

Take your breath away

SPECTACULAR SCENERY, HERITAGE TOWNS, CULINARY TEMPTATIONS AND WONDERFUL BICYCLE ROUTES – IT'S HEAVEN IN VICTORIA'S HIGH COUNTRY...

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e're flying downhill on our bikes, the wind in our faces, very proud of ourselves as we ride into Beechworth. To be honest, however, these are "balloon-tyre bombers" – old bikes on free loan from our hotel, and we're not very good cyclists, but we are getting into the spirit of things.

Victoria's High Country has some of the best and most scenic cycling routes in the country. There's road riding, mountain biking, easy-going rail trails (over 200 kilometres of bike paths) – and then there's just tootling around small townships. Everywhere you look you seem to see bicycles – single file along the road, families on off-road bike trails, bikes loaded up on car roofs and hitched on the back of big four-wheel drives.

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Main image: Cycling the rail trail

High country towns

The High Country spreads across north-east Victoria, a region of fertile food-growing valleys and vineyards, gold history, magnificent mountains, rivers and creeks, and in season, snow country and ski resorts.

Beechworth is a handy location to base yourself but other good locations for a High Country holiday – with or without a bike – include Bright, Myrtleford, Benalla, Rutherglen, Milawa and the gorgeous King Valley.

www.victoriashighcountry.com.au/towns-villages



Above: Road cycling at Mount Hotham

There are road racing and mountain bike events just about every month of the year and there's a positive peloton of cycle-tour companies. You can cycle to breweries, ride to wineries, or pedal to pick up farm-gate produce. You can literally pedal to your hearts' content.

There are also bike hire companies so you can even hire electric bikes or arrange a shuttle service to or from your destination.

Beechworth is around four hours' drive from Melbourne and it's a fine base if you enjoy the outdoors but also like to weave in a little history and sightseeing, and add some good food and wine or a boutique beer, into a getaway.

The town is 800 metres above the Ovens Valley floor – you can't help noticing the crisp mountain air and clear, velvety night skies. It's also well endowed with cafes, restaurants and interesting shops and it's amazingly family friendly. Kids love it here!

CHEERS TO THE BEERS

Some say it's all about the crystal clear mountain water. Others say it's the crisp, high-altitude air and frosty winters. Or maybe it's just the laid-back country approach to brewing in this pristine landscape? Whatever it is, there's some seriously good beer being brewed in the High Country.

These artisanal brewers are social, too. There's a community feeling – they share their skills and knowledge, many of them cycle together, and they welcome guests at their breweries dotted around the countryside. If you have the time – and a designated driver – follow the High Country Brewery Trail (a brochure even maps out the trail for you).

In Beechworth, Bridge Road Brewery was started by local cycling addict and master microbrewer Ben Kraus. A short lane off Ford Street leads to the Brewery and Pizzeria in the old coach house and stables behind legendary pub, Tanswell's Commercial Hotel.

You can stop in for refreshing ale after a ride, or join the locals in the evening. Choose from 20 beers on tap (hoppy, dark or pale ale), order a crisp-based pizza and settle in with a Country and Western soundtrack twanging in the background. Kids are more than welcome. We also tested Black Dog Brewery at Taminick Cellars near Glenrowan and Bright Brewery, with its restaurant, coffee and seasonal brews.

One of the oldest – and the newest – breweries around is Billson's Brewery in Last Street, Beechworth. George Billson, who'd been on the Californian goldfields and the local goldfields, started brewing in 1865 and built this brewery in 1872. He



brewed alcoholic beer, but when the Temperance Movement took hold, the company turned to non-alcoholic cordials and aerated waters. Business flourished for several generations. The building was empty for some years but a terrific young couple, Nathan Cowan and Felicity Cottrill, have taken over. They've opened a brewery museum – with some

Above (from top to bottom): The gold mining town of Beechworth; and an eclectic cafe offering fine local wine and produce

great photos and original equipment – and a 'Speakeasy' bar with clubby Chesterfield sofas, where you can sample their heritage craft beers.

They now make more than 20 traditional cordials (we loved the old-fashioned Sarsaparilla). They've also started distilling gin and produce their own small-batch tonic water. There's a café upstairs with

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local breads and pies. There's even a little hipster barbershop!

