2980) is a relaxed little boating town starting to sprawl in a suburban way – everyone seems to be discovering what a great spot it is from which to explore the Gippsland Lakes. The popular **Paynesville Jazz Festival** (www.paynesvillejazzfestival.com.au) happens on the last weekend in February.

You can take your own laptop along or use the terminals at **Clasique Computers** (☎ 5156 6448; 29 The Esplanade; 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat; ☎) for \$8 per hour.

Sights & Activities

Bull's Cruisers (☎ 5156 1200; www.bullscruisers.com.au; 54 Slip Rd; motor boat 4 nights 4-/8-berth \$1087/2022) has

motor cruisers sleeping from two to 10 people. Boats must be hired for a minimum of two nights, though it's only about 20% more to take the four-night option. **Mariners Cove Motel** (☎ 5156 7444; cnr Esplanade & Victoria St; hire per 4/8hr \$100/160) have the cheapest day boats for hire. No boat licences are required.

You're almost guaranteed to spot a koala at peaceful **Raymond Island** (population 480), a five minute ferry ride across McMillan Strait. There's a large colony of them that was relocated from Phillip Island in the 1950s. The small island has large areas of bush, with some good **walking tracks**. **Clydesdale Carriage Tours** (☎ 0413 029 084; Ferry Park; adult/child \$9/6; ☎) tours 10.30am-3pm Sat & Sun, or by appointment) offers a koala-spotting drive by horse and cart.

Sleeping & Eating

Paynesville Hotel (☎ 5156 6442; 75 The Esplanade; s/d/f \$55/77/87) The rooms above this local's pub will give you '70s flashbacks, but two have brilliant views overlooking the water.

Mariners Cove (☎ 5156 7444; www.marinerscove.resort.com; motel d/f \$135/165, apt \$160/205; ♻️) These bright, sunny waterside motel-style units are well located at the end of the shopping strip.

Gippsland Lakes Escapes (☎ 5156 0432; www.gippslandlakesescapes.com.au; 87 The Esplanade; d per 2 nights from \$340) This business offers a booking service for more than 60 holiday homes in Paynesville, Raymond Island and beyond.

Lake Gallery B&B (☎ 5156 0448; www.lakegallery.bedandbreakfast.com; 2a Backwater Ct; r \$195) This stylish B&B is perched on the water's edge and each room has its own original art work, king-sized bed and en suite spa, as well as dreamy views and private balconies. The B&B also has a small art gallery accessible to guests and open to the public occasionally for exhibitions.

Paynesville Seafoods (☎ 5156 6080; 67a The Esplanade; fish & chips \$7.50; ☎ lunch & dinner) The menu here is limited, but the fish is local and fresh. On a fine day, it's hard to beat sitting on the foreshore with your white paper package of fish.

Fisherman's Wharf Pavilion (☎ 5156 0366; 70 The Esplanade; mains \$6-18; ☎ breakfast & lunch Tue-Sun) The light bounces off the modern artwork and polished wooden floor, but the real attraction is being perched by the water with uninterrupted views of the passing boats and bird life. The food features fresh, local produce such as the delicious homemade toasted

muesli with organic Gippsland yoghurt, and slow-roasted seasonal fruit topped with almonds. It serves the best coffee in town and is food allergy-friendly.

Cafe Espas (☎ 5156 7275; Raymond Island Foreshore; mains \$26-32; ☎ lunch Fri-Sun; dinner Fri & Sat) Kick back with a glass of wine in hand on the veranda of this waterside café, and savour the perfectly cooked and beautifully presented modern Australian cuisine.

Wine Justice (☎ 5156 1395; 1/85 The Esplanade; ☎ 10am-7pm) Pack a picnic lunch with some of these quality cleanskin wines and gourmet local produce.

Getting There & Away

A car and passenger ferry runs a shuttle service every 30 minutes between Paynesville and Raymond Island (return per car \$7, pedestrians free, five minutes) from 8am to 10.30pm Monday to Friday, and slightly later on weekends.

Paynesville Bus Lines (☎ 0418-516 405) runs daily (except Sunday) services between Bairnsdale train station and Paynesville (\$8).

METUNG

☎ 03 / pop 730

Metung is the nicest town on the Gippsland Lakes. The unhurried charm of this picturesque village (www.metungtourism.com.au) on Bancroft Bay is contagious; it's an upmarket base for sailing and fishing and its shoreline is dotted with jetties and small wooden craft.

Metung visitors centre (☎ 5156 2969; www.metungaccommodation.com.au; 3/50 Metung Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm) has an accommodation booking service and also hires out boats.

Watch the boats bobbing in the Bancroft Bay marina from the bar at **Metung Yacht Club** (☎ 5156 2315; www.metungyachtclub.yachting.org.au; Metung Rd; ☎ bar from 4.30pm Wed-Sun). It also serves dinners from Wednesday to Saturday.

Sights & Activities

At noon each day **pelicans** fly in from all around like bomber planes, swooping on the fish issued outside the Metung Hotel. For a dip, head to the safe **swimming beach** next to Lake King Jetty.

Boats and yachts for cruising, fishing and sailing on the Gippsland Lakes are available from **Riviera Nautic** (☎ 5156 2243; www.rivieranautic.com.au; 185 Metung Rd; motor boat per day \$175, yachts per

3 days 4/8-berth \$1170/1980). Fuel and a boating lesson are included – a fabulous way of exploring the lakes. There are countless islands, jetties and stretches of beach around Metung to moor your boat at night.

You can take a 'happy hour' cruise (2½ hours) aboard the **Director** (☎ 5156 2628; adults/child \$42/free; ☎ 3pm Tue, Thu & Sat) on to Lakes Entrance. Drink and local cheeses are included. *The Director* management also hires out single and double **sea kayaks**, so you can paddle around to check out the quieter waters of the lakes (from \$25 per hour; \$65 for four hours).

Opposite Metung Yacht Club on the edge of Bancroft Bay is **Legend Rock**, a sacred Aboriginal site. According to Aboriginal oral histories, the rock represents a hunter who was turned to stone for not sharing the food he had caught. There were originally three rocks; the other two were destroyed during road-construction work, a sad reminder of some of the oblivious attitudes to Aboriginal culture. The remaining one was saved when an injunction was issued, under community pressure. The road into town shaves past the rock.

Providing a focus for the energetic local art scene is **nuart Metung** (☎ 5156 2909; www.nuartmetung.com; 69a Metung Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Thu-Mon), a new contemporary fine art gallery hosting exhibitions and showcasing the work of local artists.

Sleeping

There's little in the way of budget accommodation here.

Metung Holiday Villas (☎ 5156 2306; www.metungholidayvillas.com; cnr Mairburn & Stirling Rds; d \$100-150; ☎ ☎) Metung's former caravan park has reinvented itself as a minivillage of luxury cabins. The landscaped bush gardens around them provide some privacy. Linen is provided.

Moorings At Metung (☎ 5156 2750; www.themoorings.com.au; 44 Metung Rd; r \$140-270; ☎ ☎) In the heart of Metung village, this large, contemporary apartment complex has motel rooms and self-contained units all with water views. It's a luxuriously comfortable option with stylish rooms and a tennis court, indoor and outdoor pools and spa.

Anchorage B&B (☎ 5156 2569; www.anchoragebedandbreakfast.com.au; 11 The Anchorage; d \$150; closed mid-Jun to mid-Aug; ☎ ☎) You'll receive a warm welcome here. Enjoy a sumptuous gourmet breakfast in the sunny guest breakfast room, and kick

back in the bush garden and take in the water views. Fluffy towels, crisp sheets and soothing autumn tones make these rooms a very comfortable place to stay.

McMillans of Metung (☎ 5156 2283; www.mcmillansofmetung.com.au; 155 Metung Rd; cottages s/d \$165, villas r \$245; ☎ ☎) This lakeside resort has won stacks of tourism awards for its complex of English country-style cottages, set in three hectares of manicured gardens, and has expanded with some modern villas.

Eating

Nina's (☎ 5156 2474; 3/51 Metung Rd; dishes \$4-12; ☎ breakfast & lunch Wed-Sun) Don't miss the organic coffee and Mindy's divine home-cooked brownies.

Metung Galley (☎ 5156 2330; 3/59 Metung Rd; lunch \$10-18, dinner \$19-29; ☎ breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Wed-Mon) Felicity and Richard's city hospitality experience shines through in this friendly, efficient café serving up beautifully presented quality food. The smoked trout, organic goats cheese and rocket tart is delicious.

