

A U S T R A L I A



Peter Sharkey ended his last travel article (see January issue of B365) preparing to embark on ‘the ultimate road trip’ along Australia’s Great Ocean Road. Peter and his wife Clare collected their hire car, bade farewell to the charming city of Adelaide and headed south east: their ultimate destination was Melbourne, state capital of Victoria, 1,000 kilometres and four days away...



Adelaide’s grid road system made exiting the city easy and soon we were passing through dormitory towns en route to the Coorang National Park.

The land was pancake flat, consisting primarily of mile upon mile of wheat. Signs warning of kangaroos flashed by, but we never saw any. Instead, cattle, sheep and camels grazed on huge tracts of open land, oblivious to passing motorists.

At the small coastal town of Robe, we took the opportunity to stretch, admire the picturesque bay and book a motel room, augmenting the ‘road trip’ nature of our journey from South Australia to Victoria. Later, we enjoyed Australia’s best pizza at The Project before retiring, satiated, in anticipation

Traffic was light on Sunday morning’s drive south and after crossing the state line into Victoria we were soon enjoying the Glenelg National Park. The

route was peppered with compact, well-tended towns boasting wide roads lined with Australian flags. You could have been in America’s North East.

At Port Fairy, rated the world’s most liveable small town, we stayed at Oscars Waterfront Boutique Hotel overlooking the Moyne River. Rightly famed for its homemade star-shaped shortbread, the hotel is a few minutes from the beach and a sweeping, stunningly beautiful bay. The crystal-clear ocean had coaxed a handful of surfers into the water, watched from the beach by couples strolling where whalers and seal hunters once traded their wares.

In addition to its magnificent seaside setting, this airy, easy-going town offers a mix of waistline-threatening cake shops and a range of other establishments which contribute to the good life. Bookshops and libraries are prominent and Port Fairy also hosts a series of events including a renowned Springtime music festival.

12 Apostles on Great Ocean Road



City of Melbourne skyline view from Southbank



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Ten minutes away is Tower Hill State Game Reserve, Victoria's first national park, set in the crater of an extinct volcano. It's a fascinating place; all manner of wildlife shriek manically or fly and swing around you, although our search for an elusive kangaroo remained unfulfilled.

The following morning we slipped into Warrnambool to admire elevated views of Australia's infamous 'Shipwreck Coast' where, since 1797, more than 800 vessels have been wrecked along a treacherous stretch which extends almost 100 miles to Cape Otway.

Hugging this hostile shoreline south, we stopped at several vantage points to absorb spectacular panoramas of a vexed ocean and furious-looking waves before arriving at the Twelve Apostles, a series of limestone rock stacks rising majestically from the Southern Ocean. Roaring waves crashed into these huge, partially-eroded stacks yielding dramatic images, the ocean's noise a reminder of Nature's soaring power.

Travelling towards the Great Otway National Park, the landscape became greener, a light

drizzle and cooler temperature suggesting we could have been in south Wales.

Inland, at Otway Fly Treetop Adventures, we traversed steel walkways 30m above the rainforest floor, relishing the forest's unique beauty and literally rubbing shoulders with soaring trees which, disconcertingly considering how high we were, swayed markedly.

Further south, Cape Otway, the second most southerly point on the Australian mainland was another 'must visit'.

For thousands of nineteenth century immigrants Cape Otway was their first sight of land after months at sea. The cape's lighthouse was built in 1848, its original lantern fuelled by whale oil. Invitations to clamber up "Australia's most significant lighthouse" are rare, so I duly climbed the circular stairway at the top of which a ladder led to a wrought iron platform, the gate to which was opened by a female volunteer.

"You can go outside," she said, adding, "Careful. It's quite windy."

I scaled a few steep steps, opened the small wooden door set in thick stone then stepped outside. "Quite windy" underestimated the gale's strength by a factor of 200. Eyes half-closed, I peered due south, the vicious wind a reminder of Antarctica's relative proximity. Hands gripping the narrow walkway's rail, I circumvented the lighthouse, grateful that the howling wind became a mild breeze on the structure's northern flank.

