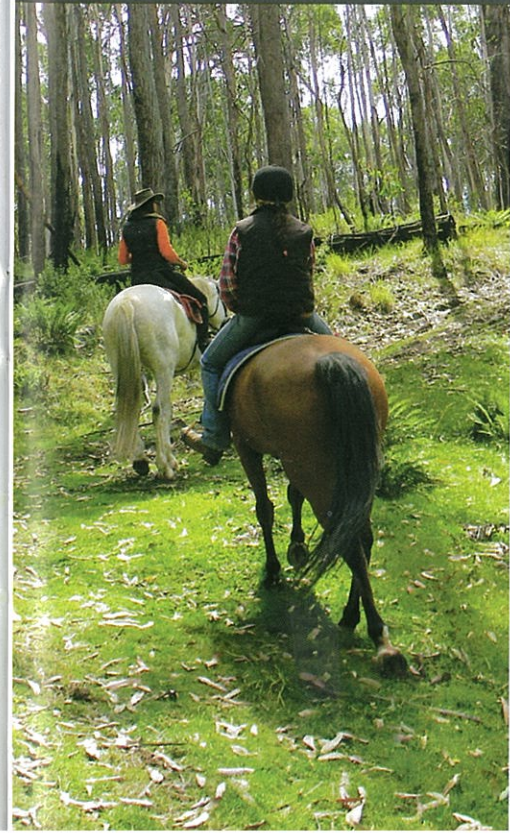




Clockwise from left: Countless river crossings – easier for some than others! ❖ Justine and Tash saddled up in front of Frys Hut. ❖ On the Howqua Hills four-wheel-drive track. ❖ Walking along the scenic Razorback Track.



# Riding High

## Saddling up in the High Country

Horse riding adventures, both in and out of the saddle, in Victoria's iconic high country.

Words and images: Miriam Blaker

It's challenging enough packing for a normal camping trip, but throw in two horses and the logistics change dramatically. Horse feed, chaff, hay, water, rugs, riding gear, saddles, helmets; the list goes on. But finally the day arrives. With my like-minded sister-in-law along for the weekend we are able to, for the first time, tow both the camper trailer and the horse float. And so our adventure into the high country begins.

Our destination is Frys Flat in the Howqua Historic Area, approximately an hour and a half from Mansfield in Victoria. Once you leave the highway behind and hit

the Howqua Track it's roughly seventeen kilometres of dust and dirt road before reaching the campground of Sheeppark Flat.

Beyond Sheeppark it's a couple of kilometres of tight curves and a rough descent into Frys Flat, making it a slow drive, especially with horses. Being aware of this we stopped at Sheeppark Flat where the girls saddled up and left us to continue without them. Driving down into Frys I am reminded of the reason we love this place so much: the area is a vast grassy plain: lush, green, surrounded by mountains and bush, and the beautiful Howqua River.

One of the first things you'll notice is the rustic hut that stands pride of place in the camping ground. Master Bushman Fred Fry built the hut in the late 1930s and lived in it until 1971. It's an impressive looking structure with five large rooms and a massive fireplace taking centre-stage. Fred Fry had a hand in building many of the huts in the region including Bindaree Hut, Ritchies Hut, Gardiners Hut and Upper Jamieson Hut. It's worth picking up a map at the Mansfield Information Centre so you can tour the four-wheel-drive tracks and seek the huts out.

There are day facilities for those that want

to visit the hut and read about its history. No overnight camping is allowed inside, but close-by campers can set up on the banks of the Howqua River with plenty of room for rigs of all sizes. We had booked two horse yards and arrived early on Friday afternoon, allowing us to secure a nice flat spot close to the horses.

By the time the girls and their horses arrived at camp, our camper trailer was all set up. They said they had trouble finding the track down but we were suspicious that they deliberately dawdled. Not that I could blame them.

