



Scenic flights by helicopter that take guests over the 12 Apostles show the power of the waves along this rugged Australian coastline. PHOTOS: SUZANNE MORPHET

# Great Ocean Walk full of natural beauty

SUZANNE MORPHET

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Australia's southeast coast was known as the Shipwreck Coast. If you were a mariner, the shallow strait that separates Tasmania from the rest of the continent was a wild and often deadly place.

Today, this stretch of coast is dotted with names that conjure ever-present dangers; names like Devil's Kitchen, Wreck Beach and Slippery Point. But aside from the strange appeal that danger holds for some of us, this coast attracts people for something else — its extraordinary natural beauty.

So here I am, listening to a shipwreck story on one of the most gorgeous, windswept beaches I've ever seen. As waves crash at our side, our guide tells us about the Loch Ard, which already had a reputation as an unlucky ship when it entered these treacherous waters in 1878.

"The ship's owner offered the captain and the second-in-command a bonus if they could get to Melbourne safely," says our guide Ed Croger. Alas the sailors hit a reef, bringing the ship's journey from England to a swift and fatal end. One person, Tom Pearce, made it to shore, then swam back out and rescued Eva Carmichael who was crying for help. The two teens were the only survivors of 54 people onboard. The story is more tragic still when we learn that Tom later proposed to Eva but she declined, returning to Ireland without her family, who all went down with the ship.

But even tragic stories can't lower your spirits here, not when you're hiking the Great Ocean Walk, as we are.

The wilderness trail begins at Apollo Bay, 200 km southwest of Melbourne and ends 104 km later at the 12 Apostles, a group of enormous limestone stacks cut out of the bottom of the continent.

You could drive this same stretch in just a few hours on the Great Ocean Road and most do, but we prefer to walk. We'll take a leisurely four days to hike about 55 km — slow enough to feel the wind in our hair, smell the salt spray, and — yes — endure some pain at the end of one particularly long day when we walked 22 km.

Seven campgrounds dot the Great Ocean Walk, but if I had to pitch a tent every night and carry all my gear I wouldn't be here. Instead, I'm on a guided tour with Great Walks of Australia, staying at an eco-lodge each night, and carrying only my daypack.

Our group is unusually small with just three guests — me and an Aussie couple in their 40s. (Ten guests is more typical and 12 is the maximum.) It's early December and the weather is perfect for



The second half of the Great Ocean Walk begins near Johanna Beach, which is named for the ship that sank here in 1848.



A pair of kangaroos peer from a hilltop along the Great Ocean Walk. The marsupials are commonly seen, along with the occasional wallaby.

walking, with temperatures in the low 20s.

We're walking the second half of the Great Walk, which is "slightly more wild and rugged" than the

first half, according to Ed. The first day is a gentle introduction including a couple kilometres on Johanna Beach, where we kick off our hiking boots and walk barefoot

in the soft, warm sand.

The turquoise water here looks inviting, but these southern waters are frigid and currents are strong. On some days Johanna Beach gets

swells up to five metres, which explains why it's a back-up beach for Rip Curl Pro, the longest continually running surfing competition in the world.

On the drive back to our lodge our first day we stop at one of the many waterfalls in Great Otway National Park, which surrounds the Great Ocean Walk. Descending a steep staircase we enter a lush forest with ferns that tower over our heads. I inhale deeply. It's like breathing pure oxygen: fresh, cool and invigorating.

Returning to the lodge we enjoy what becomes a familiar and welcome routine. First, we soak our tired feet in hot, soapy footbaths on the outside deck while scarfing down appetizers and drinks. Then we relax until dinnertime when Ed brings out a map and shows us what's in store for the next day.

"Tomorrow is going to be massive," he warns that first evening, pointing at the changing elevation. "Lots of ups and downs, but it's going to be really rewarding."

We start early, enjoying a hearty breakfast at 6:30, then driving by van to where we finished walking the previous day. At first, the trail follows quiet country roads through a landscape of pastoral perfection. Kookaburras and cockatoos call from treetops. Crimson rosellas wing past in a red blur. Cows graze on rolling hillsides.

David and Chris Hobbs, the Aussie guests, are quick to spot and point out kangaroos and joke that snakes are also here. But because the Hobbs walk fast and are always in the lead, they're the ones who see the only two snakes we encounter.

I walk more slowly, not to avoid snakes, but because the surroundings are so delightful. In the eucalyptus forests I keep an eye out for koala bears in the canopies. There are more than 700 species of eucalypt trees in Australia. The ones called "gum" trees are smooth-barked with branches sparse enough to let in the light and strong enough to hold a sleepy bear.

When the trail returns to the coastal cliffs, we hear, then see, the surging blue and turquoise water a couple hundred metres below. And with every step we get closer to the 12 Apostles, one of Australia's iconic landscapes.

When the giant limestone pillars finally appear around a bend on our last morning, the sight is at once familiar — from photos — and foreign. Like sentinels, they guard the cliffs, yet they can't prevent the crashing waves from slowly eroding them. A spectacular helicopter flight caps our tour, the grand finale of a fun-filled four days.

*The writer is a guest of Great Walks of Australia and Qantas Airlines.*

## IF YOU GO

**Great Walks of Australia:** A collection of twelve (to date) multi-day guided walks in various parts of the country. The 12 Apostles Lodge Walk operates between September and May. Rates for the four-day, three-night tour including accommodation, guides, meals, a helicopter flight and transfers to and from Melbourne are from AUD \$2,125 (approximately CDN \$2,089). The lodge focuses on serving local, sustainable food, including kangaroo meat. The lodge was purpose-built for hikers with a foot spa, drying room and hiking equipment for rent, including day packs, all-weather coats and walking poles.

**Getting there:** Qantas flies twice daily from Los Angeles to Melbourne, with a flight operating six times per week on its new Boeing Dreamliner, which began service in December. The airline partners with WestJet to provide convenient connections from Vancouver.

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