Sensibly, Clare had remained downstairs. "How was it?" she asked. "Quite windy," I replied, nonchalantly.

After 35 years, Anna and Duncan had had enough of northern Queensland's droughts so they sold their sheep farm, moved to Apollo Bay and opened an hotel, *Captain's At The Bay*. Their warm welcome and hospitality was such that it felt as though we were visiting friends. We were delighted to stay for two days.

If Port Fairy is the world's most liveable small town, then Apollo Bay, an equally agreeable oceanfront settlement, cannot be far behind. We explored it all, covering miles along the Great Ocean Walk.

Chris's Beacon Point Restaurant on Skenes Creek Road, 15-minutes from Apollo Bay, came highly recommended. Set back high above the bay, the restaurant affords magnificent views across the Bass Strait; the food and service were impeccable.

Next day, the road from Apollo Bay towards Melbourne resembled California's *Big Sur*. Cheek-by-jowl with the ocean, we were blessed with views of turquoise waters, pretty beach towns and small inlets with names such as 'Wild Dog Creek' as the weather warmed noticeably.

25km south of Melbourne, the skyline glistened in bright sunshine as driving conditions and a six-lane highway signified the rapid approach of a major city.

Negotiating a direct route to the Rendezvous Hotel on Flinders Street opposite Melbourne's main train station was easy enough despite the traffic, a mild shock after four days of open roads.



> BOOKING LINK:

Rendezvous Hotel, Melbourne
<https://www.rendezvoushotels.com/hotel/melbourne>



> BOOKING LINK:

Vibe Hotel, Rushcutters Bay, Sydney
<https://vibehotels.com/hotel/rushcutters-bay-sydney>

The hotel, which opened in 1914 as the Commercial Travellers Club, was among Australia's first to incorporate new technology such as fresh air ventilation and electric lifts, though without compromising on comfort or style. Our 'Heritage Room' featured 18' ceilings, stained glass windows and beautifully detailed corncicing.

Further along Flinders Street, the Princes Bridge crossed to Federation Square, beyond which lay King's Domain, a welcoming wedge of urban parkland.

Adjacent to the Yarra River, the park overlooks Melbourne's cluster of impressive sporting venues including the MCG and Rod Laver Arena. It also boasts features once widely evident in parks across the UK: a floral clock, Botanic Gardens and the Sidney Myer Music Bowl, where preparations were afoot for the staging of a free, open air opera.

The 'Hidden Secrets' walking tour topped our agenda the following morning, our guide leading us through the maze of Melbourne's surprisingly narrow laneways and side streets, while introducing us to little-known architecture and public art, brought to life by a succession of anecdotes and intriguing stories. Billed as an 'indulgent experience for the curiously minded,' the tour did not disappoint.

Nor did the excellent Hazel restaurant on Flinders Lane where we sampled superb regional wines as well as delicious, locally-sourced food. The establishment's relaxed atmosphere and exceptional fare combined to create an outstanding dining experience.

The South Bank Promenade, crammed with bars and restaurants, was another favourite venue for lunch, offering an opportunity to view gloriously sunlit Melbourne in its full cosmopolitan pomp.

Post-dinner, we gravitated towards the Rendezvous' Traveller's Bar to relax with a glass of something Australian. We became particularly familiar with the bar as our intentions of having a (single) nightcap were invariably compromised by lengthy conversations struck up in its uber-comfortable surrounds.



Plans for our final day in Melbourne included visiting the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), but crossing Princes Bridge, we spotted dozens of rowing eights on the river below. Curious, the prospect of watching sporting competition in glorious sunshine trumped a morning of art.

