

Good food hunting

THREE days free and we are on the road, a small group full of anticipation and the promise of discovery. With Melbourne behind us, we head for Dunkeld at the southern tip of Victoria's Grampians National Park, 260km to the west. At Ballarat, we branch off the high road (the A8, which would lead us north to skirt the upper reaches of the park) and take the low road, the B160, the Glenelg Highway, which will deliver us straight to our destination. We are on a mission to discover hidden territory, the Grampian Mountains, first stop Dunkeld and its A-list restaurant at the Royal Mail Hotel.

We pass scrubby, heath-flowered land, a paddock of shaggy ponies and undulating sheep pastures, plumply flowering wattle trees line the road. Small towns come and go: Smythesdale, a tiny cemetery at its approaches, daffodils under its trees and not a supermarket or Starbucks in sight. Our first view of the mountains comes with a chain of blue-hazed points on the horizon, about 50km from Dunkeld.

Late sun pierces cloud banks in a pyramid of rays and the road begins to climb. As we close in on the Grampians, they seem to close in on us. We fork off the highway headed for the Royal Mail and they surround us, craggy, irregular, sloping towards the Victoria Valley as if embracing a great, prehistoric ocean bed.

The ruggedly gorgeous Grampians region, smudged across central western Victoria, is a hidden prize. If you are a rock-climber, cliff-face plunger or other

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extremist, this may be familiar territory; ditto for bushwalkers. There is a quiet awakening going on, however, and the Royal Mail Hotel, in the regional town of Dunkeld, population 444, could well be responsible for breaking the spell. With its destination restaurant bedecked with food and wine awards and luring overnighters and weekend guests from Melbourne and interstate, the Royal Mail is spreading the message.

Meanwhile, let's stake a claim to the Grampians in the name of gazers and grazers. Rock faces and forested hills are as good for contemplating as for climbing.

We launch our Grampians adventure with dinner at the Royal Mail, then split up for the night. I stay at nearby Griffins Hill Yoga Retreat, one of the stars on an excellent local list. This yoga retreat is exactly that, even without the yoga. It's the kind of place I'd be happy to hole up in, with a good supply of books, for a longish stretch. Guestrooms are comfortable and home-style, opening on to a deck with views across five-star gardens to the wilds of Mt Sturgeon. Hosts are horticulturalist Jane Gibb, the garden

Judith Elen wanders the bountiful backroads of Victoria's rugged Grampians region

artist here, and Frank Jesse, a yoga expert who teaches in Melbourne. There is a garden yoga studio and a range of relaxation and practice sessions and packages.

For me, it's the garden that does it, and the breakfast of home-grown and made preserves, just-baked bread, hand-picked herbs and the most orange egg yolks, all served in a glass-sided dining room surrounded by the gardens. I wander outside and am lured down paths through cold-climate flowering trees, past streams and across bridges. I am very reluctant to leave.

Taking the scenic C216, traversing Grampians National Park north of Dunkeld, we drive between sheep pastures ringed by mountains. The devastating bushfires that swept through the Grampians early in 2006 have left areas of charred, blackened trunks veiled in fresh growth as if wreathed in tropical vines. This morning we are headed for the town of Halls Gap at the centre of the park on its eastern edge and home of the National Park and Cultural Centre, Brambuk.

Under the Aboriginal name of Gariwir, these mountains and sequestered valleys have been home to the Jardwadjali and Djab Wurrung people for thousands of years. At Brambuk, I get a small insight into what they have learned in that time. Brambuk chief executive Jeremy Clark tells me the park is 120km long and 80km across; it has roads and winding tracks, but it is wild country, he warns.

So advice is important, but this is much more than an information centre. I learn that 80 per cent of the state's rock art is in the Grampians. Many sites not usually open to the public can be visited on guided Brambuk tours.

Even if you are just passing through, as we are, a short visit is great fun. We taste crocodile skewers, emu sausages and kangaroo fillets at the bush tucker cafe and, my favourite bit, walk through an active display of the region's six seasons. I learn that the warmth (spring) is the time of butterflies, when dragonflies mate, river red gums flower and tadpoles are in the ponds. The season of eels or kooyong (summer) is the hottest and driest, when stringybarks flower, insects are active and the night sky is bright with stars.

