

Southern SECRETS

The scenery, history and 4WDing of this lesser-known region of the Victorian High Country will blow you away

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TRAVEL
Southern Alpine NP, VIC



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From the lowest flats to the highest peaks, the Victorian High Country is well known for delivering an exceptional 4WDing experience. Whether you're camping beside a peaceful flowing river or on the edge of one of the most spectacular views you've ever seen, you will always wake up to perfection. The touring-style 4WDing makes for an enjoyable weekend, with plenty of ups, downs and rocks to tackle. Throw in a few interesting huts and some trout fishing, you've found yourself one heck of a holiday.

As you enter the area from Mansfield you'll notice the initial road is very well graded. Howqua Track provides access to the lower flats and pristine camping grounds, which is open all year around. This is one of the few areas in the High Country you can still enjoy in the winter thanks to constant maintenance by National Parks.

These lower campgrounds surrounding Sheeppark Flat become very popular as they have clean pit toilets and large areas for everyone to find a spot right on the banks of the Howqua River. The lower of these flats in this area are actually accessible via normal 2WD

vehicles, but as you drive further, 4WDs begin to reign supreme.

Before long you'll pass tunnel bend on Brocks Road. Even though it's easy to miss, we took particular interest in making the walk down to the river at this point. We were pleasantly surprised as we reached the pristine and fast-flowing river and were reminded of years gone by when mining for gold was more important than life itself.

The local miners had cut a tunnel out of the ridge line so the river water was able to flow through and wash their collections in their search for gold. The bend in the tunnel and rough construction is very interesting, and it's almost tempting to walk through to the other side.

Climbing higher up the mountains brought us to Bluff Hut, and some spectacular views. The hut was a perfect spot for lunch as we read about the history of the area. The youngest boys of the family were put in charge of bringing materials from Mansfield to the hut's location via horseback. The story is amazing and one of overcoming adversity in harsh conditions. No wonder the huts were built so tough, they only wanted to do it once and do it right.

There is a long walking trail that enters from the flats to Bluff Hut, where many horse riders can often be spotted. These tracks are also perfect for hikers who are feeling fit and energetic.

There's a short walk from the hut that's not an official walking track, but leads to one of the best views we had seen so far. Perched on a rocky outcrop, we were able to enjoy the snow gum mountainside and the spectacular valley below. This peaceful place seemed like a better spot than any to simply sit and watch the clouds roll by.

Camping space for camper trailers at Bluff Hut is less than ideal, so we continued towards Lovick's Hut in search of an excellent camp spot. Lovick's has a massive grassy area fit for even the largest camper trailers, along with plenty of room for a fire. Unfortunately for us, when we came through there was a large band of horse riders set up for the night. With dark approaching we continued our search.

From Lovick's Hut the track gets a little trickier with the camper trailer in tow. You're looking at several small rocky ledges, one after another, and many that are off camber. With six

WE WERE REMINDED OF WHEN MINING FOR GOLD WAS MORE IMPORTANT THAN LIFE ITSELF

The water crossings are sometimes optional with bridges nearby, but you know which option we'd always choose

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Picture Point provided some of the best camping we had ever experienced

■ WHERE:

The Alpine National Park stretches a long way, but to access the southern section you'll need to enter via Mansfield, 190km north-east of Melbourne.

■ INFORMATION:

There is a well-resourced information centre in the main street of Mansfield, or the BP service station in town.

■ CAMPING:

There is extensive camping available in the area. Multiple sites are located in the flats around Sheeppark Flat such as Davons, Pickerings and Noonan Flat. Each of these have pit toilets and large flat areas. Camping is also available near Bluff Hut, but limited access for camper trailers. Better options around here are at Lovick's Hut, Picture Point, and Jamieson's Hut. All camping is free in the abovementioned areas.

■ FACILITIES AND AMENITIES:

Once inside the National Park, there are no services available so you must be self-sufficient. Almost all campsites have pit toilets and allowance for campfires.

■ WHAT TO TAKE:

Take all food, drinking water and firewood with you. The weather can change dramatically very quickly so carry clothing for all occasions.

■ BEST TIME TO TRAVEL:

Due to track closures in the winter months, you'll experience better weather and nicer travelling conditions in summer and spring.

■ THINGS TO SEE ON THE WAY:

On your way into Mansfield from Melbourne, don't miss a chance to visit Lake Eildon. You may also know it as Bonnie Doon from the classic Australian film – 'The Castle'.