The following morning friends rolled up in their newly acquired Jayco Silverlite Outback so our site embodied the full spectrum of camping, from horses in their yards, a swag on the ground, our camper trailer, car camping, and luxury caravanning.

Four-wheel-driving is usually high on our list but this weekend was more sedate and we were content to enjoy bush walks closer to the camping ground. These ranged from wading through river crossings, lead by Natasha on horseback, to longer more strenuous walks.

Tunnel Bend is an interesting walk about four kilometres south of Sheeppark Flat. This 100-metre-long tunnel was hand dug in 1884 by Chinese miners as a link between the Howqua River and the four-kilometre hand cut water race to the Hanney waterwheel at Sheeppark Flat. The tunnel entrance can be seen near the base of the steps at Tunnel Bend. It's amazing to walk through, just take your shoes off, keep your head low and carry a torch.

At our doorstep was the Howqua Hills Heritage Walk, an easy one hour walk that starts at either Sheeppark Flat or Frys Flat and follows the course of the Howqua River. The girls rode their horses along the low track that followed the river, whilst we meandered along the high track. Along the way signs tell the story of mining in the area with the remains of a smelting chimney, a water wheel, and water races.

There are also some long-distance walking and horse riding trails like the Lower Howqua Feeder Walking Track that follows the Howqua River for twelve kilometres from Running Creek Reserve to Tobacco Flat. But careful planning is needed, as we found out on a previous visit. Our intrepid daughter and her aunt planned an afternoon ride from here that is still vivid in my mind. We left Running Creek Reserve much later than we should have.

The walking track starts barely a metre wide, high and steep over the Howqua River, testing my vertigo as the girls rode their steadfast horses behind us. We walked a short way with them before backtracking to the car. Our plan was to drive the horse floats out of there and meet them at Frys Flat. Unfortunately, it was much later we realised the marked Lower Howqua Feeder Track finished at Tobacco Flat and to reach Frys Flat they would have to negotiate unknown territory through the river. Having begun the horse ride after lunch we knew we had to reach them at Tobacco Flat before nightfall to lead them out along the four-wheel-drive track while there was still enough daylight.

So the race was on to drive back into Mansfield, refuel, drive the floats into the Howqua Historic Area, unhitch them and get to Tobacco Flat. What followed was a series of adventures that involved river crossings, sludgy four-wheel-driving down Howqua Hills Track and our parked car rolling headfirst into a fence in our attempts to find them. It was a Sunday night in the middle of winter and there was not a soul in sight. I had visions of them lost and disorientated in the bush and us, bogged to the axles, unable to find them.

Finally, and to our immense relief, we spotted the girls near the hills beyond Tobacco Flat. They certainly didn't look stressed. Judging from their huge grins they were unaware of our worries, although later they admitted to being concerned when the track ended. Lessons learned: leave earlier in the day and carry two-way hand-held communication. As they splashed through the river and Natasha jumped her horse across the embankment I couldn't help thinking she resembled something out of *The Girl from Snowy River*.

For this trip they were content with river rides, however on the last day, we floated the horses to Razorback Hut up on Mount Stirling, accessed off the Circuit Road and the track just before the No. 3 Road Intersection.

During dry weather you might reach the hut in a conventional vehicle, but most times a four-wheel-drive is recommended for the bumpy trip into this remote alpine area. Here they saddled up for a loop walk up the Razorback Track to spectacular views across the mountain ranges. The iconic Craig's Hut was also on their wish list, but time ran out. No doubt a return trip will be planned to tick this one off their bucket list.

## FACT FILE



### Getting there

Mansfield is two and a half hours from Melbourne, accessed via the Maroondah Highway and the Hume Highway. From Mansfield continue to Merrijig, about three kilometres past Merrijig Road turn right onto the Howqua Track. Sheepland Flat is approximately 17 km from the turn off. Frys Flat is about 2.5 km south of Sheepland Flat along Howqua Hills Track.

