

Coast WITH THE MOST

Rachael Doherty explores the best of the Bellarine.

PICS ANNA PASTUKHOVA AND RACHAEL DOHERTY





“Through coastal scrub, a table provides picnickers views near a staircase to the shore”



Clockwise from top: Views crossing the Barwon River; quiches baked on site at Peppercorn Foods; customers await award-winning tapas at Annie's Provedore & Produce Store; long, low tides east of the Barwon Heads bridge.

could feel the calming force of the coast as I drove across the Barwon River. The receding tide was unveiling vast sandbars either side of its banks, with a gradual widening hinting at the mouth due west on the Saturday morning as I arrived.

Our crew was assigned to my colleague's favourite local holiday haunt to explore the many activities to be had for those planning a southern journey. And as I walked in her

sandals to experience the pleasures of the region, my immediate thought was its beauty.

WATER PLAY

With its chic, quirky retail district, safe swimming and surfing beaches around the corner, Barwon Heads draws an eclectic mix. Walkers, cyclists, holidaymakers, and stand-up paddleboarders were clearly enjoying the good weather at the Barwon River as owners watched their dogs energetically zig-zag to the shores. Living bayside in Melbourne with young kids, I envied the relaxed demeanour of the expecting couple as they strolled on the sand with a pram out the front, and a toddler splashing in the shallows close behind.

As you approach the bridge to the north through coastal scrub, a table provides picnickers with views near a staircase to the shore. The Barwon Heads shopping precinct is a pleasant stroll beyond the bridge, but I was eagerly eyeballing the ocean beaches, so leaving my phone's absent-minded GPS at the helm, I shot past the jetty and sprinted along Thirteenth Beach Road for views of the Charlemont Reef. Kombi vans, Commodores, and zinc-coated surfers waxing their boards in the carpark painted a classic Aussie scene, with the newly-constructed timber staircase providing a scramble-free access to the ocean below.



BARWON HEADS DINING

Having driven from south-east Melbourne since 6am, a coffee was well overdue, so I returned to Peppercorn Foods where I met owner Heather out the back preparing quiches. Knowing my colleagues were tight on time, I grabbed a few fresh sandwiches for us and chucked them in a lunch-box cooler.

I wandered diagonally opposite to the shady oasis of Annie's Provedore & Produce Store, known for its deli platters and cheeses. The weather was too warm for such delectable richness, though I did grab a home-made rocky road 'for the kids'.

Barwon Heads is polished yet eccentric, with pop-up markets, fresh ice-creameries and coffee served from finely detailed retro caravans. Woven bags, cool beads, and loose-fitting ware in natural fabrics provide favourable tourist fodder compared to the plastics seen elsewhere.





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Clockwise from above: Courtney 'I Can't Feel My Face' Sebek experiences negative Gs in her warbird flight; Curious Australian seals wait for their fans aka tourists to hang with them at Chinaman's Hat; a cheeky seal frolics in front of our eyes; a rather relaxed commute on the wings of the *Maureen M* courtesy of Sea All Dolphin Tours.

SNORKELLING THE BAY

Keen to hear tales of exciting feats and looking forward to a few of my own, I drove towards the Queenscliff Harbour for a snorkelling trip with Sea All Dolphin Swims.

Exiting the car park I fumble to switch off my phone's GPS to reach our craft, *Maureen M*, where our drone operator Anna Pastukhova was photographing owner James Murphy outside of his premises at Queenscliff Harbour.

Between trying on flippers, squeezing into a wetsuit and ignoring the muffled directionals

still emanating from my backpack, I caught up with my colleague Courtney Sebek who was still coming down from her Warbird flight.

"I couldn't feel my face!" she exclaimed. The ex-military C-76 was flown by Anatole Mills, owner of the Adventure Flight Company.

Just as she was describing the thrill of experiencing weightlessness while upside down at incredible G forces, our captain called us over for a brief operational run-down and showed us the signals we needed for communicating out on the water.

Mesmerised by the waves, we were dropping into the water before I knew it – our first destination being Chinaman's Hat, where 25 or so Australian fur seals spend their days. As I paddle towards the structure I spot one, nose up out of the water enjoying a satisfying scratch before ducking underwater again. As the swim advanced I grew more confident at holding my breath and delving deeper, and just as we were called in I spotted three seals swimming in ring formation right before my eyes.

As the spotter searched for dolphins, the crew challenged the passengers to coast the waters by the side of the divine *Miss M*; heeding the call and grabbing the rope I was surprised by my strength against the pull of the rushing ocean. Admittedly, I needed a hand pulling myself onto the net, with my legs feeling oddly heavy. Seeing Courtney in fits of giggles, I looked down and noticed the lower quarter of my suit was filled with water. Although proud of my bold feat, I drew the line at jumping into the sea from up top of the boat, leaving that to Anna and Courtney.

