

Explore NORTH EAST VICTORIA in the warmer months – mountain biking, foodie cycling tours, *WILDFLOWER WALKS* and all – and you'll SOON DISCOVER why visitors to the *HIGH COUNTRY* come for winter and STAY FOR SUMMER.

*Hiking the Razorback to Mt Feathertop in Victoria's High Country.*

# *Living the high life*

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FROM TOP:  
A typically bucolic High  
Country scene; Devour a  
pie from Harrietville  
Bakery. OPPOSITE:  
Shelter in the form of  
the Gorge Stone Hut  
on Mt Buffalo.

XENA PAHINA LEADS the way on Flowtown. We're squeezing this six-kilometre mountain biking trail between a lunchtime hike and an afternoon paddle, also in Falls Creek. Half an hour of bridges, rollers and berms later we're muddy-faced and pumped. "Wanna do it again tomorrow morning?" she says. A decade ago Xena Warrior Princess, as she's known locally, shifted herself and her two kids from Melbourne to Victoria's High Country for a lifestyle change and has never looked back.

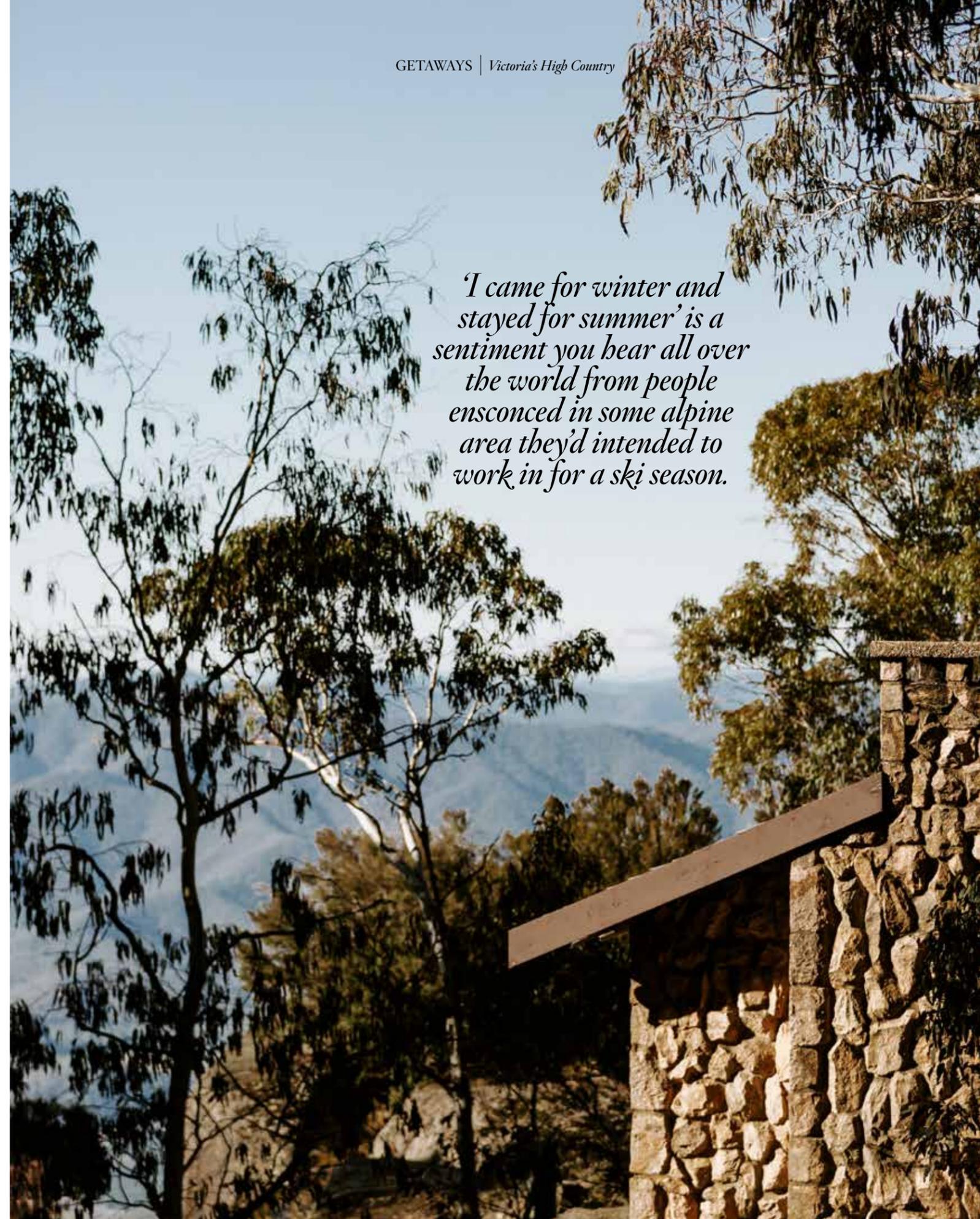
'I came for winter and stayed for summer' is a sentiment you hear all over the world from people ensconced in some alpine area they'd intended to work in for a ski season but, when winter melted away, became enamoured with what lay beneath and never left. Long daylight hours, warm weather, minimal snow cover and the energising effects of summertime really open up a landscape for people. North East Victoria is one of those places.