We had stumbled upon the Head of the Yarra, an annual 8k race contested by 270 crews arranged according to age and ability. The youngest were 14-15; the older 'masters' crews comprised men in their eighties, with 91-year-old Don Christie the most senior competitor, a man who has, incredibly, participated in all 61 editions. In many respects, he personifies Australia's good life.

“ Sydney. Bloody Hell. We'd traversed a continent, west-to-east, in just over a month.

Though delayed, our visit to the NGV was still worthwhile. The NGV has two impressive galleries a short walk apart, both with free entry to their permanent collections. We opted for the NGV International, home to the state's enormous art collection which justifies a return visit.

Our flight to Sydney the next day whisked us to the west coast inside an hour.

Sydney. Bloody Hell. We'd traversed a continent, west-to-east, in just over a month.

Within half an hour, we were at the Vibe Hotel in Rushcutters Bay, one metro stop from central Sydney, where our welcome was several notches above cordial.

The Vibe is a cool place which hosts rooftop yoga sessions next to the swimming pool and actively attracts pooch-owners to its large outside terrace, or 'Doggie Deck'. Conveniently-situated for the shoreline, soon we were heading towards the bay.

It was Deborah who greeted us first. Her friendly, "Having a nice day?" as we strolled along a footpath overlooking the bay prompting an equally enthusiastic response extolling the evident virtues of Rushcutters Bay.

We chatted for a few minutes, whereupon Deborah's other half, Mark, having finished adding fresh bait to his fishing rods, ambled over and asked where we were from. Within seconds he concluded

that wherever it was, celebratory drinks were required. Dipping into a large cooler, Mark opened a beer and handed it to me. Deborah, meanwhile, poured Clare a gallon of wine.

We sat and talked for more than an hour, Mark cracking the beers whenever he felt I required another, Deborah understanding why Clare didn't knock her wine back in one.

If there was a moment during our trip which summed Australians up, this chance, Sunday afternoon meeting with complete strangers was it. Friendly, generous, jovial, chatty, the dozens



> BOOKING LINK:
Adina Apartment Hotel, Coogee, Sydney
<https://www.adinahotels.com/en/apartments/coogee-sydney>



> BOOKING LINK:
Vibe Hotel Sydney Darling Harbour
<https://vibehotels.com/hotel/sydney-darling-harbour>

of Aussies we met were, like Deborah and Mark, invariably wonderful people.

Next morning, the train from Kings Cross whisked us to downtown Sydney. A short walk along Macquarie Street to Circular Quay and suddenly, there it was: a panoramic view of two of the world's most iconic structures, the Sydney Harbour Bridge and opposite, the sail-like architecture of the city's Opera House.

Crossing Australia felt like an achievement. We had long harboured ambitions to come to this very spot and now here we were. There was an overwhelming sense that we were somewhere extraordinarily special. It was a terrific feeling. Naturally, we snapped dozens of photos, undoubtedly the same as everyone else, except these were for *our* album, images burnt onto *our* memories, completely justifying our pre-trip 'if not now, when?' mantra.

Infused with this wonderful sense of satisfaction, we stopped for a coffee in the Botanic Gardens where two enormous birds, Australian White Ibis, drank water from a small fountain. Though common, to us it was an extraordinary sight.



The Mint – Sydney's oldest public building.

Afterwards, we became *bona fide* tourists, visiting the State Library and The Mint, Sydney's oldest surviving public building. Further along, the magnificent St Mary's Cathedral overlooks Hyde Park, the name, together with many of its artefacts, statues and fountains providing powerful evidence of Australia's strong links with Great Britain.

Sydney was in festive mode, a commanding Christmas tree guarded the town hall, while retailers in the attractive Queen Victoria Building (QVB) opposite had also pulled out the stops. Rescued from demolition in the 1980s, the QVB was transformed into a palatial depository for high-end shops adored by fashionistas.

Sydney punches its weight as a world city. Iconic landmarks, broad squares, wide roads, urban

parks, history, towering skyscrapers and an attractive waterside. Who wouldn't want to visit?

