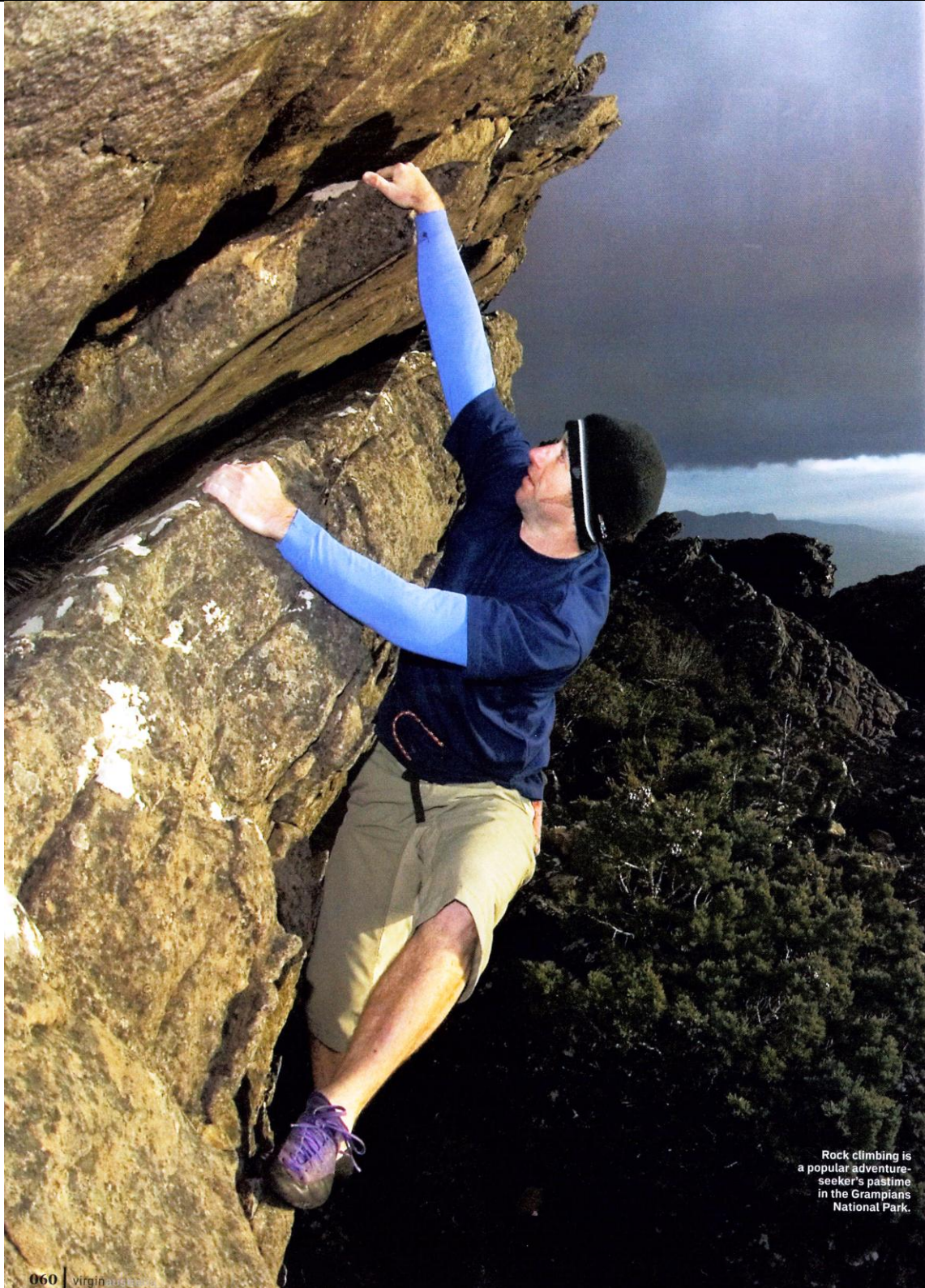


# Haystac



Rock climbing is a popular adventure-seeker's pastime in the Grampians National Park.

