

# GIPPSLAND & WILSONS PROMONTORY

Gippsland is home to some of the most diverse, unspoilt and beautiful wilderness areas and beaches in the state. The region sprawls from just outside Melbourne right along the coast to the New South Wales border, edged by the imposing Great Dividing Range. You'll find towns with strong identities, isolated beaches, and more wildlife and bush than you'll see anywhere else in Victoria. You can get a taste of it just over an hour from Melbourne along Grand Ridge Rd, a sensational day-long drive along a mostly gravel road, punctuated by a winery and a brewery, and ending with the splendour of Tarra-Bulga National Park – a feast for the eyes with towering mountain ash and valleys of giant tree ferns.

Two hours from Melbourne is the popular South Gippsland beachside town of Inverloch, and the rugged and spectacular Bunurong Marine Coastal Park – perfect for indulging your surfing, snorkelling or diving passions, or just having fun swimming, rock-pool rambling or hanging out in cafés. Not much further on is the iconic Wilsons Promontory National Park, where you can immerse yourself in the carefully preserved pristine wilderness, with walking tracks ranging from easy strolls with prams to tough terrain for the intrepid.

Within two to three hours' drive of Melbourne are some quirky little towns like alternative Koonwarra, with its organic cooking school, day spa, and delightful general store/café, the increasingly upmarket fishing village of Port Albert, and the historic gold-mining township of Walhalla.

In the centre of the region are the huge Gippsland Lakes, dotted with coastal towns with jetties full of bobbing boats. The Lakes District is Australia's largest inland waterway system, a rich haven for birds, and a favourite for boating, fishing and swimming. It's separated by coastal dunes from the long stretch of Ninety Mile Beach, which has some superbly isolated beaches.

Beyond the Lakes it's a four-hour drive into East Gippsland, home to a third of Victoria's forests. Here you'll find fabulous and varied camping opportunities, modest cabins and lodges and the occasional lighthouse to stay in. One of the most accessible parks from Melbourne is Cape Conran Coastal Park, a fabulous park for wildlife spotting, nature walks, swimming, diving and fishing. Once you're past Cape Conran there are surprisingly few travellers. This wilderness coast is one of the most beautiful regions of the state, with the rugged mountains, raging river and deep ravines and gorges of the Snowy River National Park, pristine old-growth rainforests in Errinundra National Park, and isolated beaches, calm inlets and endless bush in the internationally recognised Croajingolong National Park.

## NATURE

If you've only got time for one nature experience, make it [Wilsons Promontory National Park](#) (p278), with its extensive walking trails that can take any time from less than an hour to up to a few days. Here you'll find mountains, swamps, forests, squeaky white-sand beaches, pristine bushland teeming with wildlife, fern valleys and coastal vistas. Some of the finest walks include the 45km Great Prom Walk and the 7km ascent to Mt Oberon Summit (see p281 for more information on these and other walks). One day will give you a taste of the Prom, but at least two or three is ideal.

With more time you could visit [Cape Conran Coastal Park](#) (p294), with its abundance of pristine white-sand beaches, surf- and river-swimming, walking trails and Aboriginal cultural herit-

age. There's bush camping here, as well as cosy wooden huts, luxury safari tents and upmarket eco-cottages close by.

To really immerse yourself in the bush, travel further into the rugged [Snowy River National Park](#) (p292). If you have time and the inclination do a four-day white-water rafting trip down the river, otherwise check out the Little River Falls, camp at McKillops Bridge and travel through the park to [Errinundra National Park](#) (p293) for some driving and walking trips in this eco-wilderness.

Internationally renowned [Croajingolong National Park](#) (p296) has great camping options – Thurra River and Wingan Inlet are the best – or stay at Point Hicks Lighthouse.

If you're able, spend at least two days in each park to get a feel for them.

## TOWNS

The tiny township of [Koonwarra](#) (p278), right on the South Gippsland Hwy, is a rejuvenating spot to spend the day – try a short cooking course at the organic cooking school, some indulgence time at the day spa, or perhaps a little wine tasting. Whatever, be sure to enjoy some slow food and take in the gardens at the legendary Koonwarra General Store.

