

BIG RIVER COUNTRY

Just three hours from Melbourne you can relax and clear the mind at the Big River State Forest

Story and Photography
by MIRIAM BLAKER

At the junction there are tracks everywhere. One going up, one dipping like a roller coaster into a steep wooded valley, another heading into the scrub and yet another which looks like it's teetering on the edge of a cliff face. We pull over to check the map, mindful of the sun going down and the need to get back to our camp before nightfall. Or do we continue?

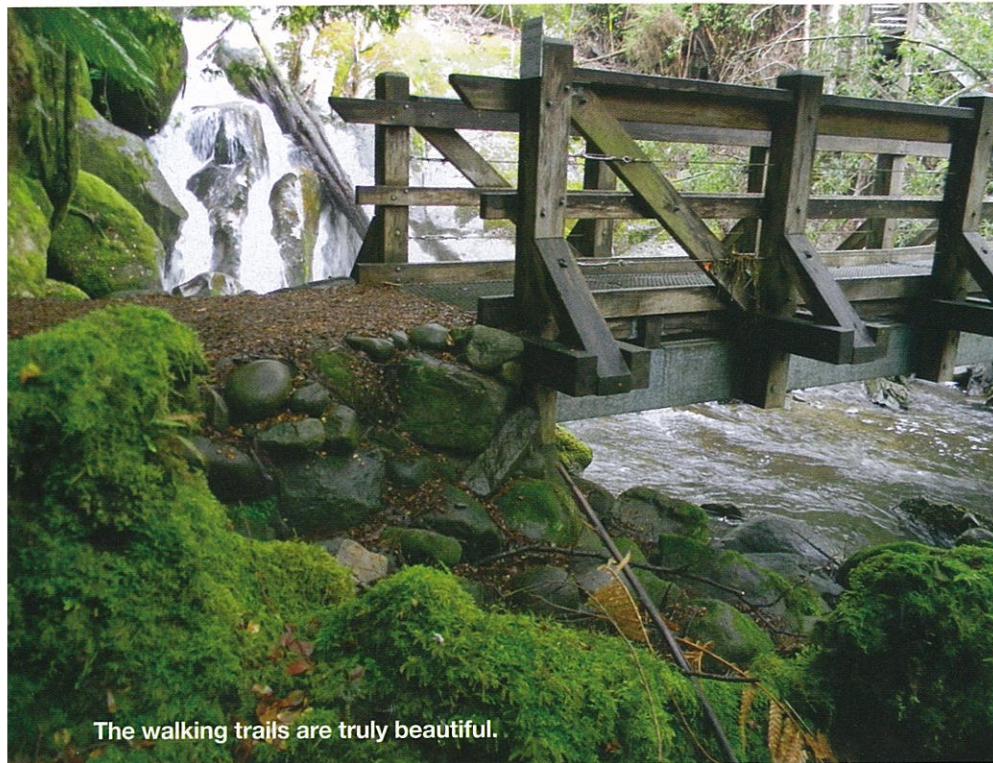
We're in the thick of the forest, surrounded by mountains, bush and tracks on all sides. It feels like we could be in the middle of nowhere but in fact we're less than three hours from Melbourne in the rugged and scenic Big River State Forest. This is seriously fun four wheel drive country and a great destination for those who want to take off for a day or weekend, such is its close proximity to Melbourne. Whether you're a trail blazer or a keen angler looking to cast a line for some trout in the flowing waters or you just want to relax by the river this place has something for everyone.

For those who love their off-road adventures, there are plenty of challenging tracks here. As we were travelling on our own this weekend we stuck mainly to the sedate ones but you can take your pick from hills, mud and rocks or all three. Or you can just keep to the dirt tracks. There are lots of attractions to enjoy along the way.