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## The new-look GRAMPIANS

WORDS BY ANDREW BAIN



*Nature has turned one of Victoria's major attractions into a destination with something for everyone.*

**B**elow me, at the foot of the mountains, a field has become a veritable lake. Kangaroos mob at its edges, nibbling grass bright as fresh limes. It's a view unlike any I've seen before in Victoria's Grampians National Park.

I've been coming here for years and it's always seemed a dry and brittle place. Beautiful, but starkly so. Fire and drought are common, but the storm and water that ripped through last January weren't. The three-day downpour triggered flash flooding and over 200 landslides. ►

JULY 2011



## WINTER WARMTH

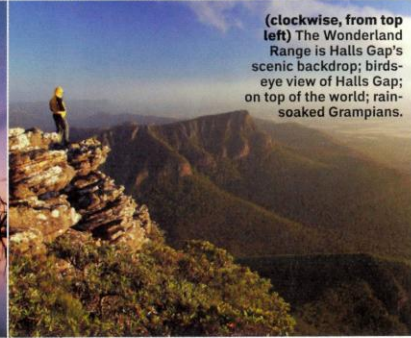
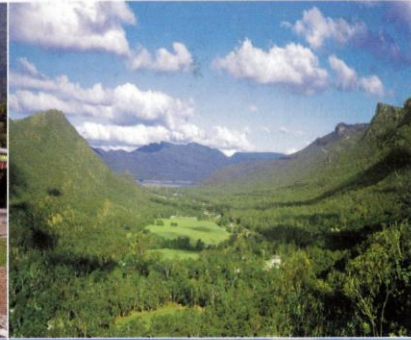
*After a day's exertion, a warming meal will soothe your aches.*

When it's time to retreat indoors, the Grampians offers a couple of starkly contrasting pub experiences. At the foot of the Watchtower crags, perfect for a post-climbing drink or dinner, the Halls Gap Hotel & Bistro serves up traditional counter meals, and local brews such as Three Troupers, which is brewed in nearby Beaufort.

At the range's southern end is Dunkeld's Royal Mail Hotel (pictured below), a country pub turned gourmet giant. Winner of a swag of awards, including *The Age* 2011 Restaurant of the Year, it has a reputation far bigger than Dunkeld itself. Here, chefs tend kitchen gardens and serve up a 10-course degustation dinner menu and the finest bistro meals at lunchtime. The famed wine list is a 90-page tome (the hotel's cellar across the road holds 30,000 bottles) stretching from local tipples to bottles of French Grand Cru priced at \$12,500 each.



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(clockwise, from top left) The Wonderland Range is Halls Gap's scenic backdrop; birds-eye view of Halls Gap; on top of the world; rain-soaked Grampians.

Six months on, much of the Grampians National Park remains closed due to storm damage, including the crowd-drawing Wonderland Range. Yet those who venture here now have a new perspective – a land that's green, alive and offers the chance to view Victoria's great sandstone range from fresh angles. Which is why I'm now hanging by a rope from a rock face known as the Watchtower, briefly distracted by the curious sight of water and greenery below my feet.

The Grampians has some of the finest rock climbing in Australia, and much of it remains unaffected by the closures. The spectacularly scenic Taipan Wall, and other climbs at the northern end of the range, are still accessible. And while the Wonderland Range used to be a favourite for most guided climbs around the village of Halls Gap (three hours' drive north-west of Melbourne), there's still Watchtower near to hand.

Less than five minutes' drive from Halls Gap, Watchtower looks like little more than a gnarled toe at the foot of Mount Difficult Range, but it has climbing challenges from natural rock stepladders to glass-smooth cliff faces, appealing to all skill levels.

I'm here now with guide Chris Ellis.

"I used to live here [at Halls Gap] in 2006 – just after the big bushfires," says Ellis as he sets up our ropes. "Then I moved to Queensland, to the Lockyer Valley. After the floods there in January I decided to move back. I was driving down here when I heard about the storm on the radio. I think I must be bad luck!" Not exactly what I want to hear from a man who's about to guide me up a rock face.

In a fold in the cliffs we puzzle our way through two climbs – Nerd's Day Out and the less cheerily named Beelzebub – a gymnastic work-out of cracks, overhangs and skinned forearms. I'm forced to exert muscles I didn't know existed, but slowly I grunt my way to the top.