Metung Hotel (☎ 5156 2206; Kumai Ave; meals \$18-30; ☎ lunch & dinner) Perched on the edge of the lake, and with an outdoor deck, Metung Hotel has had a makeover since top local restaurateur Archie was installed as manager. The bistro food is superb and the best you'll find in a Gippsland pub.

Getting There & Away

V/Line (☎ 13 61 96; www.vline.com.au) has two services daily from Melbourne that stop in nearby Swan Reach (change from train to bus at Bairnsdale; \$26, four hours), from where you can call **Metung Taxis** (☎ 5156 2005) for the 5km trip to Metung (around \$20).

AROUND METUNG

This little pocket of Gippsland is home to some national and internationally renowned artists with studios open to the public on the weekends from 11am to 4pm. The Metung visitors centre can mark them on a map for you. At the entrance to Metung, turn into Rosherville Rd and then follow the signs to **Daniel Jenkins' Studio** (☎ 5156 2173, 10 Coolavin Rd) to see his garden studio of quirky metal sculptures. **Max Nicolson's Studio** (☎ 5156 2655; 625 Nungurner Rd) is signposted from Metung Rd. He's renowned for his oil and water colour paintings of the Gippsland Lakes. Signposted from Nungurner Rd is the new **oneoftwo** (☎ 5156 3270; 96 Kleinetz

Rd, Nungurner), a studio and workshop showcasing the stunning contemporary jewellery of goldsmith and ceramicist Dore Stockhausen and silversmith Marcus Foley. November to April only.

Ten kilometres east of Metung, signposted off Nungurner Rd, the well-preserved timber homestead at **Nyerimilang Park** (☎ 5156 3253; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au; Metung-Kalimna West Rd; entry by donation; ☎ homestead 9.30am-4pm, park 9am-sunset) was originally built in 1892 as a gentleman's holiday retreat, and is now a museum with some old photographs of the area. It's a lovely spot for a walk or picnic with easy **walking tracks** and some exceptional views across the lakes of Fraser Island and Boole Poole Peninsula. Check out the East Gippsland Garden, which showcases indigenous vegetation.

LAKES ENTRANCE

☎ 03 / pop 4100

Lakes Entrance is the region's main tourist town and greets you with a graceless strip of motels, caravan parks, minigolf courses and souvenir shops lining the Esplanade. It's popular though for its picturesque location on the

gentle waters of Cunninghame Arm, backed by sand dunes and fishing boats and just a stroll from a magnificent stretch of ocean beach. This is the place to indulge almost every water-related whim you may have.

Information

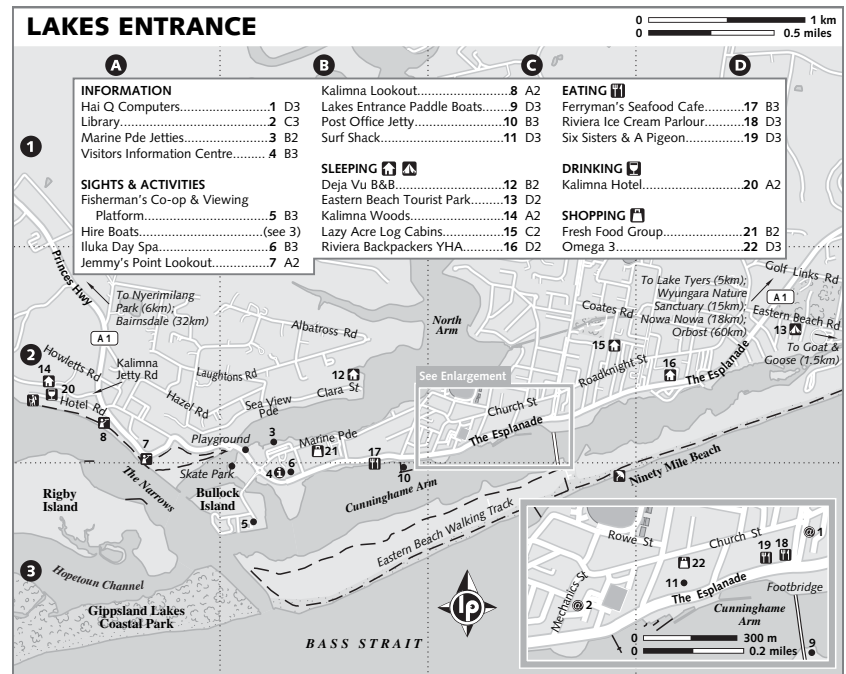
Hai Q Computers (☎ 5155 4247; cnr Myer St & The Esplanade; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat; ☎ ☎; wi-fi) Internet access including wireless internet for \$7 per hour. A computer business with a quirky gift shop.

Lakes Entrance visitors centre (☎ 1800 637 060, 5155 1966; www.lakes-entrance.com; cnr Princes Hwy & Marine Pde; ☎ 9am-5pm) Accommodation and boat trips booked at no cost.

Library (☎ 5153 9500; 18 Mechanics St; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri; ☎ ☎) Free internet access.

Activities

A footbridge crosses the Cunninghame Arm inlet from the east of town to the ocean and **Ninety Mile Beach**. From December to Easter paddle boats, canoes and sailboats can be hired by the footbridge. It's also where the 2.3km **Eastern Beach Walking Track** starts, which takes you down to the entrance artificially



created in 1889 to provide ocean access from the lakes system.

Several companies offer cruises on the lakes:

Corque (☎ 5155 1508, Post Office Jetty, The Esplanade) Popular 4½-hour daily lunch cruise to Wyanga Park Winery (adult \$50, child under/over six years \$6/25, includes lunch and wine tasting), also weekend dinner cruises and Sunday brunch.

Mulloway Fishing Charters (☎ 0427 943 154, 5155 3304; jetty opposite 66 Marine Pde) Three-hour fishing cruises (adult/child \$40/20) on the lake. Rods, tackle, bait and morning or afternoon tea are provided.

Peels Tourist & Ferry Services (☎ 5155 1246; Post Office Jetty, The Esplanade) Daily two-hour lake cruise at 2pm (adult/child \$34/17), and four-hour Metung cruise at 11am (adult/child \$44/12.50 including lunch, Wednesday to Monday).

To explore the lakes on your own, three companies along Marine Pde offer boats for hire (four/eight hours \$90/150).

Surfing lessons are offered by the **Surf Shack** (☎ /fax 5155 4933; 507 The Esplanade; 2hr lesson \$45). Qualified instructors lead the surf lessons at Lake Tyers Beach; surf gear is provided.

The **Fisherman's Co-op** (☎ 5155 1688; Bullock Island) viewing platform provides a mesmerising view of the fishing boats unloading their catch. There's often a boat there but phone ahead to check. You'll find the co-op on the right-hand side of Princes Hwy – turn at the roundabout when entering Lakes Entrance from the west.

Also on the western side of town, on the Princes Hwy, is **Kalimna Lookout**, a popular lookout spot. From Kalimna Lookout a **walking track** leads you west through bushland to Kalimna Jetty and along to the North Arm Bridge from where you can walk alongside the highway back to Kalimna Lookout. For a better view of the ocean, lake and entrance (and a quieter location), take the road directly opposite Kalimna Lookout and you'll almost immediately see a sign to **Jemmy's Point Lookout**.

Lakes' newest offering is the blissfully indulgent **Illuka Day Spa** (☎ 5155 3533; www.esplanaderesort.com.au/dayspa; 1 The Esplanade) where therapies range from a 30-minute aromatherapy tub (\$60) to the 3¼-hour 'Illuka Dreaming' – a foot treatment, sea wrap (with pearl-and-kelp body mud), and head-to-toe massage (\$350).

Guided walks to spot nocturnal wildlife, in the company of an experienced naturalist,

are run by **Wildlife at Night** (☎ 5156 5863; Wyungara Nature Sanctuary, Veldens Rd; adult/child/family \$22/13/55; ☹️ departs sunset Sat) signposted off the Princes Hwy 15km east of Lakes Entrance.

For an air adventure, contact:

Aerial Skydives (☎ 1800 674 276; Great Lakes Airport, Colquhoun Rd; skydives \$245) Jump out of a plane with an experienced skydiver and check out the coastline.