TASTING AND TIPLING

In Beechworth's Ford Street, an imposing wall of wine greets you at the petite Cellar Door Wine Store. The Store, run by Cecily and Peter Bissett and their son Lachlan, serves coffee, cakes and light food but it also stocks a selection of rare wines and is the main outlet for small local vignerons.

Chris Catlow from the boutique Sentio winery says: "Most of the local wineries are too small to have a cellar door so this is a great outlet. We have regular tastings and winemakers meet here."

When the Bissett family decided to open up the cellar to create a tasting room, they found huge hand-cut granite blocks, fireplaces and original 1850s wax-lined fermentation tanks. All that history just under the shop!

The nearby Ox and Hound Bistro also occupies a heritage shopfront. It's small, just 11 tables, so book ahead. The sun streams in by day, and at night it's cosy. The menu puts a refined French-Italian spin on

Clockwise from top left: Cyclists in rural Harrietville; heritage signposting in Beechworth; a tasty dish served up at the Provenance Hotel in Beechworth; cyclists explore the apple orchards in Bright

fresh local produce such as rabbit, chestnuts, river trout, regional cheeses. And there's a smart wine list too.

Provenance, in the former 1857 Bank of Australasia (the original vault now houses the wine cellar) has a reputation spreading well beyond Beechworth. Renowned chef Michael Ryan's menu subtly blends

“In Beechworth's Ford Street, a wall of wine greets you at the petite Cellar Door Wine Store”

European and Japanese influences using the best of regional fare, exquisitely presented. They have stylish accommodation in the refurbished stables.

Empire Hotel, a renovated but relaxed gourmet pub is popular with locals and has a lively buzz and a bar menu studded with international bites: goat kofta, sweet corn with harissa, tofu with chilli, Chinese dumplings with plum sauce.

Meanwhile, at the Press Room Wine Bar – in a former printing shop – the tapas, tortillas and patatas bravas on the menu highlight a Spanish influence. These are ideal with an artisan beer or a sparkling Spanish Cava.

Next morning – if you have perhaps over-imbibed – Beechworth has a generous number of cafés and good coffee and in no time at all you'll be ready to get back on your bike and explore some more.

SMALL BUT PERFECT TOWN

Only 20 kilometres or so from Beechworth, through a gently rolling landscape of dusty olive greens and rangy ancient gum trees is the little township of Yackandandah.

It may be small in size but it's big in character. The main street is a perfect mini goldfields streetscape, with a row of low-slung, verandahed shops, a smattering of small-scale but impressive heritage buildings and handsome European shade trees.

Make your first stop at the Visitor Information centre here for maps, brochures and a yarn about what to see and do.

Digging for gold

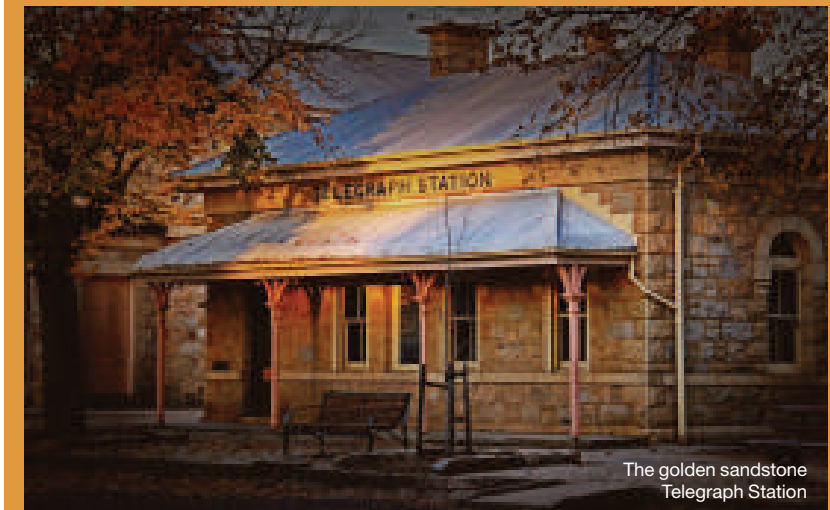
Gold was discovered at Spring Creek in Beechworth in 1852 and within a few years 10,000 people swarmed across the diggings, many living in squalid shanties and makeshift tents. But the gold poured in and soon substantial buildings were being erected to reflect the town's sudden wealth and sense of importance. Heritage streetscapes and broad, tree-lined roads are a legacy of those heady days.

