

## { DESTINATION AUSTRALIA }



TOURISM VICTORIA/PAOLI SMITH

The Twelve Apostles along the Shipwreck Coast form a dramatic backdrop to the region's history of tragedy and, occasionally, miraculous survival

# Once more unto the beaches

For the most haunting scenes along the Great Ocean Road you need to explore its shoreline

TONY PERROTTET

"NO way, mate!" declares the formidable matron at the general store near Moonlight Head. "You won't get to Wreck Beach tonight."

The other customers have fallen ominously silent as I ask directions to a remote cove where the remains of colonial shipwrecks lie scattered on the rocks. And even as she shakes her head, I notice storm clouds rolling in. She adds that she got lost last time she tried to find the "bloody" place herself.

Victoria's Great Ocean Road is Australia's emblematic coastal road trip, with the postcard-perfect sea stacks of the Twelve Apostles as its familiar climax. It's easy to forget that, before the highway was completed in 1934, this coastline was among the most isolated parts of Australia. The few inhabitants were a few hard-bitten farmers and crayfishermen in villages that could only be reached by boat. The road took years to blast through craggy mountains and virgin forests; Cape Otway proved so rugged an inland detour was required.

You still need to take just a few steps from the Great Ocean Road to plunge back into the 1800s, when a stroll in nasty weather along the dunes — at Wreck Beach, for example — was not something to be taken lightly.

Back at the general store, we mull over the details. How is the tide? (It has to be low to get around the rocks.) What time is sunset? And that sky? Well, those black clouds do appear to be dissolving, with shafts of sun now urging me onwards.

Soon I am navigating an unpaved road through tall coastal heath and dodging potholes that would make a car rental agent blanch. When the bush finally



TOURISM VICTORIA/ROBERT BLACKBURN

The Gibson Steps lead to a beach from where Gog and Magog can be seen at close quarters



TONY PERROTTET

The infamous Wreck Beach bears evidence of its dangers

parts, I am on the edge of a cliff before a sparkling blue horizon. Next stop: Antarctica. A small wooden sign announces Wreck Beach can be reached by descending exactly 366 steps.

Another sign blares "Danger" and warns that the steps are slippery, the cliffs unstable and the ocean currents lethal.

Abandon all hope? At the bottom of the steps, the surf and gulls are deafening, but the visuals are ravishing. Cowrie shells the size of tennis balls lie half-buried at my feet. The low sun touches the headlands with a golden halo. I am soon wandering along a rock shelf, pock-marked with crystal pools where orange hermit crabs scuttle for cover. And then I spot something man-made: a rusted anchor, standing upright like a nautical Excalibur.

Alongside lies a remnant from a ship's steering mechanism, an

age-blackened rod with heavy cogs from the industrial age. These fragments hark back to the night of November 25, 1869, when the French schooner Marie Gabrielle ran aground. Farther up the beach lies the anchor of the British steamer Fiji, which went down in 1891 with its entire crew. For the impoverished coastal farmers, any wreck was a tragedy, but it could also be like Christmas. The locals descended in droves to pillage the Fiji for its wood and cargo: liquor, European clothes, porcelain, toys, even a couple of grand pianos. The school teacher at Apollo Bay cancelled classes and brought the kids. A customs officer who tried to stop the fun was thrown off the cliff by drunken looters.

No maritime museum could get my imagination racing in the way these lonely anchors do; they are like rusted skeleton keys to the past. But this is no place for



extended reveries. An icy wave crashes over the rock ledge and around my calves, nearly pulling me over, so I scurry like a startled crab to escape the rising tide.

Wreck Beach is the first sign the Great Ocean Road has not entirely been tamed by its popularity. Even in the most famous sections around Port Campbell, where the Twelve Apostles loom like the decaying towers of Atlantis, I find that pursuing shipwreck history opens doors to forgotten corners of the past.

To get a sense of the 19th-century dread of this coastline, I climb down the Gibson Steps, where two of the terrifying Apostles, called Gog and Magog, feel almost close enough to touch.

Every few hundred metres there is a turnout to another powerful blowhole or cathedral-like arch that has torn hulls apart. Peering down from the cliffs, I can

had to thread the needle — navigate a narrow 80km channel between the Bass Strait islands and the menacing sea stacks. A half-degree of error on the chronometer would spell disaster and in fact about 200 ships were wrecked here in the 19th century. Even so, there are photographs of ships rammed on to the rocks with full complements of sail.

"It was completely, bloody irresponsible," Brack rants as if he's in a maritime court. "Not that the enterprising locals minded, of course. Kids used to pray there'd be another shipwreck, so dad would find some tobacco to sell."