■ CAMP ACTIVITIES:

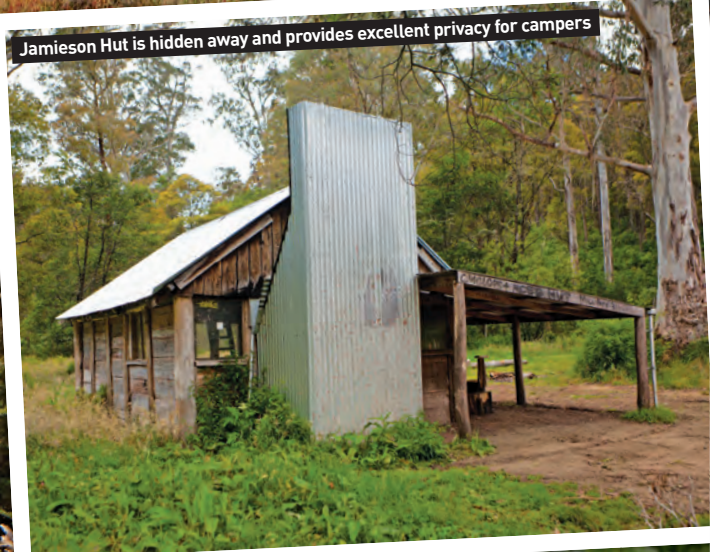
Most of the camping areas, such as Sheeppark Flat have large areas for the kids to run around and play. The nearby Howqua River provides hours of enjoyment for the kids while floating downstream on li-los.

■ FUEL AND SUPPLIES:

Last-minute fuel and supplies should be picked up from Mansfield. The town is well-equipped with supermarkets, mechanics, 4WD accessory stores and fuel service stations.

Mansfield
Diesel – \$1.56/L
Unleaded – \$1.52/L

Jamieson Hut is hidden away and provides excellent privacy for campers



The Howqua River is jam-packed full of brown trout

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With a large drop off to the left,
this bog hole was more difficult
than expected

Bluff Hut was an excellent place to stop for lunch

**THE LOWER FLATS ARE ACCESSIBLE VIA
2WDS, BUT AS YOU DRIVE FURTHER, 4WDS
REIGN SUPREME**

It may not seem it, but we're using every bit of horsepower possible to get up this steep hill

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A short walk from Bluff Hut brings views like this



Preparing lunch in one of the huts, helps revive the history in the area

After some recent rain, the tracks became sloppy at the base of the erosion mounds



wheels all facing rock ledges at the same time, traction is the key. It's a lot of fun, and you're assured 2WDers won't be up here.

Once we had made it through this section, and with the light beginning to fade, we came to a sensational clearing on the cliff line. Picture Point was our new home for the night and what a find it proved to be. We had trees to protect us from the wind, and a brilliant view over the surrounding valley.

It wasn't until morning that we realised the true jackpot we had discovered. The reds of the grasses at our feet contrasted with the deep blue sky and purples of the mountains perfectly. It was like camping in a High Country postcard. There weren't any amenities up here as it's not

an official campground, but a spectacular place to stay nonetheless.

This trek is a cracking weekender for the whole family, with a solid amount of driving and sights to enjoy. If you wanted to slow it down, spend more time exploring the surrounding areas such as Jamieson Hut and the other regions of the Howqua River, you could easily enjoy a week here.

The southern areas of the Alpine National Park are home to some of the best views of the High Country and also some of the best stories. Tackling the trek from Sheeppoint Flat will ensure you and your family will find adventure at every turn in every form. See you out there on the ups and downs of the Victorian High Country. ■

■ TRIP STANDARD:

Trips are rated A through to E, with A meaning not suitable to tow a camper trailer at all, and E meaning perfectly suited to all types of camper trailers. Howqua Track is rated E – Well-maintained gravel road which is graded regularly.

Bluff Track is rated D-C – The track varies from steep and relatively simple to drive, to becoming rocky with ledges that you'll need to take great care in negotiating. The rock ledges are more noticeable past Lovick's Hut.

Cairn Creek track is rated C – Although a relatively simple track in terms of angle of descent, the track is heavily overgrown in parts.

■ MAPS AND GUIDES:

Australia Road Atlas – Hema Maps, Sixth Edition

Camps Australia Wide 5 – Camps Australia Wide Pty Ltd, Fifth Edition

■ RESTRICTIONS AND PERMITS:

No permits required, but many of the tracks are seasonally closed between the Thursday after the Queen's Birthday Long Weekend in June to the Thursday before the Melbourne Cup in November.

■ BUDGET ATTRACTIONS:

4WDing, many huts including Lovick's, Bluff and Jamieson, and the views from Picture Point and Bluff Hut are spectacular. Not to mention trout fishing in the Howqua River and splendid bushwalking tracks.

■ CONTACTS:

Parks Victoria

Ph: 13 19 63

Mansfield Visitor Information Centre

Ph: (03) 5775 7000