Elite Airways (☎ 5155 5777; www.eliteairways.info; Great Lakes Airport, Colquhoun Rd; 20min flight \$39) Scenic local flights, or take a 30-minute aerobatic flight (yep, figures-of-eight, barrel rolls and loops) for \$220 (including DVD).

Sleeping

Eastern Beach Tourist Park (☎ 5155 1581; www.easternbeach.com.au; Eastern Beach Rd; unpowered/powerd sites \$23/27; wi-fi) Close to the beach, this park is refreshingly old-style – it has a bush setting by the Eastern Beach walking track into town (30 minutes one way) and free wireless internet. Prices almost double in peak season.

Riviera Backpackers YHA (☎ 5155 2444; www.yha.com.au; 660-71 The Esplanade; dm \$19, s/d/f \$30/44/86; 📺 📶) Part of the Beaches Family Holiday Units complex, the YHA rooms are in old-style brick units, each with two to three bedrooms and a bathroom. There's a big communal kitchen and lounge with pool table and internet access (\$2 for 15 mins). Bike and fishing rod hire are available. Non-YHA members pay a few dollars more for accommodation.

Lazy Acre Log Cabins (☎ 5155 1323; www.lazyacre.com; 35 Roadknight St; d/f \$105/125; 📺 📶) Self-contained small timber cabins are shaded with old gum trees and it's a friendly, relaxed place to stay. There's bicycle hire and a babysitting service. Disabled access is available. Prices increase by 50% in peak season.

Kalimna Woods (☎ 5155 1957; www.kalimnawoods.com.au; Kalimna Jetty Rd; d \$115-155, f \$145-185; 📺) Retreat 2km from the town centre to Kalimna Woods, set in a large rainforest-and-bush garden, complete with friendly resident possums and birds. These country-style cottages with either spa or wood fire are spacious and comfortable.

Goat & Goose B&B (☎ 5155 3079; www.goatandgoose.com; 16 Gay St; d \$140-210) Bass Strait views are maximised at this wonderfully unusual, multistorey, timber pole-framed house. The owners are friendly and all the gorgeously quaint rooms have spas.

Deja Vu B&B (☎ 5155 4330; www.dejavu.com.au; Clara St; d \$150-250; 📺) This imposing, modern, sand-

stone-coloured home has been cleverly built on the slope of a hill to maximise water views and the bushy garden ensures privacy. Paddle across the North Arm to town in a canoe after a sumptuous breakfast. Two night minimum on weekends.

Eating & Drinking

L'Ocean (☎ 5155 2253; 19 Myer St; ☹️ lunch & dinner) With one of Australia's largest commercial fishing fleets, Lakes Entrance is a great place for fresh fish and chips (\$8). One of the local favourites is the award-winning L'Ocean, which also caters for the gluten-free crowd and serves delicious fried pumpkin.

Riviera Ice Cream Parlour (☎ 5155 2972; 583 The Esplanade; ice creams \$4; ☹️ 9.30am-5pm) Organic ice cream – the perfect follow-up to fresh fish and chips.

Six Sisters & a Pigeon (☎ 5155 1144; 567 The Esplanade; meals \$6-17; ☹️ breakfast & lunch Tue-Sun) On a sunny day, join the locals street-side or by the large open window with your newspaper or magazine. This licensed café adds style to standard café offerings. Try the eggs Atlantic with egg, smoked salmon, baked mushrooms and spinach on Turkish bread. You'll find the best coffee in town here, which goes nicely with the chocolate almond torte.

Ferryman's Seafood Cafe (☎ 5155 3000; Middle Harbour, The Esplanade; mains \$10-39; ☹️ brunch, lunch & dinner) Perched in the harbour among a flotilla of fishing boats is this café, serving fish with flair. The salmon fillet, encrusted in pistachio nuts, with pomegranate sauce is divine. High chairs, a toy box and friendly staff make it very child-friendly. During business hours you can also buy fresh fish from the shop on the deck below.

Kalimna Hotel (☎ 5155 1202; 1 Hotel Rd, Kalimna; ☹️ 11am-1am Mon-Sat, 11am-11pm Sun) For a drink with views, you can't beat this hotel, signposted off the highway on the Melbourne side of Lakes Entrance.

Shopping

Omega 3 (☎ 5155 4344; Shop 5, Safeway Arcade, Church St; ☹️ 9am-5pm) This is the shop front for the local Fishermen's Co-op and is the best place to buy fish in East Gippsland.

Fresh Food Group (☎ 5155 4122; 204 Marine Pde; ☹️ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) This fruit-and-vegetable wholesaler and food store sells delicious deli items including jams, chutneys, cheeses, filled pasta and breads.

Getting There & Away

There are two daily **V/Line** (☎ 13 61 96; www.vline.com.au) services between Melbourne and Lakes Entrance (change from train to bus at Bairnsdale; \$28, 4¼ hours).

Getting Around

A handy new town bus service loops daily around the town between 11am and 4pm (20 mins, \$1.80) leaving from the post office on the hour. The service stops at the backpackers hostel and near the Eastern Beach Tourist Park.

LAKE TYERS BEACH

☎ 03 / pop 550

This small and peaceful settlement is popular with surfers for the good **surf breaks** at Red Bluff, and with families for the options of calm lake waters and ocean beaches. Two-hour **boat cruises** (☎ 5156 5492; adult/child/family \$25/15/70; ☹️ departs 2pm Mon, Wed, Thu & Sat, 6.30pm Fri) aboard the electric-powered *MV Rumblebeena* with the friendly and knowledgeable Bernie include a cuppa and cake in a quiet backwater. Evening cruises with local produce are also available on this century-old boat.

Surfing lessons are offered at Red Bluff by the Surf Shack (opposite).

The camp sites at **Lakes Beachfront Holiday Retreat** (☎ 5156 5582; www.holidayretreats.com.au; 430 Lake Tyers Beach Rd; unpowered/powerd sites \$30/34, cabins d \$95-135, f \$119-149, beach cottage d/f \$170/184, villas \$350; 📺 📶) are the best in the region outside of national parks. Vegetation offers shade and privacy and it's just a short stroll to the ocean beach. The park is almost totally surrounded by native bush, protecting local flora and fauna. Cabins are spotlessly clean and the luxury cabins are like mini motel rooms, complete with irons and hairdryers. Villas with all mod-cons are the newest addition.

The downstairs bedrooms at **Lake Tyers Beach House** (☎ 5156 5995; www.lakes-entrance.com/eachhouse/house.htm; 3 Larkins Pl; up to 4 people \$200) are bright, and the queen-size beds have quality linen, but the real delight here is upstairs: the artistically inspired, hot-pink, retro-chic living area. Wander down the bush garden path to a quiet stretch of ocean beach, or next door to the yoga studio to practise, take a class or some private tuition. Two-night minimum stay.

Waterwheel Tavern (☎ 5156 5530; 557 Lake Tyers Beach Rd; mains \$19-35; ☹️ lunch & dinner) The

Waterwheel has an inspired bistro menu and brilliant views over the lake.

V/Line (☎ 13 61 96; www.vline.com.au) buses go to Lake Tyers Beach (\$29, 4¼ hours) via Lakes Entrance.

NOWA NOWA

☎ 03 / pop 150

Tiny Nowa Nowa, on the north arm of Lake Tyers, is the base for a vibrant arts community that stages regular creative art events (see www.nowanowa.com). Stop by to see what they've been up to. There's also some fabulous, easy short walks – by the wetlands (25 minutes), the sculpture walk (20 minutes), and a walk to Boggy Creek Gorge (20 minutes).

On the site of the original Nowa Nowa settlement, **Mingling Waters** (☎ 5155 7247; 42 Princes Hwy; unpaved/powered sites \$22/25, dm \$20, cottages d \$55-70) offers comfortable accommodation by the lake in rustic, century-old buildings. Mingling Waters café/gallery, with its eclectic timber furnishings, features vegetarian food on the menu (mains \$5 to \$12; open for breakfast and lunch daily), and Mike makes renowned *ciabattas*. Tourist information is also available.

A few kilometres east of Nowa Nowa, **Yelen's Studio Gallery** (☎ 5155 7277; www.yelen.com; 201 Nelsons Rd; cabin \$125), 3km down a dirt road and overlooking Lake Tyers, is home to painter Gary Yelen. Stop by to see his vibrant oil paintings and sensuous sculpture. It's open most days; call to check. You can also stay at Gary's arty-retro cabin by the lake.