A few hours later I'm back beside Watchtower, except this time I'm on a mountain bike. With the main roads still closed to cars, bikes have become the perfect vehicle for exploring the area.

I pedal out of Halls Gap, scattering kangaroos from the road as I go. For the next two hours I'll ride on minor tracks at the foot of the Grampians, circuiting back across the lower slopes of the Mount Difficult Range. Clouds of butterflies ►

## TRAVEL {grampians}

drift around me, and I spend parts of the ride sliding through sand, splashing through washouts and creeks, and hopping logs – all the qualities of good single track mountain biking but on vehicle tracks.

For most visitors, the Grampians has traditionally been less about bikes and more about bushwalking. With the usual tourist drawcards still closed, there's the chance to broaden the view by exploring new areas around Halls Gap on foot. For a walk with heights, Boronia Peak is now the pick, especially for its dawn views across to the parallel Wonderland Range.

To get the best of the view of the sunrise I begin walking in the pre-dawn darkness. A chorus of cockatoos flies up the mountain from the valley tree tops, and from the crest of the ridge I can see the lights of the town of Ararat blinking in the distance. Together the sun and I rise over our final hill, and the view is glorious: the trademark mottled sandstone of the Grampians, bronzed by dawn light.

For all that's still wild about the Grampians, there's also plenty that's mild to warrant even a few quiet winter days here. At the foot of Boronia Peak is the compelling Brambuk: The National Park & Cultural Centre (pictured below right). The longest-operating Aboriginal cultural centre in Australia, it's set up and run by the five Aboriginal communities around the region. Its presence reflects the depth and wealth of Aboriginal history here. With more than 60 rock art sites (some dating back 22,000 years), the Grampians is the largest Aboriginal art site in Victoria.

"The main reason for the centre being here is to show our culture and educate people," says guide Rooney Grambeau, as he leads me through its two levels of displays, detailing local Aboriginal history from its Dreamtime creation by Bunjil to stories of the modern age.

Wandering through millennia of history invariably creates a good appetite and I indulge it at Brambuk's Bushfoods Cafe. The cafe's changing menu features the likes of warm crocodile salad with native mint and emu bruschetta. I settle for the Bush Food Platter, which offers kangaroo, emu, crocodile, wild duck, damper and bush chutneys.

To wash down lunch I head for nearby Great Western, a small highway town with one of the most recognisable names in Australian wine, and also one of its more unique visitor experiences.



The Grampians wine region dates back to the 1860s – its climate is perfect for shiraz, riesling and chardonnay.

Two wineries started by a pair of brothers in the 1860s – Seppelt and Best's – sit as bookends to the town. Seppelt is famous as being one of the first wineries in Australia to produce sparkling shiraz, while Best's evocative cellar door, looking like a High Country hut, adjoins an original block of vines, planted more than 140 years ago.

The attraction of Great Western extends underground, too. At Seppelt, tours lead into the so-called Drives, three kilometres of tunnels carved out in the 19th century, capable of storing up to three million bottles. It's a disorientating, subterranean maze, the walls and ceiling thick with a black mould that germinated from spores in an imported wine barrel early last century. "There was no machinery used in building the Drives, just pick and shovel," says my guide Chandra. "It took them 64 years to build."

As I drive back to Halls Gap, I realise I've hardly missed old favourites like all those picturesque walking tracks. Swathes of the Grampians may be closed, but whether your taste is for trekking or wine bottles; the heights of climbing cliffs or the depths of the Drives, still there's much on offer. ☺

## AIM HIGH

- See Absolute Outdoors Australia for climbing instruction and mountain bike hire. Visit [www.absoluteoutdoors.com.au](http://www.absoluteoutdoors.com.au).
- For details about the Brambuk cultural centre, visit [www.brambuk.com.au](http://www.brambuk.com.au).
- Tours of House of Seppelt's Drives run daily. Visit [www.greatwestern.com.au](http://www.greatwestern.com.au).
- For park information and details of closures, search for the Grampians at [www.parkweb.vic.gov.au](http://www.parkweb.vic.gov.au).