For us it was a one night getaway, a chance to



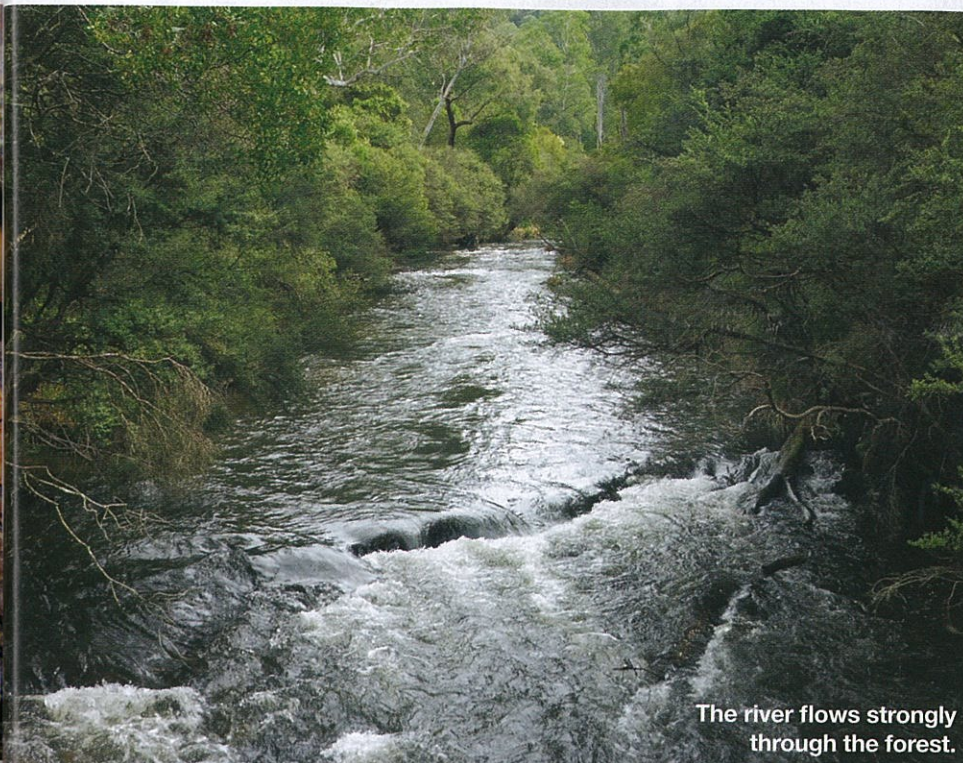
Driving over a bridge in the Big River State Forest.



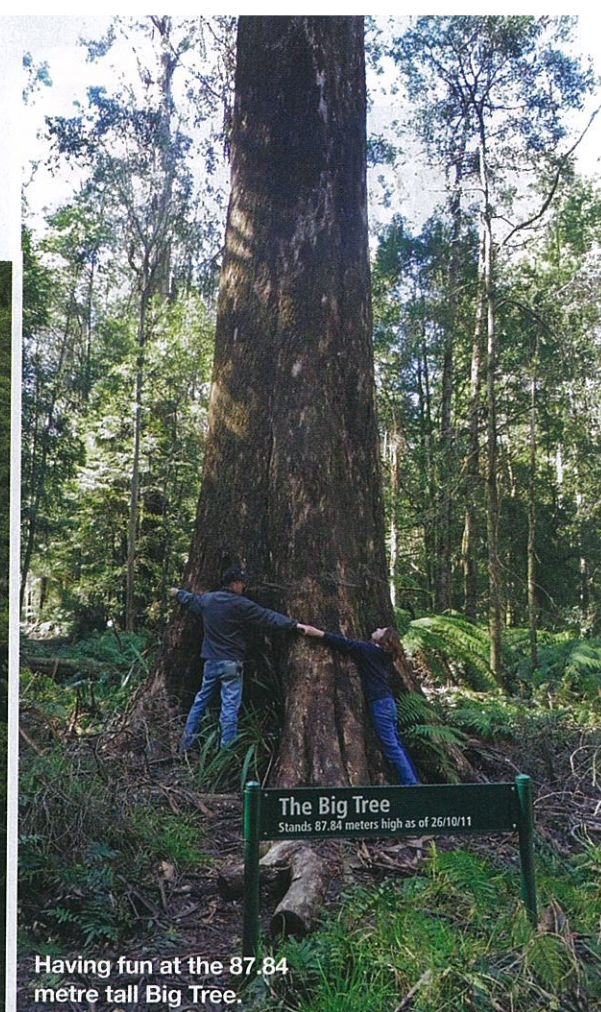
The walking trails are truly beautiful.