Brambuk has been owned and run by Aborigines since 1990, in partnership with Parks Victoria. It provides jobs and training, and proceeds from artefacts sold in the shop go to the five participating communities. One of the buildings, winner of an Australian architecture award in 1992, is a fascinating exhibition space and backdrop for dances and performances, a favourite with school groups. Like a great, anchored tent of bark and wood, it echoes the shape of a cockatoo in flight.

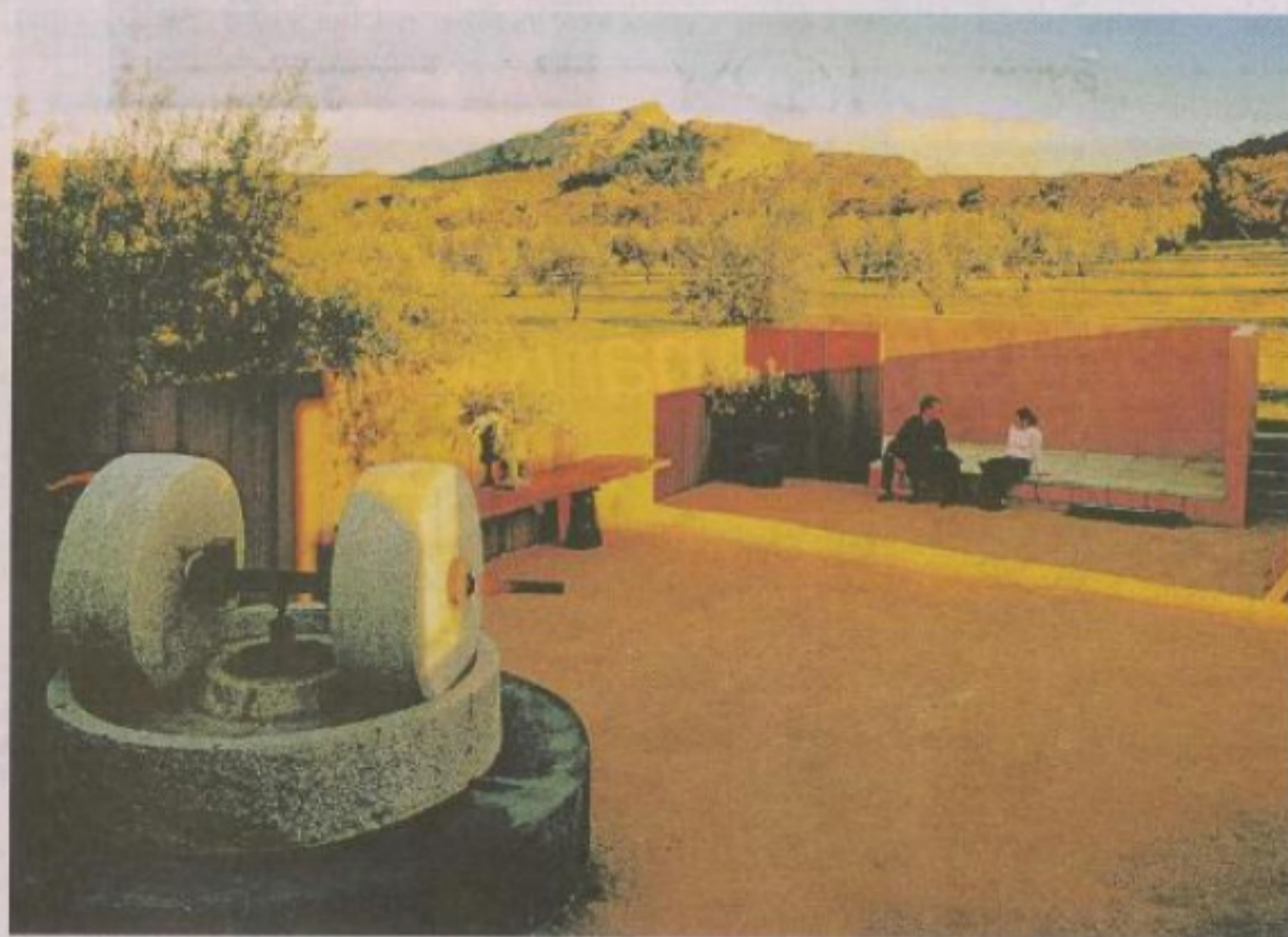
We move on to another schoolroom, this time of the weatherboard variety. Travelling north from Halls Gap, we drive through Wartook Valley, all kangaroos, mountain views and wild flowers, towards Mt Zero at the farthest reaches of the park. Organic grower Mount Zero Olives runs a compound of buildings — shop, cafe and accommodation — brought here from elsewhere

