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# Rock on

ERIN MICHAEL escapes her comfort zone and finds a mixture of breath-taking views, shin-scraping thrills and soul-soothing stories before slipping into a Dunkeld-induced food coma in the Grampians

I'm sitting on top of the world; perched on a mossy stone and surrounded by forest not so far, far away.

I kick myself again for forgetting my iPod and half-heartedly hum a few bars from Michael Buble's *I've Got the World On a String*.

About 10 minutes ago we emerged from the woodland and stepped into the spacious boulder-rimmed ridge.

Clusters of trees are spread across the expanse in front of me and roll on to nearby Dunkeld, past Mount Abrupt and on to what must be the edge of the Earth.

I look back at the mouth of the Picaninny wildflower trek we have just conquered and mention something about it resembling a scene from *Twilight*.

The past two days have been a montage of adventurous activities, fine dining, cultural insight, conversations with locals and a bounty of natural wonders to feast my eyes on.

I see the camera flash, but I'm feeling too foolish to flinch. I can't help but think that all this time I've been living under a rock, a rock really worth seeing.

I'll waste time jet-setting to remote villages in Africa or tourist hotspots in South Asia for a scenery change, but why have I never explored somewhere as amazing and accessible as the Grampians before now?

People who are in on Victoria's tourist secret are beginning to return to this culturally rich region after the reopening of Grampians Rd in August that links the tourist hubs of Halls Gap and Dunkeld.

Locals say 2011 has been tough after bracing for bushfire season only to be hit with more than 190 landslips, triggered by the deluge responsible for the devastating January floods.

Too soon my reflection time winds up and we set off back down the winding trek through open forest bursting with vibrant wildflowers. There's only one way I can see to make up for having ignored all this – "I'll be back", I promise myself.



Quad-biking: Not as simple as it looks

Bloomin' lovely: Wildflowers, but no vampires. Picture: TOURISM VICTORIA

## Getting a grip on Mt Arapiles

A snaked path sprinkled with jagged boulders and loose pebbles weaves its way around the bottom of Mt Arapiles and nudges my heart rate.

The dusty formation is showing itself through a leafy haven of lush bush, which is mesh-like and snaps at my ankles as we navigate the site known for more than 2000 climbing routes.

We're introduced to Chris, a rock climbing veteran, who tells us our three-hour beginner course entails scaling Bushranger Bluff, an isolated crag frequented by school groups.

With my fellow climbers decked in brands I've never heard of, Chris already knows the answer when he asks if anyone hasn't climbed before and he nods in acknowledgment as I meekly raise my hand.

Without realising, I've dobed myself in to be his belaying model and try to memorise every word he rattles off during the safety tutorial. A glance at the thick wall of rock towering over me and I'm quietly confident.

From the ground, it looks like there are plenty of wide ridges and awkward formations to hold and, when the first climber attacks the wall and returns in less than two

minutes, I declare I am ready to go. I reach the two-metre mark before my mindset is shattered.

My fingertips feel as though they're being pierced as I push them into the gravelly wall and, as I keep explaining to my onlookers, "There's just nowhere to put my feet!"

After what feels like a lengthy pause, I manage to haul myself higher and pass the halfway point.

But the next few metres raise the bar as I freeze in an awkward position with no ridges to rest my toes. Suddenly I'm forced to literally get a grip and hold on as my legs scramble across the rock like an unco cyclist.

I'm scraping my legs against the surface and soon feel a trickle of blood.

A scene from *27 Hours* flashes before my eyes and my pace quickens as sheer fear propels me forward. I stretch myself up and suddenly find I can no longer see rope mapped out before me – I've reached the summit.

From here I can see into the depths of surrounding valleys and marvel at how I've switched from petrified to peaceful.

Chris's voice echoes around the

rocks as he tells me to let go. There's a bounce in my step after I abseil to the ground.

### FIRING QUADS

Before Steve even tells us about his decades of working in adventure sports, it's clear he's a daredevil.