The moist conditions allow many different fungi to grow.



The river flows strongly through the forest.



Having fun at the 87.84 metre tall Big Tree.

use the Outback Dove Camper again before the school holiday crowds packed out the camping areas. We were looking forward to a peaceful weekend, relaxing by the river, enjoying the spectacular scenery of the region and maybe checking out a few off road tracks. So we were on the road bright and early on the Saturday morning.

To reach Big River country from Melbourne it's a scenic drive through Healesville, Narbethong and Marysville before turning right onto Cumberland Road and following the signs to the Lake Mountain turn-off. From there we passed Cambarville and the Big Culvert before finally reaching the turn off to Big River State Forest. Passing the signs to the big tree I made a mental note for us to stop and check it out on the way home.

The Big River Road sign has seen better days, it was graffiti covered with splattered paint, Hungry Caterpillar pictures and other additions that obscured some of the campsite names; it's a shame that people feel the need to personalise signage with scrawled messages of the "so-and-so-woz ere" variety.

Nevertheless, onwards we drove deep into the heart of the forest. Along the way in the cool forested valleys of the Torbeck and Big Rivers there is a number of good campgrounds to choose from including Big

River Camp, Married Mens, Fishbone Flat and Miners Flat. One of the larger and more popular ones, especially for those with big rigs, is Stockmans Rewards campground.

The name came from John Stockman who was a member of an exploration party that blazed a trail through this region across the Big River to the Jordan Goldfield in 1862. Prospecting the big river valley less than two years later he found the gold that led to a rush on Stockmans Reward. Around 1900 a pump sluice was set up at Stockmans and in the late 1920s a large steam dredge operated there effectively cleaning up the last of the payable alluvial. The campsite is a big open area and there are two small creeks here that join the Big River, a good place to catch a trout.

Frenchmans Creek is also a large campground and suitable for big vans but we had our sights set on Vennells Campground, just below the Big River Road. On our map this was the most remote of the campsites in the Upper Big River area and it's probably why, on finally reaching our destination, we had the place completely to ourselves. Beyond Vennells the road turns rocky and steep and would not be suitable for towing a van. To reach the campground you cross a bridge to a large, relatively flat and spacious campground right on the beautiful river. It's a tranquil spot to throw in a line

and catch a trout for dinner but if you can tear yourself away from the fishing and the campfire there are some great tracks close by to explore.

One of the best tracks in the area is Frenchmans Spur Track, where you can head up towards Woods Point via Mount Matlock which is the highest point in the area. For us however, we had our sights set on Mount Terrible and looking at the map decided we would drive up via Enoch Point.

The road leaves the river for a while and heads up a steep hillside track. The map said we were still on Big River Road but in parts it resembled a goat track. The track became rocky, very rough and curved precariously around the mountain. It was a slow bumpy trip and we were relieved to finally reach Enoch Point, where there was civilisation and some locals we could talk to.

