



With their dramatic angles and knobby features, the Grampians mountains have long loomed large for visitors, especially Victorians who almost inevitably come here for childhood holidays. Inspired by signs pointing to Wonderland Loop, Venus Baths and The Pinnacle lookout, many get their first taste of bushwalking around the town of Halls Gap, 250km west of Melbourne.

Walks from an hour to a day abound here, and elsewhere in the 168,000ha Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park. Limited infrastructure made overnight hikes challenging, however, and multi-day treks strictly for extremists, until the Grampians Peaks Trail opened recently. Adding 100km of new trail, upgrading much of an existing 60km, and introducing hike-in campsites with comforts such as rainwater tanks, toilets and solar-powered USB charging, the GPT (as it's become instantly known) is a game changer.

"It's not only opened up parts of the range for walkers, it's enabled a far greater demographic of people to experience a multi-day walk," says Grampians Peaks Walking Co co-owner Adrian Manikas. Thirteen tough days traversing the region's rugged spine from end to end if you're up for it, through diverse ecosystems from subalpine forest to wetlands. "Watching the landscape change day after day is a pretty special thing," Manikas says.

The hike could be as little as one day thanks to many access points along the trail. I'm doing an overnight, guided by the companionable Manikas, up to the second of the GPT's 11 campsites, all named by traditional owners. Initially, we stroll among wildflowers, including tiny spiky orchids and puffs of white tea-tree blooms, and past trickling waterfalls. Where streams flow across our path there are smooth stepping stones, hand quarried and cut by workers who hiked in and out with their tools. It's an early sign of how the GPT's impact on the landscape has been minimised, along with infrastructure not inclined to rot, burn or break.

The stonemasons' hard labour is evident further along when stairs help us on the inevitable journey upwards, as vegetation gives way to sandstone gnarled by the elements and ancient volcanic forces.

Eventually the path disappears. We clamber up slabs of lichen-splattered rock, and hop across ridgelines reminiscent of slumbering dragons. At this point it helps to remember the destination is called Gar, not the summit of Mount Difficult as it's been known since European explorers arrived.

We're welcomed to Gar camp by GPWC's Mitch Smith, whose big beard can't hide his big smile. He serves up excellent cheese and bottles of Grampians wine, before adding finishing touches to the pot of minestrone dwarfing his fuel stove. The fact Smith carried everything we eat and drink up the mountain is just part of what makes this meal feel miraculous.

We sit in Gar's substantial communal shelter, somehow constructed on a broad rock ledge (with the aid of helicopters). Before us is a panorama stretching across a wide valley 700m below, to the GPT's first, northern peaks, and up to endless sky. This is wilderness, yet here I am sipping shiraz.

Sadly no sunset eventuates to crown the vista, but there's hope for tomorrow's sunrise. I sleep in one of the trail's few basic cabins (mostly it's BYO tent), where Smith comes a-knocking with my preferred hot drink just before dawn. We're soon scrambling up and over more gnarly rock, to the mountain's literal peak. The reward is brilliant golden ribbons of sunrise unfurled



WALK TALL

Best foot forward on the Grampians Peaks Trail

PATRICIA MAUNDER



The view from Grampians Peaks Trail, main; rock steps leading to Gar; Pomonal Estate vineyard; Five Ducks Farm; Heath House, top left



across an otherwise gloomy sky, glittering Lake Wartook, and the trail's numerous peaks to the south in silhouette.

They will remain beyond my reach for now at least. After breakfast we head down the mountain and into Halls Gap, where hikers can find gear (including from GPWC's shop) and civilisation's comforts while looking up at the fortress-like Grampians. I contemplate this wall of rock, now capped with storm clouds, from the jacuzzi on Heath House's back deck as kangaroos and emus graze in the foreground metres away.

Heath House appears modest from the front, but this contemporary, self-contained accommodation has an open-plan living area with a liberal sense of space. A glass wall showcases that craggy fortress, especially in the lounge where ceilings soar and long, chestnut-coloured leather couches invite me to stretch out and daydream, or nap. It's easy to linger among the decor's natural hues and materials including polished wood and stone.

The town's public pleasures are steps away. Choose from two ice-cream shops, and eateries such as Livefast, where hungry hikers can chow down on second breakfast until late afternoon. Expect to be keenly observed by sulphur-crested cockatoos if you're outside enjoying the healthy-meets-indulgent cafe fare. At Paper Scissors Rock Brew Co, casual bites including soft-bun burgers go down nicely with beers made on-site.

Wine fanciers are particularly well catered for in Halls Gap. Grampians Wine Cellar offers an extensive range of local wines by the glass and bottles to go. Renowned for shiraz and sparkling, and vineyards such as Mount Langi Ghiran and Seppelt (established in 1865), the Grampians wine region will be on many lips from April 29-May 1 when the Grampians Grape Escape festival celebrates 30 years.

The actual vineyards beckon just up the road, including one of the region's newest, Pomonal Estate, which is also among the few serving meals. The small menu's delicious dishes include pork-belly bao buns, baked pumpkin finessed with feta, herbs and edible flowers, and homemade cakes. Pomonal's wines range from crisp, sparkling riesling to purple, plummy shiraz, but they also make beer and cider so it's smiles all around.

Fortunately I visit nearby Five Ducks Farm well fed, because there are always 40-50 tempting jams, preserves, marmalades, curds, chutneys and relishes to taste and buy, plus honey and ice cream. Anita Evans makes these colourful jars of joy by hand with 4kg of fruit at a time. That's just 24 jars a batch.

Beside her shop, various rare-breed ducks and chickens roam among almost wild, organically grown berry plants. After experiencing so much goodness, departing with only four jars feels restrained.

It's almost time to depart the region entirely, but not before a grand farewell with Grampians Helicopters. Seconds after take-off, the pilot points out scores of Gold Rush mullock heaps clearly visible in the brown, scrubby landscape below. As we rise up and the Grampians draw closer, he observes that Melbourne's most magnificent colonial buildings, including Parliament and the State Library, were constructed with its sandstone.

It's the living rock that really draws my attention though, as we sweep past Gar camp and circle above MacKenzie Falls' tiered cascades. Sunshine accentuates those dramatic angles and knobby features, while shadows cast by little cotton-wool clouds lazily gathering around the mountains add to the visual intrigue.

Peak after peak, the Grampians stretch into the distance, inspiring thoughts of walking more of its epic new trail.

Patricia Maunder was a guest of Visit Victoria. visitgrampians.com.au

IN THE KNOW

Visit Parks Victoria for Grampians Peaks Trail information and bookings. parks.vic.gov.au

Grampians Peaks Walking Co offers various guided hikes, plus transport, food drops and gear for independent hikers.

grampianspeaks.com.au

Heath House accommodates up to eight from \$300 a night.

heathhouse.com.au

Grampians Helicopters' options include scenic flights from \$225 per person.

grampianshelicopters.com.au