Of all the tragedies here, the wreck of the Loch Ard remains the most riveting. Miraculously, two of the 54 passengers survived the murderous waves. Cabin boy Tom Pearce was tossed on to the only patch of sand in the gorge, a one in a thousand chance. Hearing the cries of Eva Carmichael, who was clinging to a chicken coop, he jumped back into the water to rescue her, then scaled the terrifying cliffs to find help at a nearby farm.

The tabloids of the day pounced on the boy-saves-girl story and demanded the two be married forthwith. But they went their separate ways; Pearce actually returned to a life at sea.

"The silly bugger," chortles Brack. "And get this... he survived two more shipwrecks." Then, apparently, Pearce retired. He must have figured: three times lucky.

## Checklist

The designated Shipwreck Coast runs for about 180km between Cape Otway and Port Fairy. The easiest way to get into the wilder corners of the coast is to hike part of the Great Ocean Walk, opened in 2006. Campers can do the whole length in six days, but an ideal day hike is between Blanket Bay and Parker Hill Bay, which passes (at low tide) the remains of shipwreck Eric the Red. Mark Brack does half-day guided trips with small groups. More: (03) 5237 9272; msbrack@bigpond.com. Brack can also guide you to Wreck Beach to visit the remains of the Fiji and Marie Gabrielle. • shipwreckcoast.com

## STATE OF PLAY

# Picture perfect in the Flinders

Take up a brush and learn how to capture rugged South Australian landscapes on canvas

CARLA CARUSO

WEARING white to an outdoor art class probably isn't the best of moves.

So it's hard to blame anyone but myself when a gust of wind sees my freshly painted canvas land picture-first on my top, leaving a colourful imprint. Besides, my pale T-shirt's new painterly look could perhaps be the best piece of art I've created all day.

I've joined the inaugural art escape tour at Rawnsley Park Station in South Australia's Flinders Ranges, curious to see if there's an inner Monet lurking (so far, I've been thoroughly disappointed). The tours are suitable for everyone from beginners to experienced artists and cover landscape sketching and painting.

The outdoor class reminds me a little of an episode with an art-class theme from the television series *Midsomer Murders*. But there's neither lush English countryside nor corpses here; just alive-and-biting bull ants and flies. Plus, enough red dust to coat the nostrils. (Blissfully though, there's no mobile phone or internet coverage either.)

Fellow amateur artists are dotted about the dry-grassed landscape, stealing shade under the few trees. The ruggedly beautiful mountainous ranges provide plenty of artistic inspiration.

Weaving his way among the students is Gilbert Dashorst — one of the nation's last full-time botanical artists — wearing a trademark Hawaiian shirt. Apparently, his year-round wardrobe consists of such shirts and khaki shorts even when visiting Europe in winter. He's proud of his Dutch heritage and cheerily uses any excuse to drop anecdotes about his countrymen in conversation as well as proffering Dutch ginger biscuits for morning tea.

Dashorst works full-time at the State Herbarium in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens, illustrating plant material for scientific publications. So his weekend art tours are a chance to get out into nature, away from the precision of the science world, and mingle

with like-minded souls. He's also the co-author of *Plants of the Adelaide Plains & Hills*.

He suddenly pauses mid-weaving to peer over my shoulder, his brow furrowed. I'm not sure whether the state of my T-shirt or my attempt at capturing a fallen log in acrylic is the cause of his perplexity. But he makes a few murmurs and then politely asks: "May I?" I hand him my canvas and paintbrush and, with a few strokes, he's transformed my sky into a blue vision with swirling clouds.

As Dashorst works, I ask him what he hopes art hobbyists will take away from the new tours. "First, their own picture," he replies with a smile. "And hopefully, say, five to 10 years down the

The ruggedly beautiful mountainous ranges provide plenty of artistic inspiration

track, they will see that picture and it will bring back memories of their trip." (I also have my paint-splattered top for the latter.)

Dashorst moves on and, a few moments later, a fellow art student wanders past and glances at my painting. "Brilliant sky," she observes. I don't have the heart to tell her that it's the only part of the artwork that isn't mine.

Carla Caruso and James Elsbey were guests of Rawnsley Park.

## Checklist

Rawnsley Park Station is 35km north of Hawker in the Flinders Ranges (about 4.5 hours' drive north of Adelaide). The Art Escape tours cost \$880 a person, twin-share, including two nights' accommodation in a one-bedroom villa, most meals, art classes and materials. More: (08) 8648 0030; rawnsleypark.com.au.



JAMES ELSBEY

Gilbert Dashorst and Carla Caruso at Rawnsley Park