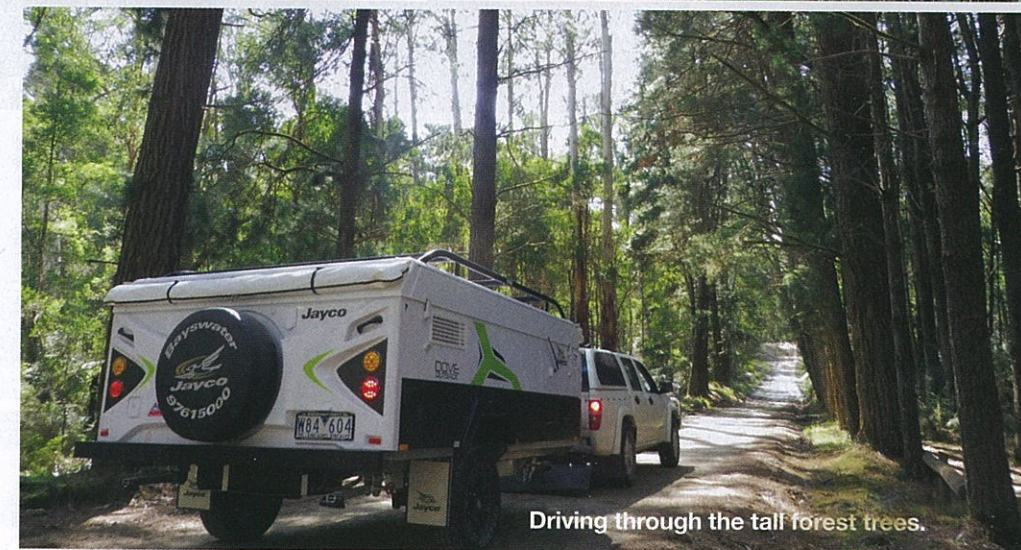
Enoch Point is an interesting place, this early settlement site was named for Enoch Hall, an old prospector known to have lived here in 1855. Enoch was probably the first person to find gold in the district but he was illiterate and so never made any reports nor did he ever claim any reward.

Populated today by just a few holiday houses, indications of the existence of this once thriving gold town can be seen in the alluvial diggings which line the river bank,

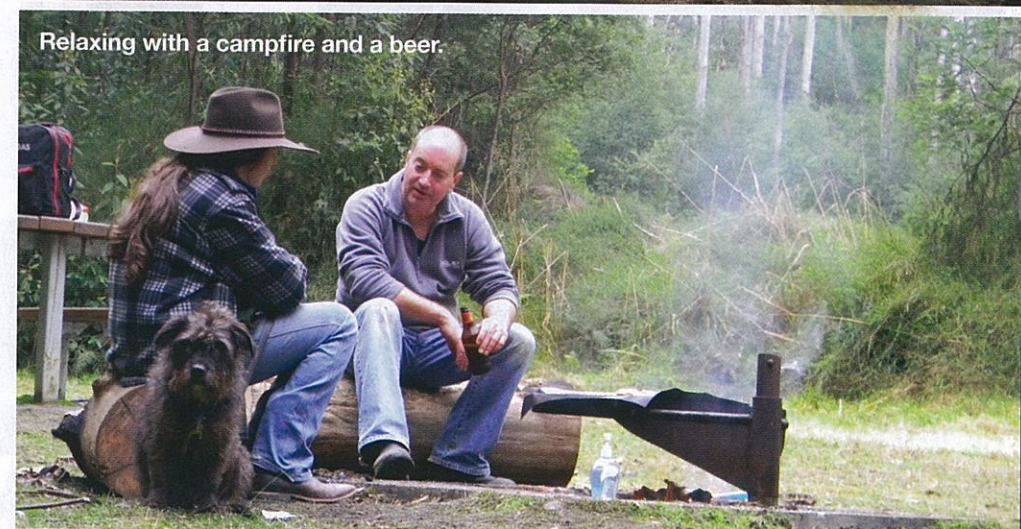
the old cemetery with its handful of graves and the dry stone walls and chimneys scattered around the area.

