



High Country Uncovered

Here are some local High Country secrets that'll make this autumn trip away your best yet.

Words and Pics
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Sick of ordering a 'hot' coffee only to get it lukewarm? How about having to line up for hours or put your name down just to be squeezed in to have that lukewarm coffee? Fear not! The hospitality of old is not dead – you just have to drive 3.5 hours from Melbourne to find it.

I'm in Bright in Victoria's High Country and experiencing one of the best things about regional Australian towns – fair dinkum country hospitality just as it should be. Friendly staff dressed in black, so you know who to order from, and a real hot coffee (not at 60 degrees, or whatever the 'perfect' coffee temperature is these days. Best of all, these staff are up for a chat.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The Park Mount Beauty sprawls around the river; Ginger Baker in Bright has lots on offer; Bright Splash Park will keep all ages entertained; Luscious greenery of The Park Mount Beauty; NRMA Holiday Park, Bright is also full of foliage; Frolicking at The Ovens River, Bright



WHERE TO STAY

Hospitality aside, the region is also a paradise for mountain bikers, skiers, hikers and families with kids. But most of all, it's paradise for RVers. With two great riverside holiday parks smack bang in the heart of Bright, plus more in neighbouring Porepunkah, Harrietville and Mount Beauty, travellers are spoilt for choice.

We enjoyed using Bright Riverside Holiday Park's brand-new facilities, and our powered site was right on the banks of the Ovens River.

Just as central, NRMA Bright Holiday Park has a more natural setting, with 300 grassy sites scattered either side of Morse's Creek, starting at the centre of the town's action – Bright Splash Park. With 25 acres of holiday park, it's almost never full and you get the feeling of camping in nature while still being able to walk to an upmarket Gin Distillery (Reed and Co Distillery) in less than three minutes.





ENJOYING OUR TIME

As is usual in the first few days on holiday in a familiar place, we started off in Bright with familiar pleasures – some locally brewed beers at the Bright Brewery and the Hero Board that provided enough meat for four men. Then, sitting in Ginger Baker’s spacious backyard in the early evening sun eating gorgonzola gnocchi and pork and fennel meatballs really set the relaxed holiday vibe.

Venturing more into the land of the locals, we were charmed to discover cute-as-a-button cafe Coral Lee. With a ‘50s era interior, right down to the floral embroidered material napkins, this is like sitting in your nana’s kitchen with food to match – that is, of course, if you were lucky enough to have a nana who made assorted iced teas from scratch and a mouth-watering array of homemade cakes.

Thirty minutes down the road and a whole lot quieter, Mount Beauty is at the foot of Victoria’s highest mountain, Mt Bogong (1986m) which makes a spectacular backdrop. The Park in

Mount Beauty (technically Tawonga South) is a great lesser-known holiday park, with the majority of spots on the banks of the fast-flowing Kiewa River. It’s a 20-minute walk to the centre of Mount Beauty, but you’ve got all you need right here. The spots are shady and there’s plenty of soft green grass underfoot. A little pebble beach makes a wonderful spot for dipping your toes in the icy water and brave youngsters in rubber tyres streaming past provide entertainment.

There’s not a lot to do here but that’s the appeal. The two local cafes, within a minute’s walk of the holiday park, are more than enough if you need a caffeine fix. You could spend a few nights here to unwind or longer if a ‘sitting by your van with a book and a beverage’ is your idea of a great holiday. For us it is. A few days here and we didn’t want to leave. Luckily the friendly locals gave us more of a reason to hang around with freshly baked organic sourdough bread from Tawonga Bakery across the road only available a few mornings a week.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Frying Pan Inn is a popular eatery in Falls Creek township; The walk to Emerald Pools is nothing short of breathtaking; Cope Hut is a well-known stop on the Heritage Hut Trail; Emerald Pools are so named for the water colour; Is it any wonder the Frying Pan Inn is popular?



OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Wanting to do some free camping too, extensive internet research told us Buckety Plains or Langford West would be our best options. Both are accessible by caravan and 2WD and both with relatively private sites surrounded by beautiful Australian bush.

The internet, however, can only tell you so much and the locals were unanimous – Pretty Valley (18 minutes past Falls Creek) is a far superior choice, and still accessible with a small caravan. We were told of secret emerald pools, breathtaking views and definitely empty, private camping spots so big they'd fit three vans in each (so just enough space for my husband, myself and our 4-year-old to relax). Our decision was made. But first stop, Falls Creek.