Visitors have a similar response: "People come here in winter and then come back in the summer and get blown away," Karen Smythe of Trails, Tales and Tucker told me earlier that day as we walked in the midday sun between mustering and refuge huts on the wild-flowering Bogong High Plains. Our guide, local historian Ken Bell, looks like a well-aged country singer, calls everyone mate and employs the odd f-bomb for emphasis on issues he's passionate about.

Victoria's highest mountain and surrounds gave their name to the bogong – 'big fella' – moth that migrates from Queensland and New South Wales to rest in cool crevices. Aboriginal nations met →



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peacefully here every summer to feast on this delicious source of fat and protein but from the mid-1850s, when grazing was introduced and gold discovered, everything changed. "Our Indigenous people lived with the land and we lived off the land," said Ken.

Beneath the chubby limbs of ancient snow gums near Cope Hut, the owner of Diana Alpine Lodge, Lisa Logan, was waiting for us with a picnic lunch of cured meats and pickled vegetables, fruit salad and lemon curd tart, rosewater lemonade and local wines. Not my first taste of North East produce but completely different to the previous day's experience.

Just 100 kilometres away, yet 1000 altitudinal metres closer to sea level down in the valley where the Ovens River flows, Myrtleford has been reinventing itself since the tobacco industry crashed over a decade ago. This Italian-flavoured town that tourists traditionally race through on their way to Bright was the perfect first stop of a week-long High Country trip because it forced me to slow right down.

Delizie Cafe Deli's charismatic owner Roberto Parolin showed us how to make gnocchi from scratch. Our small group then took a leisurely cycle to Pepo Farms – the only producers of pumpkin seeds in Australia – where we tasted pepitas, nut oils and chocolate turmeric walnuts. At family-owned Michelini we tried wines made with Italian grapes I'd never even heard of before and I fell hard for teroldego. Back at the cafe our little white masterpieces were served with pesto sauce and more vino and, when it was all over, everyone on this Rolling Gnocchi tour hugged like we'd just travelled Tuscany together for a week.

Myrtleford also has a once-a-month farmers' market and apparently their Boxing Day rodeo is bucking great.

All week I hear people refer to the mountains and the valley but appreciatively rather than competitively. Air temperature drops approximately one degree per 100 metres so when it's a baking hot high-30s in the Kiewa, King or Ovens Valley people can zip up a mountain and hike, bike, paddle and picnic in the sweet relief of a mid-20s sunny day. As it is when →



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Take a seat at the bar at Tomabawks in Bright; Knock up some gnocchi at Delizie Cafe Deli; Amble along the river in Bright; Check in with Jeff Swan and Nikki Fisch, co-owners of Harrietville Bakery. OPPOSITE: The road trip back to Melbourne from Victoria's High Country is particularly scenic.