EAST GIPPSLAND

This area contains some of the most remote and spectacular national parks in the state – it's a wonderland of dense forests ranging from the coastal wilderness areas of Croajingolong and the rocky gorges of Snowy River, to the lush rainforests of the Errinundra Plateau. Logging in these ancient forests is a hot issue.

The Princes Hwy carves its way through the centre of the region. Unexciting Orbost is the major town and the gateway to the Snowy River and Errinundra National Parks, as well as the magnificent coastal areas of Cape Conran, Mallacoota and Croajingolong, which are all uncrowded, unspoiled and undeveloped.

There are excellent Parks Victoria visitors centres at Cann River and Mallacoota.

BRUTHEN

☎ 03 / pop 630

This energetic little town hosts the annual **Bruthen Blues Festival** (www.bruthenblues.org), billed as the biggest little blues festival in Australia. The festival on the third weekend in February has developed a strong following over the years and features local, national and international blues musicians, as well as music workshops, a community market and an hilarious fundraising duck race.

Le Cafe (☎ 5157 5665; 72 Main St; Devonshire teas \$8; ☎ lunch Thu-Sun) is a little place with the best Devonshire teas in East Gippsland, served with lashings of cream and homemade jams. Across the road, the **Bruthen Bakery** (☎ 5157 5554; 69 Main St; pies \$4; ☎ 6am-5pm Mon-Fri, 6am-4pm Sat-Sun) is famed for its pies.

BUCHAN

☎ 03 / pop 330

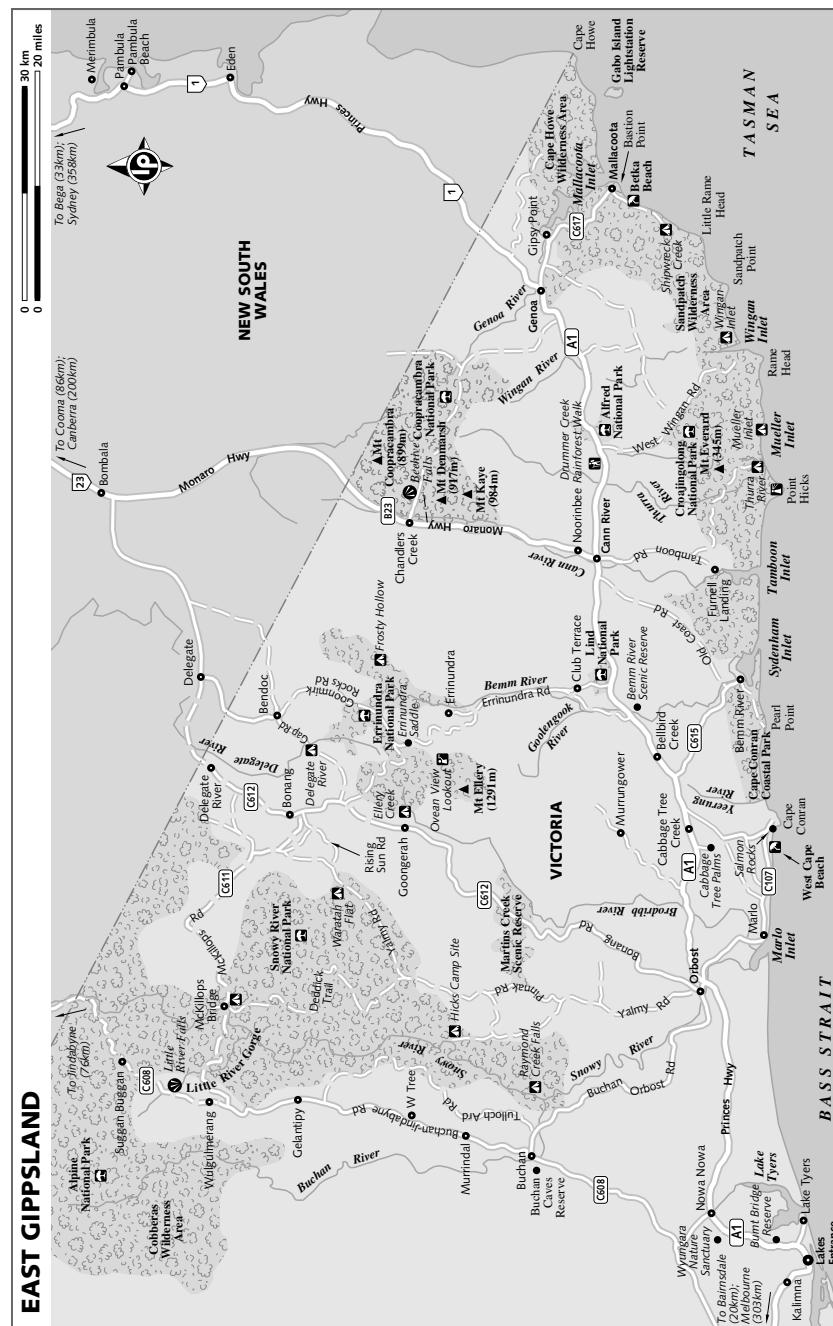
The quiet town of Buchan in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains is famous for its spectacular limestone cave system that has been open to visitors since 1913, and is of significance to the Gunai/Kurnai people. Further up in the mountains is the remote community of W Tree, home to one of Australia's most established Buddhist centres.

Buchan Valley Roadhouse sells petrol, the general store has local tourist information, and internet access is available at the community resource centre.

Sights & Activities

Just over a kilometre from the tiny township is the **Buchan Caves Reserve**. Underground rivers cutting through limestone rock that formed about 300 to 400 million years ago, carved the caves and caverns. The local Aboriginal people lived in them over 18,000 years ago, and have legends associated with them. The reserve itself is also a pretty spot with shaded picnic areas, **walking tracks** and grazing kangaroos. Invigoration is guaranteed dunking your feet or taking a dip in the icy **rook pool** (admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm).

Parks Victoria (☎ 5162 1900; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au), at Caves Reserve, runs guided caves tours (adult/child/family \$13/7/33; three to five tours daily), alternating between Royal and Fairy Caves. They're both impressive – Royal has more colour, a higher chamber and extinct kangaroo remains; Fairy has more delicate decorations and fairy sightings have



been reported to the delight of many. The rangers also offer hard-hat guided tours to Federal Cave during the high season. Federal is less developed for visitors and is only recommended for those over 12 years.

Sakya International Buddhist Academy (SIBA) (☎ 5155 0329; www.sakya.com.au/siba; 2592 Gelantipy Rd, W Tree) has a divinely beautiful mediation hall and runs a meditation session at 11am on Sunday, which is open to the public. Meditators are invited to say on for lunch afterwards (by donation). For those wanting a longer chill-out time there's an annual programme of meditation retreats in this 40-hectare bushland oasis. If you have a strong interest in Buddhism and would like to visit, or are interested in the Sunday meditation, call ahead.

Sleeping & Eating

Buchan Caves Reserve (☎ 5162 1900; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au; Buchan Caves Reserve; unpowered/power sites \$13/18, cabins \$58, wilderness retreats s/d \$100/120; 🚰) Edged by state forest, the camp ground within this reserve offers plenty of shady sites. There are a couple of standard cabins and new safari-style tents providing a luxury wilderness experience (think comfortable queen-size bed) without having to pitch your own tent. It's ideal for those who'd love to camp if only it wasn't so uncomfortable.

Buchan Lodge Backpackers (☎ 5155 9421; www.buchanlodge.com; Saleyard Rd; dm \$25) A short walk from the caves and the town centre, just by the river, this friendly, rough-and-ready, timber-lined building is great for lounging about and taking in the country views. Staff will also organise a transport shuffle for those wanting to raft or canoe down the Snowy River. Children under 14 can stay by arrangement only. Rates include continental breakfast.

Caves Hotel (☎ 5155 9203; 49 Main St; mains \$15-24; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This century old timber pub has quality bistro meals and some wicked deserts, such as the *Mars Bar* cheesecake.

Getting There & Away

Buchan Bus 'n' Freight (☎ 5155 0356; www.buchanbusfreight.com.au) operates a service on Monday, Wednesday and Friday from Bairnsdale to Gelantipy via W Tree and Buchan (one way \$14).