Falls Creek township in the 'warmer' months (it's about 10 degrees cooler than the towns below due to its 1600m+ altitude) is well worth a visit in itself to experience the inclusive community feel, surprisingly gourmet eating establishments (without the crowds) and breath-taking hikes in perfect hiking weather.

We arrived after a car-sick inducing 1 hour and 15-minute drive from Bright to an eerily empty main street with hundreds of empty car parks waiting for the snow to fall once more. The majority of businesses were closed, and with virtually not a soul around the only thing missing was a single tumbleweed

blowing down the street. But it's said that real community can only develop in a town of 150 people or less (the human brain is evolved to cope with no more than about 150 social relationships) and the community feeling in 'Falls Creek without the snow' was palpable, maybe because the snow season last year didn't really happen or because everyone who does still have a job in hospitality and tourism these days is so much more grateful for it.

Who knows what it was, but we were greeted like old friends wherever we went and treated like locals after just one night. Four days in and we were chatting to staff we knew walking their dog after work. It was nice, and the kind of thing that makes you do quick calculations in your head to work out if you could move here.

Then there was the food. At our first stop the waitress was adamant, "Go to The Frying Pan Inn for slow-cooked barbecue meats. I was there last night, and you'll probably see me there again tonight!"

This place has been a local institution since 1965 and is worth as many visits as you can fit in. The chatty chef told us about his love of spicy food. He'd been up late last night making another super-hot sauce that we absolutely had to try. He'd also spent the morning putting together a killer playlist of '90s rock anthems to get that perfect pub atmosphere. Coupled with our beef shin with mango and jalapeno chermoula and kangaroo chorizo with locally foraged herbs, 'Falls Creek without the snow' was looking pretty damn good as a holiday destination.



fast

FACTS

- Tawonga Bakery is open Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays 10am-1:30pm. They are down the driveway at 225 Kiewa Valley Highway. Pretty Valley has limited phone reception.
- The Emerald Pools can be found by following directions given by staff at Falls Creek Information Centre (it is a closely guarded local secret with no printed directions).
- Wallace's Heritage Trail starts from Wallace Hut car park. Detailed directions can be found at falls creek.com.au.

“...we were greeted like old friends wherever we went and treated like locals after just one night”



PRETTY VALLEY

Proteined up to our eyeballs, we set off in search of the Emerald Pools in Pretty Valley and to check out some of the world class hiking tracks the area has to offer. About five minutes' walk down a picturesque river valley we found the deep, sparkling clear emerald rock pools and, being just about as isolated

as you can get, stripped off for an icy and invigorating swim.

My German-born husband, not so accustomed to Australian wildlife, asked if we need to watch for snakes. My answer, "Nah, a top of 12 degrees, it's too cold for them," was proven wrong a few minutes later when he narrowly missed one with his foot. Holiday-makers beware! The Alpine Copperhead

Snake is the most common snake above 700m and Australia's only venomous snake found above the snowline and active in cold weather.

But the shock didn't last long with a soundtrack of singing red bellied Flame Robins in the background and the scent of native Australian wildflowers in the air. The scenery here is dramatic to say the least. Snow gums burnt in a 2003 fire are bleached to a stark white and their twisted gnarly shapes give this place an eerie feel.

We opted for Wallace's Heritage Trail, which is an easy 6km (two-hour) round trip and, even for someone who usually walks straight past a historical information board, the huts are thoroughly intriguing.

Wallace's Hut, the oldest in the National Park (circa 1889) is now extensively restored. Cope Hut, built by the Ski Club of Victoria in 1929 as a ski lodge after the state experienced a surge in skiing, was called 'The Menzies of the High Plains' because of its size and 'comfort'. Standing in the freezing cold looking at a bare bones wood hut that was thought of as luxurious, with my iPhone with emergency call capability in my pocket and wearing my state-of-the-art hiking gear, I marvel at holiday-making 100 years ago. No Google maps, no slow-cooked meats and certainly no perfectly brewed hot coffee. 📱



TOP TO BOTTOM Waking up to views like no other in the High Country; The reason behind Pretty Valley's name was incredibly obvious

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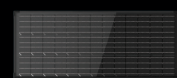
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