### Where to camp

Campgrounds in the Howqua Hills Historic Area with horse yards are provided at:

Tunnel Bend Flat (for small groups) and Frys Flat (for larger groups).

Bookings for the horse yards are essential. Telephone the Mansfield Office on 13 19 63.

There are no fees for camping at Frys Flat and Sheepland Flat. Fire pits and pit toilets are at Frys Flat and Sheepland Flat. Dogs are allowed and it's first in best dressed.

Designated horse yards – Camps in the Alpine National Park: 7 Mile Flat, Ritchies Hut, Bluff Hut, Pikes Flat, Mitchell's Flat and King River Hut.

Horse camping is generally appropriate in those areas where horseriding is permitted.

Horse camping is not permitted in defined camping areas unless horse yards are provided. Where yards are provided in defined camping areas, horse parties must yard their horses.

### When to go

The best time to camp in the High Country is in the late spring (October) to early autumn (May) although the area around Howqua Hills is usually still accessible during the winter months thanks to constant maintenance by Parks Victoria. Beyond the lower flats of the Howqua River many of the tracks are impassable due to the snow falls and road closures, generally between May to November. Check with Parks Victoria before visiting.

### Further information

For information on camping and horse riding in the high country telephone Parks Victoria on 13 19 63 or contact the Mansfield Visitor Information Centre on (03) 5775 7000.

Or visit the website at [www.parkweb.vic.gov.au](http://www.parkweb.vic.gov.au)

For information on trail riding companies around Mansfield visit [www.mansfieldmtbuller.com.au/horse-riding](http://www.mansfieldmtbuller.com.au/horse-riding)

The Colonial Way  
Taylors Road, Rheola  
Telephone 0429 932 744 for more information or visit [www.colonialway.com.au](http://www.colonialway.com.au)



Above:  
Relaxed campers and horses at Frys Flat camping ground.

Our departure from Razorback Hut was well timed as a trail riding club, consisting of a large contingent of horse floats and four-wheel-drives, converged on the area. For those who love the idea of camping but don't have their own horse, there are many trail riding companies that offer treks into the high country.

Companies like Hidden Trails on Horseback, Lovicks and Watson's Mountain Trail Rides offer day and overnight tours and pack saddling trips for the ultimate high country adventure. Whether you're an experienced rider or a total novice you'll be teamed up with the best horse for your ability. Safe calm horses, the best of country hospitality and beautiful scenery are guaranteed to leave you with unforgettable memories, if not just a hint of saddle soreness.

For the ultimate camping experience with horses, without any risk of saddle sores, check out The Colonial Way in the Central Victorian goldfields area near Rheola. The Colonial Way is Australia's original horse-drawn caravan holiday, and the only wagon holiday of its kind in the country. It's also one of the most laid-back getaways you'll ever experience. Once you arrive and swap your car for a Clydesdale horse there are no fuel expenses and time slows right down. We experienced this trip a few years ago and I can honestly say I've never come home dirtier, yet more relaxed and rejuvenated.

This is the ultimate 'slow down' holiday where you'll rarely pass another car on the back roads. It's just you and your Clydesdale at the helm, clip-clopping down rural roads, pulling a wagon reminiscent of the gypsy age.

There's no tent to set up and the cosy wagons come with bunk beds and gas cooking facilities. All you need is a plentiful supply of food, sleeping bags and a good dose of adventure. No experience with horses is necessary because you'll be given full guidance when you arrive. Patrick Hedwards is the owner, and he's never too far away if you need a hand.

This is a real chance to escape the rat race and get back to basics, to enjoy quality family time in the outback without the distractions of technology. The kids loved having their own horse to feed and groom and even today say it was one of their best holidays ever.

At night time there are campfires to enjoy and the most magnificent starry skies. Patrick usually rolls up to share a drink and check that all is well, and he sums the experience up perfectly. 'Being out here is brilliant ... it's just a bloody great lifestyle.' No argument from me. ❄️