With no joy on the dolphin front, the captain skipped *Maureen M* to Pope's Eye in Port Phillip Heads Marine National Park. I called Anna to join us for the second swim but she looked happy as a clam admiring the water birds and their metre-wide wings. So I pinched her GoPro and slid into the crystal clear waters for spectacular views of the brightly-coloured fish life and soft corals subsiding in the shelf.

A QUEENSLIFF WELCOME

Between swims and death-defying feats, the crew plied us with fruit and sugar, but after a physical day and a good shower, I hankered for an early dinner at the landmark 360Q



The CJ-6



✶ The ex-military fighter trainer plane used for Courtney's flight was a Nanchang CJ-6.

Pilot Anatole Mills of Adventure Flight Co. says the post-WWII craft was first manufactured in the 1950s at the start of the Cold War.

Enjoying a long production life, the Nanchang CJ-6 was manufactured until 2011, with the craft pictured here one of the last to be brought into the country.

As an ex-military fighter trainer, it is unarmed but has a live cockpit.



Ratings

RV Infrastructure: ★★★★★
Attractions: ★★★★★
X-Factor: ★★★★★



Highlights

- 📍 Close up animal encounters
- 📍 Low tide wanderings
- 📍 Spotting reef dwellers

Clockwise from top left: Gorgeous views and great lamb at the iconic 360Q waterfront restaurant at Queenscliff Harbour; mastering the paddleboard at Barwon Heads; Golf Boards at Curlewis Golf Club; many ways to stretch yourself at Barwon Heads; sharing lunch at the Flying Brick Cider House; our super-comfortable Jayco Conquest.

restaurant. Here, the Sri Lankan rubbed lamb rack from the spring menu was too much to resist, and was washed down with a local Baie Wines rosé and chased with a white chocolate and vanilla bean fool topped with salted caramel popcorn. From the wall-to-wall windows facing the Harbour, I watched vessels docked at the marina bob gently in the breeze. But views from up top beckoned so I climbed the 40m observation tower above the restaurant to take in Queenscliff, the Harbour and the ferry terminal in the patchy late afternoon sun.

Well fed, I wandered down the old-world streets of Queenscliff to the tunes from the Queenscliff Music Festival, but the evening was approaching so I checked into the delightful BIG4 Beacon Resort. The resort is neat as a pin, welcoming yet secure, and offers patrons a variety of cabin accommodation, powered sites, and a campground on artificial grass. Looking to ease my weary legs I enjoyed a dip in the heated indoor pool before wandering around to inspect the grounds, where I spotted a dedicated wash for rigs. The shared spaces here are amazing, and if you're travelling with a group you can make use of the gorgeous function area and spacious indoor/outdoor camping kitchen.

Wandering back to my Mercedes-Benz Jayco Conquest provided by Prestige Jayco after dark, I heated up hot chocolate in the microwave and slept like a baby on the innerspring bed.



ACTIVE IN THE BELLARINE

The next day, returning to Barwon Heads, the weather was less than fair, but she was still a picture under a stormy sky, so I stayed to check out the paddleboarders in action.

Here, Sean from WSUP was conducting beginner lessons for women on behalf of Surf Life Saving Australia to encourage active lifestyles. Participants were engaged from the get-go and by end of the hour-long lesson all five were proudly standing up on their boards grinning from ear to ear despite the rain.

But I was angling for a stretch, so I wandered down the sand towards the bridge for a spot of yoga, where Rachel Hely our instructor from Barwon Heads Yoga looked ever-serene. Gentle and reassuring, I felt very safe as she adjusted my position.

It was getting late, and I was feeling a bit peckish, so I left beautiful Barwon Heads behind for lunch with a friend at the cider brewery in Wallington. Named after the yellow-tailed black cockatoo, the Flying Brick Cider Co presents



tours and a tasting of its preservative-free ciders, which went down a treat alongside the tapas we ordered and the free-range roast chicken and quinoa share plate.

I didn't have time for golf but I had heard about a great little club just down the road. Here, at the Curlewis Golf Club, patrons are allowed to enjoy the course in more relaxed attire. The friendly vibe was evident from the clubhouse, which had views overlooking the You Yangs. They were also visible from the pro shop where we met Sam, who was keen to demonstrate the club's latest and very cool addition, GolfBoards.

Having watched him surf the 18th, and impress us with his swing, we bid our goodbyes.