FROM LEFT: Local historian Ken Bell regales walkers on the Bogong High Plains Trails, Tales and Tucker tour; Enjoy a lunch on tour made with North East produce. OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left): Soak in the vines at Feathertop Winery; The boutique vineyard produces 22 types of wine. Sample some of them with winemaker Nick Toy; Stop for a picnic at historic Cope Hut; The winding road to Falls Creek.



*At family-owned Michelini we tried wines made with Italian grapes I'd never even heard of before and I fell hard for teroldego.*

I visit Falls Creek again, this time to take a morning horse ride in nearby Tawonga and, after that, to hike the Razorback from Diamantina Hut with local 'mountain man' Karl Gray. When the thunder rumbles above the ridge and the sky spits, we ditch the idea of summiting Feathertop despite being halfway there.

We take shelter in Karl's gallery at Dinner Plain where the walls are decorated with his photographs of the area and apt words that proclaim "mountains are real, raw, unpredictable..." He and his young family live permanently in this village of 230 people at 1500 metres bordered by Alpine National Park. It's the ideal base for a bushwalking holiday and the only place in the Australian ski fields you can bring a dog. Karl tells me about someone who, on first visiting Dinner Plain, spontaneously bought one of his images and a house.

The following morning, I drop back down into the leafy village of Harrietville where the bakery is co-owned by a Swiss pastry chef, Nikki Fisch and I sit and talk about life, the universe and her home canton as I devour Appenzell-style vanilla slice and buttery tarts filled with home-grown fruit.

I take a walk around outside with track developer Andrew Swift who encourages people to "get a jam sandwich and thermos" and follow these short well-marked trails around Harrietville to spots like Tronoh Dredge Swimming Hole

and the site of a former Chinese mining village beside the East Ovens River. I later learn Andrew panned here for the gold used in his and his wife's wedding rings and lockets for his stepchildren.

The tree-lined entrance to Bright is as ludicrously long as its house prices are high. It's almost an outer suburb of Melbourne now with its new gin distillery, huge brew pub, wine bars, restaurants and a different cafe for every morning of a fortnight including social enterprise Dumu Balcony Cafe, which trains young people from the Northern Territory community of Wadeye. That afternoon the land manager for Mystic Mountain Bike Park shows me where track builders are finishing off a ramp for the Hero trail and we ride her favourite blue routes.

Just up the road in Porepunkah, within this epicentre of the Alpine Valleys wine region, is family-owned boutique vineyard Feathertop. All grapes are handpicked and their winemaker, Nick Toy, is down to earth. Feathertop currently produces 22 different wines from these subalpine growing conditions and "we believe we're seeing the best of some of these varieties", Nick tells me over a Vino Cucina food and wine-matching experience.

That afternoon a ranger collects me in her 4WD at the park entrance to Mount Buffalo in the rain and we drive the elevated plateau in freakishly unseasonal →





## FIVE OF THE BEST...

### Places to eat

The **EMPIRE HOTEL** does hearty meals and favours Beechworth beers and wines. [empirehotelbeechworth.com.au](http://empirehotelbeechworth.com.au)

**HARRIETVILLE BAKERY** is where Australia Post meets Swiss pastry. 219 Great Alpine Road

**MOUNTAIN KITCHEN** is a cosy Dinner Plain cafe. [mountainkitchen.com.au](http://mountainkitchen.com.au)

**THE PRODUCE STORE** in Mansfield sells freshly prepared food and local foodstuffs. [theproducestore.com.au](http://theproducestore.com.au)

**TOMAHAWKS** in Bright has an American-inspired menu and a great buzz. [tomahawksbright.com.au](http://tomahawksbright.com.au)

### Places to drink

**BRIGHT BREWERY** overlooks the Ovens River and uses sustainable brewing practices. [brightbrewery.com.au](http://brightbrewery.com.au)

**FEATHERTOP WINERY** in Porepunkah has a cellar door, restaurant and accommodation. [feathertopwinery.com.au](http://feathertopwinery.com.au)

**MICHELINI WINES** in Myrtleford is a 150-year-old family owned winery. [micheliniwines.com.au](http://micheliniwines.com.au)