We're at his 200ha property in Brimpaen in the Wartook Valley, a short drive from Horsham, and he asks if we have heard anything dangerous about quad bikes.

I almost wish I didn't do my research – 13 deaths on ATVs so far this year. But since the Grampians Quad Bike Adventures opened in 2008 there hasn't been an accident.

After thorough safety training, we tackle a training course marked with witches hats and dips in the soil.

My first lap leaves me nervous and by my second I've caused Steve to sprint towards me as I battle to "give it thumb" and power up a small incline. But soon it's time to switch out of training mode and speed isn't the only thing that increases. Across the next three hours, I'm faced with dips, grooves, branches, puddles and even water-crossings that send my pulse racing.



Peak practice: It's a long way to the top, but the effort is worth it for the magnificent views.



## Good Mail on gourmet grub

Driving along the main street in Great Western, we pass canola fields that are so vibrant it looks as though someone has spread the pastures with thick butter.

We make a pit stop at Salingers Cafe for a light lunch and are intrigued by a honeycomb window full of bees, which is positioned on the wall like a piece of art.

It takes me a while to decide on the homemade salmon and camembert quiche and I'm happy with the choice, but it's the following Baci chocolate flourless cake that earns the bragging rights.

Later, on our final evening, the sun is beginning to set as we arrive in the quaint town of Dunkeld.

Just 400 people call the town home and don't seem to mind that it's put on the map by its award-winning restaurant, the Royal Mail Hotel.

Fresh flavours come together in its kitchen, with only ingredients grown on site or sourced from the region dished up. Even more impressive is its revolving menu, depending on what is in season.

Eager to taste what all the fuss is about, we opt for a selection of dishes: eel and smoked beetroot, organic vegetables, grain-fed beef and slow-cooked suckling pig with a spicy garnish.

The table erupts with praise when my plate is placed on the table. The presentation is striking – a chunk of steamed sand flathead simmers in a lemony juice, surrounded by charred vegetables and a light coconut sauce and lashed with home-grown asparagus.

But it's the smallest ingredient in the dish, ground hazelnuts, that helps make it one of the finest fares I have ever tasted.

Coupled with a Henty Estate chardonnay, I enter an inevitable food coma.

## Boulder and the beautiful at art of matter

No longer a tourist but an adventurer, I hustle along the dirt track and towards the peaking rock.

The faint white outlines grow larger as we approach the boulder and wonder exactly how long the rock art has been preserved for.

The Grampians is home to a whopping 90 per cent of Victoria's rock art sites. Visitors can delve deeper into the region's origins with numerous galleries, shops, cultural centres and interpreted displays.

But Brambuk – the National Park and Cultural Centre just out of Halls Gap – is the heart of the area.

Brambuk chief executive officer Jeremy Clark speaks with passion as we huddle on the centre's deck.

Clark says the Grampians National Park – also known as Gariwerd from one of the Aboriginal languages – and its culture centre gives life to the Jardwadjali and Djab Wurrung communities.

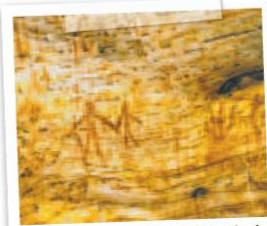
As the sun sinks, the surrounding area is awash with wildlife; native birds soar overhead and kangaroos sip from pools just metres away.

Exemplifying the hub's significance, Clark tells of how people can taste Aboriginal cuisine,

learn how to throw a boomerang, become immersed in native stories and listen to a didgeridoo.

We learn the rock art we observed hours earlier is one of 250 known sites in the area, though only a handful of people know each location, and only five are accessible to the public.

These secret sites preserve the rich remains of Aboriginal people who have camped in rock shelters for the past 22,000 years and further demonstrates there is much more to the Grampians than even its natural splendour.



Walls treat: The area includes 250 rock art sites. Picture: TOURISM VICTORIA