

THE PERFECT 10 PORT FAIRY

At the end of the line

This historic settlement on Victoria's southwest coast is as pretty as a picture

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TOURISM VICTORIA



1 THE OPEN ROAD
THE magical-sounding fishing hamlet of Port Fairy is at the mouth of the Moyne River on the end of the Great Ocean Road and the idea of getting there from Melbourne seems like a journey to somewhere sprinkled with stardust. Surely pixies will be waiting at the bottom of great green gardens; in my mind is an illustration from a May Gibbs children's storybook, all gumnut babies, banksia and chortling kookaburras. The coastal route is fabled for its rugged scenery and pristine waters but my road trip is far more prosaic — a late Sunday-afternoon drive of more than three hours in lashing rain and lowering light on the shorter Princes Highway inland route from Avalon airport via Colac and Warrnambool. (Tip: If flying in, this is a much quicker option than setting out by road from Tullamarine.) Next morning I discover blustery beaches of dog-walkers and high-stepping wading birds and all the cosy charms of a small port that could have been freshly airlifted from Cornwall. It is winter and few visitors are about but I love off-season travel and the prospect of places buttoned up against the elements. It reminds me of the England of my youth, with seagulls coughing in the mist and the joy of hurtling indoors to roaring fireplaces and pots of tea, the shedding of bundles of clothing, cheeks rosy-red and all but stinging with wind and cold.

2 TAKE A DETOUR
APPROACHING from Melbourne on the Princes Highway, take the golf club turning to the left before entering Port Fairy proper. This road will take you past a lone two-storey house (on the left-hand side) that featured as a location in the recent ABC telemovie *The Broken Shore*, filmed around Port Fairy, Port Campbell National Park and Portland in April last year; many locals appeared as extras in this adaptation of Peter Temple's 2005 crime novel about a Melbourne detective, Joe Cashin, played by Don Hany, who returns to his fictional home town of Port Munro to recuperate after being injured on duty. Hany has been quoted as saying he "does a lot of lonely walking on the beach" in the role. If you have watched *The Broken Shore*, you'll soon identify other locations in and around Port Fairy, from cliff-top haunts to cafes.

3 THE GREEN OUTDOORS
IN the area are about 70 species of birds, from sandpipers to spoonbills; small nature reserves and wetlands; an 1859-built lighthouse on a gale-tossed point; and a shearwater colony on Griffiths Island, an Aboriginal mission in the 1850s and now accessed by tracks and causeways. If the weather is favourable, take a boat trip to Lady Julia Percy Island, Australia's only offshore volcano and one of four fur seal breeding colonies in the state. There's whale-watching from May to September, with good sightings from Logan's Beach at nearby Warrnambool. More: pfoatcharter.com.au.

4 STARTING BLOCKS
I SOON realise it is impossible to get lost. The town of about 3000 residents, which balloons fourfold during the annual Port Fairy Folk Festival (March 6-9 next year), is laid out in a grid of more or less dead-straight, broad avenues lined with stately Norfolk pines and white weatherboard cottages. Most of what visitors need can be found along Sackville Street and its cross-streets, Bank and Cox. There's angle parking, veranda posts, old-fashioned awnings and a country-town feel that reminds me of Daylesford and Hepburn Springs. There are about 50 National Trust-listed 19th-



century buildings (pick up a leaflet and walking map from the Visitor Centre on Bank Street) but many venerable edifices have been repurposed — such as the looming post office on the corner of Sackville and Cox streets, now a showroom and shop for Darriwill Farm. Make up a hamper here with goodies such as macadamia shortbread, pink grapefruit jam, basil-infused extra virgin olive oil, Shaw River buffalo cheese and house wines under the Trusty Old Ute or Chainsaw labels. More: darriwillfarm.com.au.

5 RETAIL THERAPIES
THE odd sign for live bait or Western District legs of lamb appears alongside day spas and espresso joints with gluten-free menus, and there seems to be a push towards upscale boutiques in line with the expectations of sea-changers, from cashed-up baby boomer retirees to young families looking for quality lifestyle and more affordable real estate. I note several chic clothing and homewares stores, especially Francis & Francis (lots of Elk items, from boots to jewellery), Isabella's and Beaches. And, hooray, there are several specimens of that endangered species known as the bookshop.

6 DASH FOR CASH
BE prepared for places that take only cash (a shock for city interlopers like me). One such establishment is The Farmer's Wife, tucked along a laneway (look for the sign on a bicycle propped against a post on Sackville Street), run by ex-police officer Jo O'Keefe, who says she used to be known as "the cupcake copper" for all the home-baked treats she would take to colleagues. In a way, this is a cafe that does what it says on the packet — Jo really is a farmer's wife, and she serves up hearty, no-nonsense fare of the ilk of spicy Thai carrot or zucchini and mint soup, smoothies and juices served in those trendy glass jars with handles, and brownies and fruit-studded muffins. But the best coffee I discover is at the convivial little Slitti on Bank Street, with a wedge of homely cake on the side.

7 LOCAL BITES
MY introduction to regional produce is courtesy of the maxi-bar, with wines from Basalt vineyard on the Great Ocean Road, and breakfast basket provided to guests at Drift House (see Best Beds). There's a supermarket on Sackville Street stocked with all you'd require for self-catering but Port Fairy is not short on good dining options; be sure to sample Tanya Connellan's fine fare at Merrijig Kitchen in the heritage-listed Merrijig Inn on Campbell Street, once a drinking den for the settlement's original whalers and sealers. While beach holidays usually mean Paddle Pops and Cornettos, upgrade here to artisan ice cream from Poco on Cox Street, with daily-changing flavours such as limoncello and white chocolate with salted caramel.

8 INS AND OUTS
PIZZAS from Coffin Sally (average \$15; big enough for two) on Sackville Street are almost toasty in their crustiness, salty and garlicky, and come in flavours with delightfully quirky names such as A Salted ("two pizzas walk into a bar...") or try the tasty Pear Blue with runny mozzarella, gorgonzola, pancetta and rocket. Local ingredients are used where possible and this is lovely takeaway treat to carry back to your lodgings or to enjoy beside beach, river or bay.

9 GET PACKING
SUCH is the charm of Port Fairy that checking real estate agency windows is irresistible. In 2012, it was named the most liveable small community in the world by the UN-endorsed Livcom Awards and, because I have just checked, there's a four-bedroom heritage charmer in a good location and in fabulous condition going for \$695,000. Packing now. • visitvictoria.com

BEST BEDS

10 DRIFT HOUSE
USE the alternative entry road (see Take a Detour), meander beside East Beach (past East Beach Takeaway, Port Fairy's best chippie) and cross a bridge over the Moyne River to the junction of Gipps and Regent streets. There stands Drift House, which all but waves a welcome to visitors to Port Fairy as the original bluestone building has done since the 1850s. From this exposed angle you can truly appreciate a brilliant marriage of old and new materials and the lightly-tethered buoyancy of its perforated steel and glass rear extension. Melbourne couple John Watkinson and Colleen Guiney opened Drift House late last year after a marathon restoration; now there are four enormous double suites, all with kitchen facilities, ultra-mod bathrooms and great design credentials, including Colleen's mixed-media murals and collages. More: 0439 969 282; drifthouse.com.au.