Continue further up the South Gippsland Hwy to visit [Port Albert](#) (p281), a fishing village with a proud maritime history, all on display at the town's small museum. Don't leave town without trying some fish and chips, allegedly the best in the state, or checking out the general store with its gourmet café and eclectic shop. You could stay overnight and do a loop back to Melbourne via [Walhalla](#) (p283), once a prosperous gold-mining town, now one of Victoria's most scenic historic townships, built on a precipitous hillside. Walk around the township, tour an old mine, or stay longer and take in a ghost tour or a 4WD adventure around the area.

Heading further east to the Gippsland Lakes, there are numerous small townships to stop in, but the pick of them is [Metung](#) (p286). A few minutes drive off the highway, the road sweeps around the lake into the village, perched on a tiny spit of land. Hire a boat for an afternoon, take a cruise, and enjoy the café scene or a meal at the lakeside pub overlooking the water.

## BEACHES

Just about any Gippsland beach is perfect if you want an expanse of white, sandy beach. [Ninety Mile Beach](#) (p285) offers just that – ninety miles of secluded beaches, with a few small towns dotted along the way. [Inverloch](#) (right) and [Lake Tyers Beach](#) (p289) are favourites with the bucket-and-spade brigade, with calm, safe swimming beaches, plus surf beaches for the grown-ups where you can take lessons if you're new to the game.

Further afield, [Cape Conran](#) (p294) and [Mallacoota](#) (p295) are beautiful beach spots offering inlet- or river-swimming, as well as some fantastic surf, both in idyllic bush settings.

## DIVING

This region isn't famous for its diving but there are a few great dive sites here. The unassuming [Bunorong Marine & Coastal Park](#) (p277) in South Gippsland provides some of Australia's best diving opportunities, and close by, there's the opportunity to experience [Wilsons Promontory National Park](#) (p278) from a different angle.

In both these parks, local operators organise dives for certified divers and run courses for those interested in learning to dive.

Further up the coast at [Cape Conran Coastal Park](#) (p294), dives are offered most weekends for experienced divers.

## INVERLOCH

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Inverloch's proximity to Melbourne and its fabulous surf, calm inlet beaches and outstanding diving, snorkelling, restaurants and cafés make it a popular destination. It expands to bursting point during the Christmas school holidays, when visitors descend on the town's [inlet beaches](#) and the ocean [surf beaches](#) along the road to Cape Paterson, but somehow the town manages to maintain a down-to-earth vibe. Inverloch also draws the crowds when it hosts the popular [Inverloch Jazz Festival](#) (☎ 5674 3141; www.inverlochjazzfest.org.au) on the Labour Day long weekend each March.

If you want to learn to catch a wave, the [Learn to Surf Offshore Surf School](#) (☎ 5674 3374; 32 Park St; www.surfingaustralia.com.au; 2hr lesson \$45) offers lessons at the main town surf beach. Alternatively, find some solitude on the [Screw Creek Nature Walk](#) (40 minutes return), which starts from the Inverloch Foreshore Camping Reserve car park – an easy walk via dunes, swamps and grasslands with expansive views from the bluff.

## INFORMATION

[Bunorong Environment Centre & Shop](#) (☎ 5674 3738; www.sgcs.org.au; cnr The Esplanade & Ramsey Blvd; ☎ 10am–4pm Fri–Mon, daily during school holidays) An abundance of books and brochures on environmental and

### TRANSPORT: INVERLOCH

Distance from Melbourne 145km

Direction Southeast

Travel time Two hours

**Car** Take the M1 (CityLink/Monash Fwy) then exit at the South Gippsland Hwy and travel to Korumburra. From there take the Inverloch–Korumburra Rd.

**Train & Bus** V/Line (☎ 13 61 96; www.vline.com.au) trains depart daily (twice on Saturdays) from Melbourne's Flinders St and Southern Cross stations for Dandenong, connecting with buses to Inverloch (\$13, 2½ hours).