Greedy to cram more into the dying embers of our holiday, we arranged a few days at the beach, at Coogee Bay, another spectacular arc of golden sand and perfect blue ocean east of Sydney.

Impressed by the branded aparthotels at which we had stayed elsewhere, we checked into Coogee's Adina Apartment Hotel (another classy establishment) and were soon exploring Sydney's coastal walkway, roaming south beyond several very popular man-made rock pools.

Coogee is a tranquil coastal suburb, a place to read, eat, drink, mess about in the water and chill out. Bondi Beach, by comparison, is a tad more boisterous but it delivered everything we expected: surfers, bikini-clad blondes, over-priced drinks, music. It's also a fabulous, must-visit venue, though you do wonder what all of the sun-lovers on the beach do for a living.

In retrospect, we were probably jealous of them because our five-week sojourn was nearing its end, though not before returning to Sydney for a few final days.

The Vibe Hotel in Sydney's Darling Harbour had only recently opened but had already received excellent reviews which we could wholeheartedly endorse.

The nearby National Maritime Museum was so close it would have been criminal to miss the replica of Captain Cook's *Endeavour*, but we also lunched, drank and enjoyed ourselves around Darling Harbour and nearby Pyrmont.

Our 'to see' list was virtually complete and catching a ferry across Sydney Harbour to Manly Beach the next day following a short voyage to Manly Cove allowed us to tick this off too.

Sheltered on the city-facing harbourside, Manly is Sydney's only ferry destination with a surfer's beach fronting the Pacific Ocean. We walked from the harbour to the ocean and nabbed the best seat at the Pantry, a beach restaurant overlooking the Pacific. "Welcome to the best view in Manly" said the menu; we had it.

Afterwards, we strolled along a promenade lined by Norfolk Island pines enjoying glorious



Etihad Airways

Peter and Clare Sharkey travelled to Australia via Abu Dhabi as guests of Etihad Airways. For details of flights from the UK, including Manchester and London Heathrow, as well as from Dublin, go to www.etihad.com/en

You can also explore Abu Dhabi with a free two-night stopover courtesy of Etihad Airways. First check upon the availability of participating hotels, then book a multi-city flight via Abu Dhabi. Once your flight is booked, simply advise Etihad the name of the participating hotel at which you would like to stay. Further details can be found at:

<https://www.etihad.com/en/destinations/abu-dhabi/stopover>

Etihad's website also contains practical information relating to matters such as cabin selection, baggage allowance and the airline's loyalty programme.

warmth and an ice cream, milking our last full day in Australia.

Etihad's convenient late flight time gave us one remaining opportunity to meander around Circular Quay, photograph the bridge and opera house a few dozen more times and smile back at Sydney before heading to the airport.

We strolled to Etihad's relaxing premium lounge before boarding the plane in the comforting knowledge that we would enjoy a good night's sleep on the forthcoming 14-hour flight to Abu Dhabi, changing planes there to complete our journey to Manchester. Soon, a single button converted an already spacious seat into a full-length bed; it didn't take long to fall asleep and dream of those elusive kangaroos...

Visiting the state of Victoria

For general travel information and suggested self-drive itineraries, Victoria's dedicated travel website is excellent:
www.visitvictoria.com/information

Loads of Melbourne-specific information can be found at: **www.visitmelbourne.com**

It's always worthwhile booking direct with hotels. We stayed at Oscars Waterfront Boutique Hotel in Port Fairy and Captain's At The Bay in Apollo Bay. They may be contacted via:
www.oscarswaterfront.com and info@captains.net.au

The Tower Hill Wildlife Reserve's website, **www.towerhill.org.au** and the Otway Fly Treetop Walk site, **www.otwayfly.com.au** are both worth examining, while culinary buffs may wish to check out Chris's Beacon Point (**www.chriss.com.au**) which overlooks the Bass Strait and Melbourne's Hazel restaurant at **www.hazelrestaurant.com.au**