SNOWY RIVER NATIONAL PARK

This area is one of Victoria's most isolated and spectacular national parks, dominated

by deep gorges carved through limestone and sandstone by the mighty Snowy River. The entire park is a smorgasbord of unspoiled and superb bush and mountain scenery. It covers more than 95,000 hectares and includes a huge diversity of vegetation, ranging from alpine woodlands and eucalypt forests to rainforests and even areas of mallee-type scrub. It's home to loads of wildlife including the rare brush-tailed rock wallaby.

The two main access roads to the park are the Buchan-Jindabyne Rd from Buchan, and Bonang Rd from Orbost. These roads are joined by McKillops Rd (also known as Deddick Valley Rd), which runs across the northern border of the park from Bonang to just south of Wulgulmerang. Various access roads and scenic routes run into and alongside the park from these three main roads. The 43km **Deddick Trail**, which runs through the middle of the park, is only suitable for 4WDs.

On the west side of the park, the views from the well-signposted cliff top lookouts over **Little River Falls** and **Little River Gorge**, Victoria's deepest gorge, are spectacular. From there it's about 20km to **McKillops Bridge**, a huge bridge spanning the Snowy River, and making it possible to drive across the park. It's a beautiful spot and where the park's main **camp sites** (free), with toilets and fireplaces, are. There's also some sandy river beaches and swimming spots. There are several good **short walks** around here, and the 15km **Silver Mine Walking Track** starts at the eastern end of the bridge. Be warned: it's worth the trip, but McKillops Rd is an adventure in itself (see boxed text, opposite).

There are various other free bush camping areas and picnic grounds in the park. Walking and canoeing are the most popular activities, but you need to be well prepared for both as conditions can be harsh and subject to sudden change. The classic canoe or raft trip down the Snowy River from McKillops Bridge to a pull-out point near Buchan takes at least four days and offers superb scenery: rugged gorges, raging rapids, tranquil sections and excellent camping spots on broad sand bars. See p134 for operators.

Good **scenic drives** in and around the park include McKillops Rd, Rising Sun Rd from Bonang, Tullock Ard Rd from just south of Gelantipy, and Yalmy Rd, which is the main access road to the southern and central areas,

WING HAGGER

You can do a driving loop through both Snowy River and Errinundra National Parks on McKillops Rd. What's the road like? Oh, it's a goat track! It'll freak you out. It's fine for 2WD though, and it's the one road that's usually passable all year, unless parts of it collapse.

Err, does that happen often? No, heavy rain washed part of it away last year. The road was built in the 1930s, and it's slow work fixing it, so it was closed for a few months.

It's easier now with new technology, right? No, same technology. When they built it in the 1930s, they'd pick and shovel a bit of hill away until it was wide enough for the truck to turn the corner, so they could use the truck to jammy in the support underneath the road. It's still pretty much the same.

If it's that narrow, what if there's another vehicle coming the other way – do you have to back up? Nah, you can see cars coming a long way ahead, and there are places you can pull over. There's a few more places since the road was rebuilt. Actually, we should have notices up saying, 'Pull over when you see another vehicle.' My wife freaked out the first time I took her along there. It was just after New Year and there were quite a few oncoming vehicles. They all pulled over on the sheer cliff side, and we passed them all on the steep drop side. 'Freaking out mate?' I said to one. He just nodded.

Are there many accidents? Well, none that I've heard about. Nah, it's safe.

Parks Victoria Ranger Wing Hagger works from Parks Victoria's remote office at Bendoc (population 190), just north of Errinundra National Park and close to Snowy River National Park.

and places such as Waratah Flat, Hicks Camp Site and Raymond Creek Falls. These roads are unsealed and usually closed during winter.

For information about camping, road conditions and other details contact **Parks Victoria** (☎ 13 16 93; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au).

Sleeping

Karoonda Park (☎ 5155 0220; www.karoondapark.com; Gelantipy Rd; dm/d \$28/56, cabins \$110; 🚰 🚰 🚰) At Gelantipy, 40km north of Buchan, is this cattle and sheep property, home to Snowy River Expeditions, which also has backpacker and cabin accommodation. The backpacker accommodation is in a newish timber lodge. The cabins are comfortable, sleeping six to ten people: some are old and faded; others have been recently renovated. You'll receive a relaxed friendly country welcome here. Rates include breakfast. A three-course home-cooked meal in the large camp kitchen costs \$15 to \$20; fully catered packages are also available. Activities available include abseiling (per hour \$25), horse riding (per hour \$35), wild caving (per hour \$35), and white-water rafting (see p134).

Getting There & Away

Buchan Bus 'n' Freight (☎ 5155 0356; www.buchanbusfreight.com.au) operates a bus service to Bairnsdale from Karoonda Park on Monday, Wednesday and Friday (one way/return \$16/25).

ERRINUNDRA NATIONAL PARK

The Errinundra Plateau is a misty and verdant wonderland that contains Victoria's largest remaining areas of cool-temperate rainforest. It's one of East Gippsland's most outstanding natural areas and a battleground between environmentalists and loggers. It's also one of the least visited parts of East Gippsland.

The national park covers an area of 25,600 hectares and has three granite outcrops that extend into the clouds, resulting in high rainfall, deep, fertile soils and a network of creeks and rivers that flow north, south and east. The park has several climatic zones – some areas of the park are quite dry, while its peaks regularly receive snow. This is a rich habitat for native birds and animals, which include many rare and endangered species such as the potoroo.

Errinundra is one of the best examples in the world of 'mixed forest' vegetation – it's dominated by southern sassafras and black oliveberry, with tall eucalypt forests providing a canopy for the lower rainforests. Some of the giant trees are many hundreds of years old.

The main access roads to the park are Bonang Rd from Orbost and Errinundra Rd from Club Terrace. Bonang Rd passes on the western side of the park, while Errinundra Rd passes through the centre. Road conditions are variable and the roads are often closed or impassable during the winter months or after floods – check with Parks Victoria offices in

Orbost or Bendoc first. Watch out for logging trucks. Roads within the park are all unsealed but are 2WD accessible. Expect seasonal closures between June and November, though roads can deteriorate quickly at any time of the year after rain.

You can explore the park by a combination of scenic drives, and short and medium-length walks. **Mt Ellery** has spectacular views; **Errinundra Saddle** has a rainforest boardwalk; and from **Ocean View Lookout** there are stunning views down the Goolgook River where you can see as far as Bemm River. The park also has **mountain plum pines**, some of which are more than 400 years old, which are easily accessible from Goonmirk Rocks Rd. For more information contact **Parks Victoria** (☎ 13 16 93, Bendoc ☎ 02-6458 1456, Orbost ☎ 5161 1222; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au).

Nestled on the edge of the forest is tiny **Goongerah** (population 50) where there's a thriving community with two active community environmental organisations. **Goongerah Environment Centre** (GECO; ☎ 5154 0156; www.geco.org.au) organises ongoing protests and blockades in the forest. GECO has detailed information about forest drives and walks on its website. The other community group **Environment East Gippsland** (EEG; ☎ 5154 0145; www.eastgippsland.net.au) lobbies extensively on forest issues and provides people with the chance to explore the forests under the guidance of environmental experts at the **Forests Forever Ecology Camp** (☎ 5154 0145; www.eastgippsland.net.au; per day adult/teenager/child \$20/10/free), held each Easter at Ellery

Creek camp site in Goongerah. BYO camping gear and food. Ecologists guide you through the forest and hope that you'll be awed by their beauty and complexity, outraged by their destruction, and will spread the word.

Sleeping

Frosty Hollow Camp Site (free) This is the only camping area within the national park (it's on the eastern side). There are also free camping areas on the park's edges – at Ellery Creek in Goongerah, and at Delegate River.

Jacarri (☎ 5154 0145; www.eastgippsland.net.au/jacarri; cnr Bonang Hwy & Ellery Creek Track, Goongerah; s & d \$80, f \$90) This gorgeous little cottage, made from recycled and plantation timber, is on Jill Redwood's organic farm. It's solar-powered, has a slow combustion stove for heating and cooking, and sleeps four.

ORBOST

☎ 03 / pop 2452

Orbost, by the Snowy River, is just off the highway. It doesn't have a lot to excite the traveller but it's a handy place to stock up if you're heading into the surrounding national Parks.

Orbost visitors centre (☎ 5154 2424; orbostvic@bigpond.com; cnr Nicholson & Clarke Sts; ☎ 9am-5pm) is in an historic 1872 slab hut. **Parks Victoria** (☎ 5161 1222; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au; cnr Nicholson & Salisbury Sts; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) has information on road conditions in the forests.

