Navigating Noojee

Noojee is guaranteed to take even the best four-wheel drivers out of their comfort zone.
The word Noojee is Aboriginal for 'place to rest' but navigating some of the steep rocky tracks within the Loch Valley, and around Noojee, leaves little time for complacency or catnapping. The tracks in this area are made up of extreme climbs, descents, ruts and corrugations that will force even the most experienced four-wheel drivers to put their money where their mouths are.

The Loch Valley is just out of Noojee, in the forested foothills of the Great Dividing Range, about an hour and a half drive from Melbourne. It’s a playground of tracks that range from easy to extremely difficult. It’s the perfect destination for a weekend of offroading and adventure in an area surrounded by rolling green hills and mountain forests. The area is rugged, scenic and enjoyable in all seasons, but can get quite slippery when wet so beware of the red clay hills, mud and bog holes. Being one of the wettest places in Victoria, you need to be prepared for rain at any time of the year.

Noojee is east of Melbourne – just north of Warragul. If you take the scenic route to get there via Powlltown, a small settlement with a history of timber mills and tramways, you’ll find several of the old tramways have been converted into forest walks. One of these walks is Reid’s Tramline Loop, a six kilometre track which fords the Little Yarra River and trails past Reid’s sawmill.

From Powlltown there are a number of easy to medium grade 4WD forestry tracks that start from Learmonth Creek Road and wind through the Yarra State Forest before joining onto the Noojee State Forest.

Noojee is a picturesque and historic hamlet set on the Latrobe River. Downtown Noojee consists of a pub, a general store, a post office and The Red Parrot Café. There’s also a water wheel in town, located beside the Latrobe River – just behind the Noojee Hotel.

There are a number of places to camp in the area. The most popular is Toorongo Falls Reserve located along the picturesque Toorongo River. This area is four kilometres up the Mt Baw Baw Tourist Road then a few kilometres up Toorongo Falls Road. It’s a lush area surrounded by tall mountain ash forest and a fast flowing mountain river. There are pit toilets, a number of fireplaces and plenty of spots to pitch the tent or camper trailer.

The most popular attraction here is the Toorongo Falls – even if you don’t camp here, the walk is worth the stop. The two kilometre loop leads to the Toorongo Falls.
and Amphitheatre Falls. The beautiful fern gullied path follows the river, passing through lush rainforest, warbling mountain streams, massive ferns alongside necklace ferns, colourful fungi and moss laden boulders – it’s a photographer’s dream. Then there are the waterfalls themselves, which are particularly impressive after a bit of rainfall.

On the other side of Noojee, within the Loch Valley, is Poplars Reserve, which offers a quieter vibe to that of Toorongo Falls. There are close to 20 campsites in this area, located on the edge of the Loch River, so there’s plenty of room to spread out. Plus there are fire pits and drop toilets close by and large gums to provide ample shade. The campsite is dog friendly, and the pups will no doubt have a great time paddling in the nearby creek. 4WD tracks are also in abundance in this area and the New Turkey Spur Road is one of the more difficult tracks. It runs for about a kilometre and then turns into a deeply rutted hill section.

Not far from the Poplars is the tallest surviving trestle bridge in Victoria. Of seven originally built, this bridge is the last one remaining. It was built in 1919 as part of a railway used to freight timber out of the district along a broad gauge railway. Over the years, Noojee and its bridges have suffered a couple of disastrous bushfires and in 1939 this bridge was completely burnt down and rebuilt.

In its heyday, the train line accommodated goods and passenger trains. It must have been an impressive sight as trains coasted along the heights of the valley, however slow they may have been. If you think train services are sluggish now, the 143km trip from Flinders Street Station to Noojee used to take six hours.

During the 1930s, train services were cut from Warragul to Noojee and the line was closed in 1954. The line was last used in that year when locals travelled to Warragul to see Queen Elizabeth II during her first Australian tour. Now, once a year in March, the bridge groans with the weight of hundreds of gourmands as part of the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival, an unusual dining experience far removed from the trusty camp barbecue.

Most days the bridge is quiet. It’s a short, steep walk to the top of the bridge where you can marvel at its structure.
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It spans an extraordinary 102 metres and is 21 metres high with 19 sets of piles. On the other side of the bridge is a three-kilometre walk that follows the old train line through the forest.

If you have time, take the road through Noojee, past Ivy Creek and the tiny hamlet of Tanjil Bren and you’ll soon reach Mount Baw Baw. In the colder months, this is a favourite for snowboarders and cross-country skiers, but even when the snow melts, this pretty alpine village is spectacular.

If snowboarding isn’t enough to get the heart pumping, then there are plenty of 4WD tracks that will. Gunn Track has a rutted hill and can get extremely slippery when it’s been raining. Some other tracks worth checking out are; Whitelaws Track, Sawdust Heap Track, Youngs Track and Stoll Road in the Neerim South area. Stoll Road starts on Beards Track and joins up with the top of Hard Up Haul Track. Most of the track is downhill and not overly difficult, though it can get slippery when wet. LY1 Track is another excellent track; it’s steep, tight, windy and lots of fun. And then there’s the challenging Bennetts Track, which takes you onto Woodall Track. It has a great hill that will test anyone’s nerve. Also look out for Herron Fire Line and Burgess Tracks.

As you snake your way through the forest, you may pass the Lower Goodwood Mill site. Here you can still see the large kilns, built in 1931, that were used for drying timber. The seven kilns are some of the largest and best preserved in Victoria.

At the end of a long and exciting day on the tracks, be sure to stop by, have a beer and tell a few stories at the Toolshed Bar. The Toolshed Bar and Outback Restaurant, located just off Loch Valley Road, is the town’s most famous watering hole. Originally a tool and chook shed, it’s now famous for its corrugated iron bar, massive fire place and exceptional food. The bar and restaurant also has bucket loads of atmosphere and is a great place to mingle with local characters. The well-stocked Alpine Trout Farm is nearby, offering free bait and tackle, if you’d prefer to catch your own dinner.

Noojee is teeming with history, and a walk through the town will make you appreciate its timber milling past. More than 200km of tram lines were built to link the mills to the railway station – at least 28 mills were in operation between 1919 and 1926. The Ralph Cornwall Loch Valley Tramway Walk is a five kilometre return walk that follows the course of one of these historic timber tram lines. It starts at the suspension footbridge over the Latrobe River – next to the picnic area on McCarthy Spur Road. Interestingly, Noojee is one of only five towns in Victoria to...
still have a fully functional saw mill that produces timber by hand.

The forests surrounding Noojee have some remarkably tall trees – the largest is the Ada Tree. To reach the tree from Noojee you’ll drive past Starlings Gap camping and picnic area, which is a nice place to camp if you want to break up the drive. Once arriving at the Ada Tree car park, it’s an easy walk along the Island Creek walking track, which passes through some spectacular rainforest, to reach the base of the massive tree.

The Ada Tree is a mountain ash, estimated to be 270 years old, with a root system believed to extend over an acre. While it was once bigger, today it stands at 76 metres tall – she’s still one of the largest trees in Victoria (if not Australia). Years ago the top of the tree was destroyed and blown away, either by high winds or a lightning strike – in her prime she may have reached 120 metres. Nevertheless with its enormous height and a phenomenal girth of 15 metres, this beauty looks like something out of Jack and the Beanstalk.

Noojee sits among some of Victoria’s most spectacular mountain country and is surrounded by lush forests and challenging 4WD tracks. Its close proximity to Melbourne means it’s the ultimate weekend getaway, but two days is barely enough to unravel all of its secrets.