



# Victoria

## HIGHLIGHTS

- o Loving the car-free comfort of Victoria's premier cycleway, the **Murray to the Mountains Rail Trail** (p129)
- o Rolling into a historic gold-rush town like **Maldon** (p152) and trying to imagine it in its heyday
- o Setting your cadence to the wave-against-rock rhythm in **Port Campbell National Park** (p122) on the Great Ocean Road
- o Breathing that deep sigh of relief when you crest the climb to **Mt Hotham** (p136)
- o Waking at sunrise to watch Mt Sturgeon changing colour as daylight arrives in **Dunkeld** (p120)

## TERRAIN

It's all there: fertile flood plains, river valleys, rolling hills, tablelands and mountains worthy of their European namesake Alps.

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Some people look at Victoria through the spinning wheel of a bicycle. What they see is paradise: a slim state, easily traversed by regional transport, but with as much variety, wilderness, remoteness, pluck and urban oomph as its more portly neighbours. From what many claim is the most spectacular coastline in the world to a High Country that rivals its European-namesake Alps, the Great Ocean and Great Alpine Rds bracket a land of many marvels that draw in visitors by the millions.

Cyclists have been turning to Victoria in larger and larger numbers. Whether to tour great roads, slip between the historic towns of the central goldfields, sample the wares of gourmet producers, singletrack the trails of extensive state and national parks, or just meander along any of the numerous rail trails, cyclists in Victoria are satisfied. So too are the communities that cater to them, some at last seeing the commercial viability of a cycle-friendly salute.

No, the boasts are not off base; Victoria really does have something to suit all cycling speeds. And unlike elsewhere in Australia, where the more ground you cover the more you realise how far you still have to go, in Victoria the banks of nearly every billabong have some new historical titbit to take in. That's why Victorians themselves never tire of their own state. They know they'll never exhaust the supply of things they haven't seen, usually just a couple of hours from home.

## HISTORY

Estimates of the number of Aborigines in Victoria at the time of European colonisation vary between 15,000 and 100,000. What is known is that in 1803 a small party of convicts, soldiers and settlers arrived at Sorrento (on Port Phillip Bay) but abandoned the settlement within a year. It wasn't until 1824 that explorers Hume and Hovell made the first overland journey south from Sydney to Port Phillip Bay.

The first permanent European settlement in Victoria was established in 1834 at Portland (in the Western District) by the Henty family from Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), some 46 years after Sydney was colonised. In 1851 Victoria won separation from New South Wales (NSW), and in that same year the rich Victorian goldfields were discovered, attracting immigrants from around the world. Towns like Beechworth and Ballarat boomed during the gold rush, and are veritable museum pieces today. Melbourne was founded in 1835 by another enterprising Tasmanian, John Batman, and to this day it retains much Victorian-era charm and gold-boom 1880s architecture.

Melbourne, on Port Phillip Bay, was a natural attraction for free settlers, and by the 1860s, squatters had settled much of the state's extensive lightly wooded areas, which were pronounced ideal for grazing. By this time, the colonisers' violence, land clearing and introduced diseases had reduced the Indigenous Koorie population to less than 2000.

The gold rush saw hundreds of thousands of miners flock to the goldfields. By the 1870s much of the surface gold had run out, although reef mining continued until the 1890s. By then a rich centre, Melbourne became Australia's premier bicycling city (see boxed text p154).

In the 1890s the property market collapsed and left Melbourne in a depression, from which it did not recover until the 1920s, with the establishment of coal, dairy and manufacturing industries. The latter suffered greatly during the Great Depression, when more than one-third of Victoria's workforce became unemployed.

The latter half of the 20th century saw a huge influx of immigrants. As a result, Melbourne today is widely regarded as Australia's most multicultural city. The

1990s witnessed another period of ferocious development – a process that, with an ever-growing population, continues today.

## ENVIRONMENT

Victoria has vastly contrasting geographical regions. In fact, Victoria is like greater Australia in microcosm: desert-like landscapes in its west, extensive stands of temperate rainforest in the east, mountains in between and strings of beaches along the coast. The Great Dividing Range runs east to west and includes Victoria's highest peaks. It buffers the north of the state from rain and cold southerly winds, producing drier and warmer conditions. The hottest and driest areas are the northern Wimmera and Mallee regions, which make up the Victorian section of the Murray-Darling Basin. Coal is mined in Gippsland (in the southeast), which also has fertile dairy country and vast forests. The coast varies from seemingly endless sandy beaches to imposing rocky headlands.

Approximately 65% of the state has been deforested but the diversity of Victoria's vegetation is still apparent, with 16 landform and vegetation regions on register. Eucalypts – including the hardy Mallee scrub, towering mountain ashes and twisted High Country snow gums – and acacias (wattles) are the most common trees. Wild flowers abound, especially in the Grampians and coastal regions.

Native fauna (pretty much all of the 'pin-up' species) is concentrated in protected areas, although possums and honeyeaters are common in urban climes too. Kangaroos, wallabies, emus, wombats, koalas, cockatoos, galahs and rosellas are often seen on the roads.

## CLIMATE

Victoria has a temperate four seasons climate and three climatic regions. The southern and coastal areas are subject to changeable weather patterns associated with frequent cold fronts and southwesterly winds.

The alpine areas have the most unpredictable conditions, dominated by weather extremes like winter (and sometimes even summer) snow.

The weather is generally more stable north of the Great Dividing Range, where the Mallee of the northwest is hot and dry.