Orbost Exhibition Centre (☎ 5154 2634; www.orbostexhibitioncentre.org; Clarke St; adult/child \$4/free; ☎ 10am-

4pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) showcases stunning works by local timber artists.

A Lovely Little Lunch (☎ 5154 1303; 125a Nicholson St; mains \$7-11; ☎ lunch Mon-Sat) is Orbost's nicest café and has good coffee, a friendly vibe and a baguettes, focaccias and homemade pies for lunch.

MARLO

☎ 03 / pop 340

Sleepy little Marlo sits at the mouth of the Snowy River where the river lazily flows into a large lagoon before entering the sea. You can follow the river as it meanders to the sea along the **French's Narrows Walking Track**, a 20 minute walk just out of town on the Marine Pde-Cape Conran Rd. There's abundant bird life here and the fishing is renowned. There are a couple of caravan parks, pub accommodation and a motel in Marlo. The general store has an ATM and some tourist information.

The **Marlo Hotel & Country Retreat** (☎ 5154 8201; Argyle Pde; mains \$16; ☎ lunch & dinner) is Marlo's only sit-down eating option. The food is typically old-style bistro, but the views from the deck overlooking the vast expanse of water are sensational.

CAPE CONRAN COASTAL PARK

This is a blissfully undeveloped part of the coast with some simply beautiful, remote white-sand beaches. The 19km coastal route from Marlo to Cape Conran is particularly pretty, bordered by banksia trees, grass plains, sand dunes and the ocean.

There's good **surfing** at West Cape Beach and you can take lessons here through the Surf Shack (p128).

The Yeerung River is a relaxed spot for swimming, canoeing and fishing. **Cross Diving Services** (☎ 5153 2010; 0407-362 960; per dive \$50) offer dives for qualified divers on most weekends at Cape Conran. Equipment hire is available. It's a fabulous spot for **walking** – Parks Victoria can provide a brochure. One favourite is the nature trail that meets up with the East Cape Boardwalk, where signage gives you a glimpse into how indigenous people lived in the Cape area. Take the West Cape Rd off Cape Conran Rd to get to **Salmon Rocks** where there's an Aboriginal **shell midden**, dated at more than 10,000 years old. **Cabbage Tree Palms** can be accessed from a number of points and is a short detour off the road between Cape Conran and the Princess Hwy. This is Victoria's only stand

of native palms – a tiny rainforest oasis. Keep an eye out for bandicoots and potoroos, which have increased in numbers since the park's fox control programme was introduced.

Sleeping

Parks Victoria (☎ 5154 8438; www.conran.net.au) manages the following camping, cabin, and wilderness retreat accommodation at Cape Conran Coastal Park.

Banksia Bluff Camping Area (unpowered sites \$16.50) This camp site is right by the foreshore. The generous sites are surrounded by banksia woodlands offering shade and privacy. The camp ground has toilets, cold showers and a few fireplaces, but you'll need to bring drinking water (or purchase from the park office).

our pick **Cape Conran Cabins** (cabin \$109) These self-contained cabins, which can sleep up to eight people, are surrounded by bush and are just 200m from the beach. Built from local timbers, the cabins are like oversized cubby houses with lofty mezzanines for sleeping (BYO linen). The cabins have rain water on tap.

Cape Conran Wilderness Retreats (d/f \$120/150) Perched in the bush by the sand dunes are these classy safari tents. All the simplicity of camping, but you have comfortable beds, and a deck outside your tent door. Two night minimum stay.

West Cape Cabins (☎ 5154 8296; www.westcapecabins.com.au; 1547 Cape Conran Rd; s & d \$175, f \$205) Crafted from locally grown or recycled timbers, these self-contained cabins a few kilometres from the national park are a work of art. The timbers are all labelled with their species, and even the queen-size bed bases are tree trucks. An eight-seater outdoor spa adds to the joy. It's a 15-minute walk through coastal bush to the superb beach.

BEMM RIVER

☎ 03/pop 160

If you're into fishing, don't miss Bemm River. This small and friendly holiday hamlet is paradise for fisher folk with a river and inlet seemingly bursting with fish. There's fishing platforms available or you can hire a boat from **Bemm River Holiday Lodge** (☎ 5158 4233; 37-41 Sydenham Pde). The serene Sydenham Inlet is rich with bird life, and sunsets at the nearby coastal beaches are usually impressive.

You'll find basic food supplies and bait here, but no petrol. Accommodation is mostly ageing caravan parks and holiday flats.

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

You can't explore most of the Snowy River or Errinundra National Parks with a 2WD, while sections of Croajingolong are only open to a limited numbers of walkers. There are a few companies providing organised trips into this beautiful wilderness area:

An eco-tourism award winner, **Gippsland High Country Tours** (☎ 5157 5556; www.gippslandhighcountrytours.com.au; 5-7-day tour \$1250/1970) is an East Gippsland-based company running easy, moderate and challenging, five- to seven-day hikes in Errinundra, Snowy River and Croajingolong National Parks. The Croajingolong trips include three nights accommodation in the Point Hicks Lighthouse (p140). There's also a five-day bird-watching tour in Snowy River country (\$1190).

Rainforest Adventure Services (☎ 5154 0174; www.rainforestadventures.com.au; 2-day walk incl meals \$120) runs weekend forest walks in Errinundra National Park with overnight camping.

Take an adventure tour with **Snowy River Expeditions** (☎ 5155 9353; www.karoondapark.com/sre; Karoonda Park, Gelantip; 1- to 4-day tours per day \$135) on a rafting trip of the Snowy or a half-or full-day abseiling or caving trip. Costs include transport, meals and camping gear.

Wilderness Bike Ride (☎ 5154 6637; www.wildernessbikeride.com.au; 3-day ride \$310 incl meals & camp fees) runs three- or four-day mountain bike rides in April through the wilds of Errinundra National Park.

The local pub is the **Bemm River Hotel** (☎ 5158 4241; www.bemmriverriverhotel.com.au; 3-5 Sydenham Pde; d/f \$85/120; 🍷), offering the most comfortable accommodation in town. Its newish, beach-hut-style timber cabins are about as stylish as cabins get. Hang out on the pub's wide timber deck overlooking Sydenham Inlet with Baney the pub dog, and munch on homemade pizzas, or tuck into a substantial steak. Fish, of course, also features on the menu (mains \$17 to \$25; open for lunch and dinner daily).

BEMM RIVER SCENIC RESERVE & LIND NATIONAL PARK

The **Bemm River Scenic Reserve** is just metres from the highway and there's a 45-minute walk through rainforest, crossing two swing bridges. Keep an eye out for lyrebirds.

A few kilometres further along the highway it's worth taking a slight detour to **Lind National Park** for the 6km **nature drive** that follows the Euchre Creek through rainforest back to the Princes Hwy. Some enlightened folk declared this 1370 hectares area of rainforest and bushland as a scenic stopover spot for travellers way back in 1926. You'll see lush valleys, meandering creeks and tall stands of eucalypts. To get there, take the turn-off on the highway to Club Terrace, drive 4km to the township, and turn east at the (faded and small) Euchre Valley Nature Drive signpost.

CANN RIVER

☎ 03 / pop 230

Cann River is a small saw-milling centre with a massive crossroad at the junction of the Princes and Monaro Hwys. The **Parks Victoria** (☎ 5158 6351; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au; Princes Hwy; 🕒 10am-4pm Mon, Tue-Fri when ranger available) office is the main information centre for Croajingolong National Park. Road access information and camping fees are listed on a noticeboard outside the office, along with park notes. When the office is open, overnight hiking and camping permits are available, along with maps and walking guides.

From Cann River, the Monaro Hwy heads north to the Coopracambra National Park (4WD access only) and Canberra, and the unsealed Tamboon Rd heads south to Tamboon Inlet, Thurra River and Mueller Inlet in Croajingolong National Park.

There's nothing to keep you in Cann River beyond a quick bite to eat at one of the cafés or pub, or a stock up at the supermarket, with

the delightful exception of **Norinbee Selection Cellar Door** (☎ 5158 6500; 53 Monaro Hwy; mains \$23-\$26; 🍷 lunch Wed-Sun, dinner Thu-Sat) with wine tastings from its own vineyard and a restaurant menu laced with alcohol. Try the pork fillet in a plum and port wine sauce, or poached pears in your choice of red or white wine. Their truly gourmet pizzas are topped with offerings such as salmon, brie, capers and asparagus. There's also a selection of quilts and other crafts for sale.