History buffs might want to join a guided tour (it takes over an hour), an entertaining and sometimes amusing introduction to the town's history and characters. You can also visit some of the town's historic buildings including the 1858 Courthouse where legendary bushrangers Ned Kelly and Harry Powers were tried.

At the golden sandstone Telegraph Station, built in 1857, you can still send a telegraphic message. In the former Athenaeum building, also 1857, you'll find the Burke Memorial Museum in honour of the famous and ill-fated explorer Robert O'Hara Burke, who was stationed at Beechworth from 1854 to 1858.

The Visitor Information centre is in the splendid two-storey Town Hall opened in 1857. Beside it are the gardens designed by noted botanist Baron von Mueller from Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens (and a delightful spot for a picnic).

Old Beechworth Gaol is another must for history buffs. And in the entrance you'll find a 1964 silver Airstream caravan serving coffee and snacks. Out of town at the cemetery the 1857 Chinese Burning Towers and headstones are a reminder of the 5,000 Chinese who worked on these goldfields.



The golden sandstone Telegraph Station

Clockwise from top left: Shops in Yackandandah; and cyclists on the Pedal to Produce cycling trail in Rutherglen

The Museum and Historical Society Office, just a few doors away in an 1860s stone building, is a mine of facts, figures and fascinating photos. Can you believe, the Bank of Australasia opened here in 1857, and in that first year, 33,400 ounces – or almost a thousand kilos – of gold was lodged? No wonder men were downing tools and heading for the gold diggings.

We also picked up some homemade crab apple jelly from a stall outside the museum. The High Country is renowned for its tasty apples, so if you see that jam, or it's apple season, stock up.

We spent a while browsing the shops, including the pottery workshop of ceramics master John Dermer, known for his beautiful salt-glazed pots and >>

USEFUL WEBSITES

- For more information about what there is to see and do in Victoria's High Country visit www.victoriashighcountry.com.au.
- Must Love Dogs B&B is ideally located in the Rutherglen wine region (www.mustlovedogsbedandbreakfast.com.au). This quaint cottage has three luxury suites and boasts tranquil gardens. Facilities include a heritage-listed dining room with a log fire, as well as a solar heated swimming pool and spa.
- The Plane Trees Estate in Beechworth (planetrees.com.au) offers self-catering accommodation in a unique log and earth Eco-Lodge which sleeps up to 10 guests, or the estate's romantic Arts Suite, located within a Tuscan styled villa: perfect for two or four.



represented in the National Gallery of Victoria and the Parliament House in Canberra.

Given the cycling going on in these hills, we couldn't resist the Rusty Bike Café and ordered up some Buttermilk Pancakes to get us through the day. Those who enjoy a pie, though, would do well to stop by Gum Tree Pies, also in the main street. The décor is a tad basic, but the Thai Green Chicken Curry and classic Steak and Guinness are highly recommended.

If the weather is fine, try the Gorge Walk. You need some walking shoes or trainers, as it's quite uneven but it's not a hard walk. It starts from the Sports Oval. You follow the gurgling creek bed and wind along a bush track and over some old stone steps. You can see where the gorge was cut away to sluice for gold. At first it was by pick and shovel but later it was blasted through with dynamite.

The sun was shining, pin oaks were turning wine-red (it was early autumn) and we could hear the

Clockwise from top: The Star Hotel; the main street; and a butcher's shop – all in Yackandandah

warbling of magpies on the day we did it. If it's hot, don't forget your hat and water bottle. The sun here can be fierce.

For mountain bike enthusiasts, Yack Tracks is around 50 kilometres of trails meandering through the Stanley State Forest. It's suitable for beginners and intermediate and the locals assure us there are long, unbroken sections, so you don't need to keep stopping. Take the Bells Flat Road out of town to reach it. 🇦🇺