The Great Ocean Rd (B100) is one of Australia’s most famous road-touring routes, where the Otway Ranges and the sheer limestone cliffs of Port Campbell and Peterborough collapse into the crashing surf of the Southern Ocean. Beyond Apollo Bay, the treacherous Shipwreck Coast – from Cape Otway to Port Fairy – is littered with wrecked vessels. This is some of the planet’s most beautiful coastal scenery, a point not lost on the hordes of international tourists in rental Winnebagos making their languorous way past the road’s hills and hair-pin turns. The road weaves its way along classic surf beaches before sliding into the Otway Ranges just after Apollo Bay.

The lush Otway Ranges, stretching from Aireys Inlet to Cape Otway, offer revitalising landscapes for bushwalking and camping – most of the coastal section is part of the Great Otway National Park.

Too many visitors drive straight through the open stretches of road, pit-stopping only at the towns and major sights – Lorne, Apollo Bay, the Twelve Apostles – but it’s the isolated beaches in between the towns and the thick eucalypt forests in the Otway hinterlands where you can really escape the crowds and truly commune with nature. To miss this is to experience only part of what the region offers. Spend a few weeks scratching below the surface here – this is God’s own country.

As we make our way along the Great Ocean Rd we pay our respects to the indigenous peoples of this region – from east to west they include the Gulidjan, Gadubanud, Giraiwurung and the Gunditjmara people.

The first sections of the Great Ocean Rd were constructed by hand – picks, shovels and crowbars – by returned WWI soldiers. Work began in September 1919 and the road between Anglesea and Apollo Bay was completed in 1932.
Lighthouses & Shipwrecks

In the era of sailing ships, Victoria’s beautiful and rugged southwest coastline was one of the most treacherous on Earth. Between the 1830s and 1930s, more than 200 ships were torn asunder along the so-called Shipwreck Coast between Cape Otway and Port Fairy. From the early 1850s to late 1880s, Victoria’s gold rush and subsequent economic boom brought countless ships of prospectors and hopefuls from Europe, North America and China. After spending months at sea many vessels (and lives) were lost on the final ‘home straight’. The lighthouses along this coast – at Aireys Inlet (p229), Cape Otway (p237) and Port Fairy (p244) – are still operating. The Cape Otway Lighthouse was also involved in the first telegraph cable laid between Tasmania and the Australian mainland in 1859. The spectacular coast around Port Campbell (p238) is where the Loch Ard famously sunk, and the town is littered with material salvaged from this and many other shipwrecks. At Wreck Beach (p238) you can see the anchors of the Marie Gabrielle which sank in 1869, and the Fiji, driven aground in 1891.

Walking

The Victorian west coast attracts walkers of all ages and fitness levels who come to enjoy the wide coastal vistas and sea air. The are many coastal walks, along beachfronts and over headlands, that can be done in stages as leisurely strolls or as multiday treks. Visitors centres issue maps of town walking tours that take in historic landmarks and points of interest. The gentle 30km Surf Coast Walk (p227) leaves Torquay and goes to Moggs Creek; the Great Ocean Walk (p234) starts at Apollo Bay and runs all the way to the to the Twelve Apostles; but the biggie is the Great South West Walk (p246), a 250km epic.

Surfing

The Great Ocean Rd offers fantastic opportunities for surfers with great year-round Southern Ocean swells lashing every beach and point. Wannabes can have lessons in beachside towns between Torquay to the South Australian border. Bells Beach (p227) is one of the most famous surfing spots on the planet, and there’s a legendary (read: suicidal) break at Johanna Beach (p237), but every stretch of this coast offers a mix of breaks for beginners and surf-nazis.