About 11km east of Cann River on the northern side of the Princes Hwy is the **Drummer Creek Rainforest Walk**, an easy 45-minute walk that starts at the picnic area and takes you through warm-temperate rainforest. There are some massive grey gums here – kids will love the one with the huge hollow. If you're lucky (and quiet) you might see a Gippsland water dragon sunning itself by the Thurra River. Notes about the rainforest are available at the start of the walk.

COOPRACAMBRA NATIONAL PARK

Remote and undeveloped Coopracambra (38,800 hectares) retains its original ecosystem virtually intact. The landscape is rugged and spectacular, with dramatic deep gorges where the earliest fossil evidence of four-footed creatures was discovered. The only area of the park accessible by 2WD is **Beehive Falls**, an idyllic and scenic spot, with small cascades falling into rock pools shaded by the surrounding bush. Beehive Falls are 2km from the Monaro Hwy, 28km north of Cann River. Beyond the Beehive Falls, the only access through the park is a 4WD track.

The park vegetation is mainly open eucalypt forest, with a few areas of sheltered rainforest, and there are walking tracks to peaks such as Mt Kaye and Mt Denmark, though they are only suitable for fit and experienced bushwalkers. **Parks Victoria** (☎ 13 19 63; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au) can provide further information about extended remote 'off track' walks. It's a fantastic place for bushwalkers who want to escape the crowds, with rewards of sandy beaches and swimming holes. Bush camping is permitted but there are no formal camping or toilet facilities in the park.

GIPSY POINT

Named after the schooner *Gypsy* that tied up here in the 19th century, Gypsy Point is an idyllic settlement at the head of Mallacoota

Inlet. Although it's only 10km off the Princes Hwy, it has a deliciously remote atmosphere – once you're sitting on the jetty looking out over the inlets, you'll feel like you're a million miles from anywhere. A resident mob of eastern grey kangaroos lives in the area and you'll often see them, especially at dusk, as they graze by the water.

Gipsy Point Lodge (☎ 1800 063 556, 5158 8205; www.gipsypoint.com; self-contained cottages d/f \$120/140, guest-house per person r \$155 incl dinner & breakfast; 🍷) is a guesthouse in a peaceful setting, surrounded by bush and water. The pastel-green rooms seem to blend with the environment and have glorious water views. Facilities include a tennis court, use of canoe and rowboats, and motor boat hire (\$95 per day). Nonguests are welcome for the well-recommended dinner (a three-course set meal for \$60 per person), but be sure to book ahead.

The modern, spacious, split-level apartments at **Gipsy Point Lakeside** (☎ 1800 688 200; www.gipsy.com.au; d \$240-260; 🍷 📺) have king-sized beds and are in a prime location, all designed to maximise the serene water views and your privacy at this luxury boutique resort. There's a guest restaurant, or gourmet hampers and barbecue packs are available. No kids under eight allowed.

MALLACOOTA

☎ 03 / pop 980

Completely surrounded by the internationally acclaimed Croajingolong National Park, Mallacoota is one of the most beautiful spots in the state. Its long, empty, ocean beaches, tidal river mouths and vast inlet are a paradise for swimmers, surfers, anglers and boaters. At Christmas and Easter it's a crowded family holiday spot, but most of the year it's pretty quiet.

Mallacoota has been a haven for travellers since the early 20th century when a camp set up by the poet EJ Brady on the shores of the inlet attracted notable Australian literary figures, such as Henry Lawson and Katherine Susannah Pritchard. It's still an inspirational place.

Information

Lucy's (☎ 5158 0666; 64 Maurice Ave; 🕒 8am-9pm; 📺) Have coffee and cake, or Lucy's homemade rice noodles, while you access the internet (\$2 per 15 minutes). **Mallacoota Information Shed** (☎ 5158 0800; Main Wharf, cnr Allan & Buckland Drs; 🕒 10am-4pm) Operated by friendly volunteers.

Mallacoota Newsagency (☎ 5158 088; 14 Allan Dr; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun; 📺) Internet access for \$2.50 per 15 minutes, or you can plug in your own computer.

Parks Victoria (☎ 13 19 63, 5161 9500; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au; cnr Buckland & Allan Drs) Has an information centre opposite the main wharf, with excellent outdoor displays and information on Croajingolong and Mallacoota.

Sights & Activities

CRUISES & BOAT HIRE

One of the best ways to experience the beauty of Mallacoota is by boat. The calm estuarine waters of Mallacoota Inlet are completely surrounded by national park and have more than 300km of shoreline. Cruises are offered and there are many public jetties where you can tie your boat up and come ashore for picnic tables and toilets. Fewer cruises operate in the winter months, so call ahead to check.

MV Loch-Ard (☎ 5158 0764; www.cruisemallacoota.com; Main Wharf; 2hr cruise adult/child \$25/10) has been cruising the lakes for almost a century. This old wooden boat also does two- and three-hour trips including one to the far side of the lake where the original Mallacoota settlement once was.

Wilderness Coast Ocean Charters (☎ 0418-553 809; Gabo Island \$60, Skerries \$120) runs trips to Gabo Island from Bastion Point, leaving early in the morning, with pick-up in the afternoon. The Skerries seal colony trip views these delightful creatures off Wingan Inlet. Whales are sometimes spotted on trips from September to November.

Mallacoota Hire Boats (☎ 0438 447 558; Main Wharf, cnr Allan & Buckland Drs; motor boats per half-/full-day \$85/145, canoes per hr \$17) is centrally located and hires out canoes and boats; no licence is required. Cash only.

GABO ISLAND LIGHTSTATION RESERVE

The windswept 154-hectare island, 14km from Mallacoota, is home to sea birds and one of the world's largest colonies of Little Penguins. Whales, dolphins and fur seals are regularly sighted off shore. The island has an operating **lighthouse**, built in 1862, which is the tallest in the southern hemisphere; tours are available for \$9.50/5 per adult/child. Accommodation is also available (p138). Access to the island is possible by boat (see above) or by air with **Mallacoota Air Services** (☎ 0408-580 806; www.mallacootaairservices.com; return for 3 adults or 2 adults & 2 children \$200)

WALKING

There are plenty of great short walks around the town, the inlet, and in the bush, ranging from a half-hour stroll to a four-hour walk. The easy 5km one way **Bucklands Jetty to Captain Creek Jetty Walk** starts about 4km north of the town and follows the shoreline of the inlet past the Narrows. The walk can be extended from Captains Creek via eucalypt forests to either Double Creek (3km) or the Mallacoota-Genoa Rd (3km). The 7km **Mallacoota Town Walk**, which loops around Bastion Point, and combines five different walks, is also popular. Walking notes with maps are available from Parks Victoria and the Information Shed.

BEACHES

For good surf, head to Bastion Point or Tip Beach. There's swimmable surf and some sheltered waters at Betka Beach and it's patrolled during Christmas school holidays. There are also good swimming spots along the beaches of the foreshore reserve, at Bastion Point and Quarry Beach.

VOLUNTEERING

The friendly and relaxed **Bushland Weeding Group** (☎ 5158 0540; Mallacoota Information Shed) meets weekly at the Mallacoota amphitheatre, usually on Fridays from 9am to 11.30am, and warmly welcomes helpers. If you arrive after 9am, directions will be on the amphitheatre blackboard. BYO gloves and weeding tools, or the group can supply these.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

Mallacoota Air Services (☎ 0408+580 806; www.mallacootaairservices.com scenic flights 3 adults from \$80) offers scenic flights over the inlet, to Gabo Island, and as far afield as Eden in NSW.

The **Mallacoota Arts Council** (☎ 5158 0890; www.mallacootaarts.org) organises an annual programme including music events, art exhibitions and a spring festival.

Sleeping

There are plenty of options here, though during Easter and Christmas school holidays you'll need to book well ahead and expect prices to be significantly higher.

Mallacoota Foreshore Caravan Park (☎ 5158 0300; camppark@vicnet.net.au; cnr Allan Dr & Maurice Ave; unpowered/powerd sites \$17/21, caravan d \$65; 📶) Hundreds of grassy sites extend along the foreshore and

have sublime views of the lake with its resident population of black swans and pelicans. There's free internet access for campers.