and resurrected in all their nostalgic glory. The first to be brought in, a country schoolhouse from Strathdownie near the South Australian border, furnishes bedrooms for WWOOFers — willing workers on organic farms — who come here from across the world to do just that. They often love a spot of extreme sport and Mt Stapylton, which is in view, and Hollow Mountain beyond it, which are world-renowned for rock-climbing and abseiling, are part of the drawcard.

Meanwhile, the Grampians is Australia's largest olive producer and the farm-gate store here (another old schoolhouse, this one brought from Great Western, down the road a bit) is a beautiful place to stock up. Sun slants through the windows and falls across old wooden tables, cabinets and meat safes filled with the grove's organic and bio-dynamic goods (marinated olives, oils, sun-dried blocks of dark soap, tapenades). There is all manner of local produce, from herbs, vinegars and caper tapenades to pulses. (I leave with small hessian sacks of Persian red and French green lentils.)

Apart from olives, sheep, Black Angus cattle around Hamilton and Dunkeld, farmed venison, wheat and goat dairies near Ballarat, the region is known for its wines, notably shiraz and riesling. Best's Wines is nearby at Great Western. Its vineyards include about 0.4ha of 150-year-old vines, which are still producing. There are 50 European grape varieties from early plantings and, of these, seven remain unidentified. Some are not known anywhere else in the world.

It is an interesting vineyard to visit, the old maintained beside the new. The Best family fed prospectors here during the gold rush, planting vines in 1866. Local vigneron Frederick Thomson bought the vineyard in 1920 and the fifth generation of his descendants operates it today. Visit the hand-dug, rammed earth cellars with their red-



The good oil: There's a shop, cafe and accommodation for organic farm workers at Mount Zero Olives

gum rafters and uprights innocent of nails. The original red-gum slab stables are the cellar door.

Seppelts Great Western, just down the road, is another historic gem, with 3km of underground tunnels, candlelit night tours and fascinating stories of the winery's early days (ask about Nellie Melba's champagne bath).

We also visit Mount Langi Ghiran estate. Set on red loam soil in the shadow of two mountains, with an Italian winemaking heritage, its top wine is Langi Shiraz.

There is a list of winemakers to visit. We have left the car at our lodgings and are chauffeured around by Mike

Dilisio, who operates Grampians Pyrenees Tours and is a fount of knowledge on the region as well as its wineries. When we visit, Dilisio is days away from opening a cafe restaurant, Nectar Ambrosia, in Ararat, which is conveniently on our route home.

We visit for lunch, a test audience. Imagine, in a very stylish setting, local olives, Meredith Dairy cheeses, warm salads laced with prosciutto and poached egg the colour of mandarin skin, omelets threaded with leafy herbs, open lamb burgers (this is sheep country), lush desserts and house-baked bread and (of course) local wines. Ground coffee beans from Spain,

Brazil and Africa, specially blended in Italy and roasted in Melbourne, hiss out of a Nuova Simonelli espresso machine that comes from Genoa, one of only two or three such masterpieces in the country.

Do we really have to go home? Judith Elen was a guest of Grampians Marketing and Tourism Victoria.

- www.visitgrampians.com.au
- www.griffinshill.com.au
- www.brambuk.com.au
- www.mountzeroolives.com
- www.grampianswine.com.au
- www.grampianspyrenees-tours.com.au
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New Pacific

China Adv Shanghai, B Chengou, 1

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The Water, Reed Flute Pandas, Five 16 Oct, 07

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