**REED & CO. DISTILLERY** is also a bar and restaurant in a repurposed mechanics' garage in Bright. [reedandcodistillery.com](http://reedandcodistillery.com)

**WANDI PUB** is a beloved local favourite in Wandiligong, near Bright. [thewandipub.com](http://thewandipub.com)

### Places to stay

**DINNER PLAIN ACCOMMODATION** offers self-contained lodgings for up to 22 people. [dinnerplainaccommodation.com.au](http://dinnerplainaccommodation.com.au)

**PROVENANCE** in Beechworth has tasteful accommodation behind the restaurant. [theprovenance.com.au](http://theprovenance.com.au)



**QT FALLS CREEK** has designer apartments and is bogong-shaped from above. [qhotelsandresorts.com/falls-creek](http://qhotelsandresorts.com/falls-creek)

**SKILIB** is a low-key laid-back lodge on Mt Buller. [skilib.com.au](http://skilib.com.au)

**THE STELVIO VILLAS** are modern two-storey semis in central Bright. [alpinevalleygetaways.com.au](http://alpinevalleygetaways.com.au)

### Tours to join

**BOGONG HORSEBACK ADVENTURES** operate from the Baird family's Tawonga property Spring Spur. [bogonghorsebackadventures.weebly.com](http://bogonghorsebackadventures.weebly.com)

**MYRTLEFORD CYCLE CENTRE** leads Cook, Cycle, Feast tours (including Rolling Gnocchi), which can be tailored to groups. [myrtlefordcycle.com/tours](http://myrtlefordcycle.com/tours)

**KING VALLEY BALLOON FLIGHT** floats you from Brown Brothers over a waking valley. [brownbrothers.com.au](http://brownbrothers.com.au)

**SKADI ADVENTURES'** Mt Buller Hiking & Biking Experience runs in conjunction with All Terrain Cycles. [skadiadventures.com.au](http://skadiadventures.com.au)

**TRAILS, TALES AND TUCKER** is an easy Bogong High Plains stroll to huts and lunch. [trailtalesandtucker.com](http://trailtalesandtucker.com)



## I hike the Razorback from Diamantina Hut with local 'mountain man' Karl Gray until thunder rumbles above the ridge and the sky spits.

and utterly magical falling snow. On any other day in November people are up here frolicking in waterfalls, swimming and canoeing at Lake Catani, fly fishing, road cycling, hang-gliding, hiking, camping. In January the 1723-metre-high Horn is the best place to see aestivating bogong moths. And the heritage-listed timber Chalet – Australia's first ski resort – never really gets old.

The experiences I have in Beechworth are as extreme as this late-spring weather: after a Rogues, Ratbags and Mongrel Dogs tour at Old Beechworth Gaol that's all about Ellen Kelly and sons, the floggings until 1930 and the no flushing toilets until 1994, I have a luscious two-hour treatment at The Spa Beechworth.

Over dinner with a local at the town's finest establishment, Provenance, Sarah Pilgrim tells

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Ascending to Falls Creek; A walker on the Bogong High Plains.* OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left): *Wildflowers abound; One of the myriad cafes in Bright; A pit stop at Milcb Cafe in Falls Creek; Summer in Victoria's alpine regions energises the landscape in a whole different way.*



me "most of us living in the North East have chosen to be here".

The weather isn't right for hot-air ballooning from Milawa so I drive to Mansfield and hike up Mt Buller on Klingsporn Bridle Track with Ness Hinneberg – another urban escapee who rescued herself by creating Skadi Adventures.

The next morning the sun rises over Buller into a clear sky and we descend the 12-kilometre Delatite River Trail on bikes. As I hammer down that track dodging rocks and roots, rolling through creeks and balancing across log bridges above the rushing river it really strikes me what a dangerous place this is to have a holiday; I could easily picture myself living here like so many of the High Country converts I have met along the way. **AT**

## DETAILS

### Getting there

From Melbourne it's about a three-hour drive on the Hume Freeway. From Sydney it's about a six-hour drive. Trains run daily from Sydney and Melbourne to Wangaratta, Albury and Chiltern. For more information see [victorianshighcountry.com.au](http://victorianshighcountry.com.au)