Fast facts

THE BELLARINE PENINSULA

The Bellarine Peninsula is 90 minutes southwest of Melbourne, surrounded by Port Phillip, Corio Bay and Bass Strait. The region is well known for its stunning beaches, quaint seaside towns and cool-climate wineries.

CAMPING & EATING

- 📍 **BIG4 Beacon Resort**, (03) 5258 1133, www.beaconresort.com.au
- 📍 **Barwon Heads Caravan Park**, (03) 5243 3842, www.barwonheadscaravanpark.com.au
- 📍 **Ocean Grove Holiday Park**, (03) 5626 1046, www.oghp.com.au
- 📍 **360Q**, (03) 5257 4200, www.360q.com.au
- 📍 **Flying Brick Cider Co**, (03) 5250 6577, www.flyingbrickciderco.com.au

ACTIVITIES

- 📍 **Adventure Flight Co.**, 1300 341 006, www.adventureflightco.com.au
- 📍 **Sea All Dolphin Swims**, (03) 5258 3889, www.dolphinwims.com.au
- 📍 **Curlewis Golf Club**, (03) 5251 2534, www.curlewisgolf.com.au
- 📍 **Werribee Open Zoo**, 1300 966 784, www.zoo.org.au/werribee
- 📍 **WSUP**, 0439 113 457, www.wsup.com.au
- 📍 **Barwon Heads Yoga**, 0430 515 424, www.barwonheadsyooga.com.au

Visit www.visitgeelongbellarine.com.au for more information



WERRIBEE ZOO

I was looking forward to the private Off-Road Safari at the Werribee Open Range Zoo but it still exceeded my expectations, with the driver Ron Goldsmith our guide.

Having spent 25 years on the job “as a casual” and a vanner to boot, Ron spoke passionately about the plight of some of the Zoo’s endangered animals on the range.

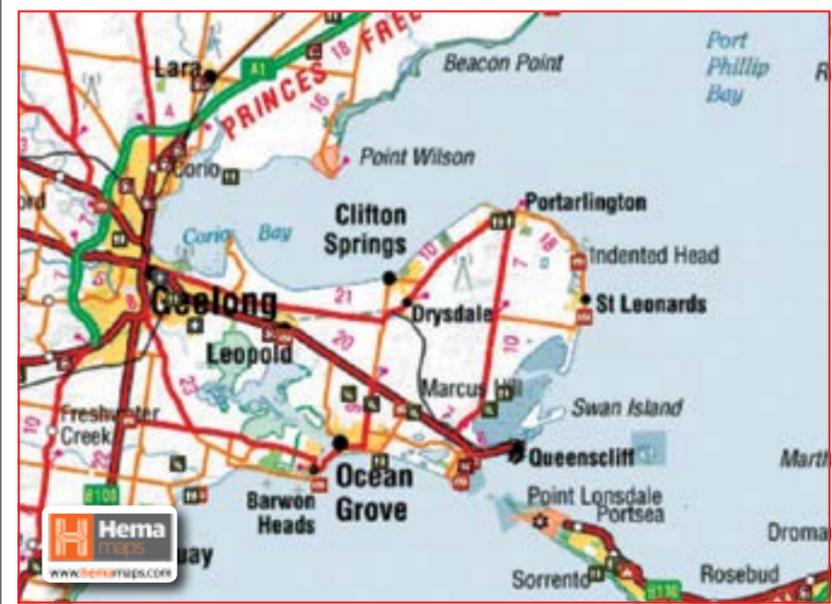
He also told me Werribee Zoo started as agistment for Melbourne Zoo and, as the public cottoned on, picnics sprung up alongside the paddocks filled with exotic animals, serving inspiration for the attraction 30 years ago.

When I started the tour I wondered if I had the glass to get the shots, but the curiosity of hand-reared camel Vera scuttled that fear as she pushed her nose through the bars. Taking a step back, I let out a nervous giggle, and as I grabbed a wide angle lens she grew bored, snorted and poked her nose in the front of the van. Soon thereafter an antelope, also hand-reared and seeking a familiar friend, wandered to the drivers’ side. Ron, obliging, stretched out his hands quietly waiting until the animal offered up his nose for a welcome scratch.

We crossed about 100 acres in our open-air vehicle, watching ostriches stretch their full-size wings, some bossy zebras (whose stripes aren’t always black), a hippopotamus and her older calf, and took in views of the savannah where animals graze, and ended our day with an ‘off the menu’ close-up encounter with giraffes at feeding time. [CW](#)



The Bellarine Peninsula



Clockwise from top: Werribee Open Range Zoo Off-Road Safari guide and CW reader Ron Goldsmith travels Australia between tours; book a private safari tour or take the free public shuttle; giraffes don’t mind if you join them for dinner; are you watching the hippos or are they watching you?






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