Mallacoota Hotel Motel & Backpackers (☎ 5158 0455; inncoota@bigpond.net.au; 51-55 Maurice Ave; dm \$22, motel s/d from \$65/80; 📶 📶) The backpackers rooms are a bit shabby but there's a good shared kitchen, use of the motel pool and it's conveniently next door to the pub. Motel and family units overlook the lawn and pool.

Adobe Mudbrick Flats (☎ 5158 0329; www.adobe.holidayflats.com.au; 17 Karbeethong Ave; flats \$80) These 1970s-built, eco-friendly, comfortable mudbrick flats are about 5km from the town centre and are particularly fun for families, with birds to feed outside your door, a farmyard of ducks, and kangaroos and a lyrebird to look out for. Check out the gorgeous inlet views from the comfort of your hammock. You're encouraged to recycle, compost and conserve water. Linen costs extra.

ourpick Karbeethong Lodge (☎ 5158 0411; www.karbeethonglodge.com.au; 16 Schnapper Point Dr; d/ff \$120/150) It's hard not to be overcome by a sense of serenity as you rest on the broad verandas of this early 1900s timber guesthouse with uninterrupted views over Mallacoota Inlet. The large guest lounge and dining room have an open fire and period furnishings, and there's a mammoth kitchen if you want to prepare meals. The pastel-toned bedrooms are small but neat and tastefully decorated. The Lodge is signposted from the Genoa-Mallacoota Rd.

Gabo Island Lighthouse (☎ 5161 9500, 13 19 63; up to 8 people \$169) Accommodation is available in the three bedroom Assistant Lighthouse Keeper's residence. Enjoy the extreme isolation (well, along with the 300-plus animal species) and look out for migrating whales in autumn and late spring. Pods of dolphins and seals basking on the rocks are also regular sightings. Two night minimum stay.

Mallacoota Houseboats (☎ 5158 0775; Karbeethong Jetty; 3-night minimum \$850) These houseboats are a divine way to explore Mallacoota's waterways. The clean and cosy boats sleep up to six and have kitchen, toilet, shower and barbecue. Prices almost double in peak season.

Eating

Croajingolong Cafe (☎ 5158 0098; Shop 3/14 Allan Dr; mains \$5-13; 📶 breakfast & lunch Tue-Sun) Overlooking the inlet, this is the locals' favourite café to catch up over a coffee on the weekend. Grab your newspaper and settle down to pancakes

and wild berries, or the enormous Veggie Brekky. No credit cards.

Mallacoota Hotel Motel (☎ 5158 0455; 51-55 Maurice Ave; mains \$15-29; 📶 lunch & dinner) The pub bistro provides hearty meals on its varied menu with reliable favourites such as chicken Kiev and vegetable risotto. Bands play at the pub regularly in the summer.

Tide Restaurant (☎ 5158 0100; 70 Maurice Ave; mains \$17-29; 📶 dinner) The service is attentive at Mallacoota's most upmarket dining option with its prime lakeside setting. The menu featuring seafood is well-presented and the food is similar quality to the pub. No credit cards.

Getting There & Away

Mallacoota is 23km off the Princes Hwy. From Melbourne you can catch a daily **V/line** (☎ 13 61 96; www.vline.com.au) train to Bairnsdale and coach to Genoa (\$36, seven hours), then get the **Mallacoota-Genoa Bus Service** (☎ 0408 315 615; one way \$4), which meets the V/line coach on Monday, Thursday and Friday. During school and public holidays there's also a Sunday service.

CROAJINGOLONG NATIONAL PARK

Croajingolong is one of Australia's finest national parks, recognised by its listing as a World Biosphere Reserve by Unesco (one of 12 in Australia). This coastal wilderness park covers 87,500 hectares and stretches for about 100km along the easternmost tip of Victoria from Bemm River to the NSW border. Magnificent unspoiled beaches, inlets, estuaries and forests make this an ideal park for camping, walking, swimming and surfing. The five inlets: Sydenham, Tamboon, Mueller, Wingan and Mallacoota, are all popular canoeing and fishing spots. Mallacoota Inlet is the largest and most accessible (see p137).

Two sections of the park have been declared wilderness areas (which means no vehicles, access to a limited number of walkers only, and permits required): the **Cape Howe Wilderness Area**, between Mallacoota Inlet and NSW border, and the **Sandpatch Wilderness Area**, between Wingan Inlet and Shipwreck Creek. The **Wilderness Coast Walk**, only for the well-prepared and intrepid, starts at Sydenham Inlet, by Bemm River and heads along the coast to Mallacoota. You can start anywhere in between. Thurra River is a good starting point, making the walk an easy-to-medium 59km (five-day) hike to Mallacoota. Tony Gray runs

a **car shuttle** (☎ 5158 0472, 0408-516 482; up to six people \$212) to Thurra River from Mallacoota: leave your car at Mallacoota airport.

Croajingolong is a bird-watcher's paradise, with more than 300 recorded species, including glossy black cockatoos and the rare ground parrot, while the inland waterways are home to a myriad of water birds such as the delicate azure kingfisher and the magnificent sea eagle. There are many small mammals, including possums, bandicoots and gliders, and some huge goannas. The vegetation ranges from typical coastal landscapes to thick eucalypt forests, with areas of warm-temperate rainforest. The heath land areas are filled with impressive displays of orchids and wild flowers in the spring.

Point Hicks was the first part of Australia to be spotted by Captain Cook and the *Endeavour* crew in 1770 and was named after his first Lieutenant, Zachary Hicks. There's a **lighthouse** here (see p140), which is open for tours recanting tales of dark, stormy nights filled with ghosts and shipwrecks. You can still see remains of the *SS Saros*, which ran ashore in 1937, on a short walk from the lighthouse.

Access roads of varying quality lead into the park from the Princes Hwy. Apart from Mallacoota Rd, all roads are unsealed and can be very rough in winter, so check with Parks Victoria on road conditions before venturing on, especially during or after rain.

Contact **Parks Victoria** (☎ 13 19 63; www.parkweb.vic.gov.au; Cann River ☎ 5158 6351, Mallacoota ☎ 5161 9500) offices in Cann River or Mallacoota for information, road conditions, overnight hiking and camping permits, and track notes. Lonely Planet's *Walking in Australia* has an excellent detailed description of the walk from Thurra River to Mallacoota.

Sleeping

The main camping areas are at Wingan Inlet, Shipwreck Creek, Thurra River and Mueller Inlet. Given their amazing beauty, these campgrounds are surprisingly quiet and bookings only need to be made for the Christmas and Easter holiday periods. Wingan and Shipwreck can be booked through Parks Victoria (see above), and Thurra and Mueller through Point Hicks Lighthouse (p140).

Wingan Inlet (unpowered sites \$15.50) Serene and secluded, this site has superb sandy beaches and great walks. The Wingan River Walk (2½ hours return) through rainforest

has great water holes for swimming and cascading rapids.

Shipwreck Creek (unpowered sites \$15.50) Only 15km from Mallacoota, this beautiful camping ground is set in forest above a sandy beach. It's a small ground with just five sites and there are lots of short walks to do here.

Mueller Inlet (unpowered sites \$16) The calm waters of this inlet are fantastic for kayaking and swimming, and the camp sites are only a couple of metres from the water (not ideal with toddlers). It's a small camping ground with eight sites – three of them walk-in – but it's the only camping ground without fireplaces. There's no vegetation providing privacy, but outside Christmas and Easter holidays it's usually quiet.

Thurra River (unpowered sites \$16) This is largest of the park's sites, with 46 well-designed sites

stretched along the foreshore from the river towards the lighthouse. Most of the sites are separated by bush. There's communal fireplaces, and pit toilets with signage reminding you how to look after the environment. Thurra River and Mueller Inlet camping grounds are less than 5km from the lighthouse.

Bush Camping (unpowered sites per person \$5) Several other bush-camping sites lie along the Wilderness Coast Walk. BYO drinking water; permits required.

Point Hicks Lighthouse (☎ 5158 4268, 5156 0432; www.gippslandlakesescapes.com.au/Properties/PointHicksLighthouse; up to 6 people \$250-295) This remote lighthouse has two comfortable, heritage-listed cottages that originally housed the Assistant Lighthouse Keepers. Each of the cottages have sensational ocean views and wood fires.