There's a picnic area and a walking track which leads to Enoch Falls but we were conscious of the time and wanted to make the most of our daylight hours. We spoke to a couple of locals about the shortest way to Mount Terrible, then doubled back to Matlock Track and from there cut across to the junction. And it was there we had to make our decision, continue on, possibly into the dark or head back to camp, collect some wood for the fire, light the campfire and settle in for a night of camp cooking, relaxing and drinks by the fire. As adventurous as I am the relaxing won out!

Had we taken the mount Terrible Track we would have ended up at the summit of Mount Terrible but it would have been pitch black by the time we returned to camp. You can also reach Mount Terrible via Donald Track and via Newmans and then Dane Spur Track. Had we taken the higher track, the steep Moonlight Spur Track, we would have ended up at Knockwood before re-joining the Mansfield-Woods Point Road. Instead we took Hope Track which leads back to Vennells Campground, stopping to collect firewood along the way. We enjoyed a warm camp fire, succulent eye fillet steaks cooked over the coals and quality



Driving through the tall forest trees.



Relaxing with a campfire and a beer.



The roads are all weather gravel.



Take time to relax and soak in the wonderful forest.

family time relaxing by the river.

My regular early morning walk with Harry the dog the next day saw us crossing the bridge and meandering along the river, enjoying the solitude and freshness of the new day; there was not a soul around, just us and the birds heralding in a new day.

Our drive home included a stop at Cambarville to have a look at the historic settlement then a walk to the Big Tree. The Big Calvert, as it's signed, proved to be a very scenic walk through lush rainforest though, on arriving at the Big Tree, it didn't seem quite as big as we expected. Turns out this mighty Mountain Ash was reportedly the biggest tree in Australia back in 1959 measuring a massive 92 metres until a severe storm that year snapped its top off. Still it was pretty wide to get our arms around. The sign near the tree puts it at 84 metres tall, with a girth of 5.2 metres at three metres off the ground. It is still impressive as are the Cora Lynn Falls, which are also located close by and well worth the walk.

If you're passing back through Marysville and you have time check out the 46km scenic dirt road loop that is Lady Talbot Drive accessed by continuing along Mt Margaret Road, through state forest to the

Buxton-Marysville Road. This also makes a great day trip on its own as it's only a couple of hours from Melbourne. There is a number of forest walks, lookouts and picnic spots that can be enjoyed along the way such as Phantom Falls, Keppel Falls, Taggerty Cascades and The Beeches. Lady Talbot Drive is suitable for two wheel drive vehicles but in dry weather only. The road beyond The Beeches is best suited to four wheel drive vehicles.

Since the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, Lady Talbot Drive has changed dramatically and there are now extensive views up and down the rushing Taggerty River and the many surrounding mountains. It's a beautiful drive and a great place for either an overnight or weekend break.

Big River is a great destination. Even though we were only there for one night the solitude of our bush camp and the peaceful riverside ambience deep in the heart of the Big River State Forest made us feel as though we had been gone much longer. We may not have made it to the top of Mount Terrible but, with its vast network of tracks and campsites off Big River Road and its close proximity to Melbourne, we will undoubtedly be back.

Fact File

How to get there

From Melbourne drive through Lilydale, Healesville, Narbethong and Marysville. At Marysville take the Woods Point Road and after 18kms veer left at the Cumberland Junction then turn left down the Eildon-Warburton Road into the heart of the Upper Big River State Forest. Big River Road is an all weather gravel road.

Where to camp

Three of the larger camping areas in the Upper Big River State Forest - Stockmans Reward, Frenchmans Creek and Big River Camp are suitable for caravans. Vennells is further along the Big River Road but is still accessible to larger rigs. There is a pit toilet and fire places at Vennells. Pick up an Upper Big River Recreation and Camping Guide leaflet which includes a map and information on all the campsites in the area. All camping is free and on a 'First Come First Served' basis.

More Information

For more information on the Big River State Forest visit the Mansfield Visitor Information Centre at 175 High Street Mansfield or Telephone 1800 039 049.



See Location Map on page 122