We arrived just on dusk on a chilly winter night, barely beating the sun as it appeared to kiss the top of the mountain. We’d just driven through historic Beechworth, in north-east Victoria, promising our children we would be back to visit the famous shop belonging to the Beechworth Sweet Company. We still had about 20km to go and were keen to set up our camper before dark. Our destination was the mountain village of Yackandandah, surrounded by forest, native bush and history – the perfect place for a weekend of adventure and relaxation.

Once a prosperous gold town, Yackandandah (or Yack as it’s affectionately known by the locals) was originally on the old main road from Sydney to Melbourne. Bypassed, it now sits in the triangular country region bounded by the Great Alpine Road and the Hume and Kiewa Valley highways. Nestled and snug in the picturesque valley, it could be a world away from anywhere.

As we descended from the forest into the avenue of English oak trees in Yackandandah’s main street I was struck by the town’s beauty. The air was crisp and there was something special that seemed to seep into our bones as soon as we arrived, forcing us to slow down.

We crossed the stone bridge (built in 1861) over Commissioners Creek and a large sign pointed to our destination, the Yackandandah Holiday Park.

This is one of the best places to camp. The park is right in the middle of town but it feels like it could be in the middle of nowhere. It’s a small, quiet country park with a motto which seems to epitomise the entire town and its visitors: ‘No Hard Yacka’. Yackandandah is the perfect spot to tackle top tracks or potter about in peaceful surrounds.
the roads and creeksides were heavy with fallen autumn leaves. The town had shady verandahs on the colourful building facades and wide gutters – our youngsters had great fun jumping over them.

We met a bloke called Ralph Czarnecki, the owner of Frankly Speaking Antiques, a great place to browse through quirky and old-time treasures. Ralph has owned the antique store for 25 years and said the only thing he loved more was riding his motorbikes, one of which sat outside the store, a silver Can-Am Spyder.

The main street is Heritage Listed with 37 National Trust buildings to explore, including the Athenaeum, the Courthouse and the Bank of Victoria but there’s something about a shiny, three-wheeled motorcycle that has it over the historical stuff and appeals to all the boys, especially mine. Look out for the old signs at the nearby Yackandandah Motor Garage.

The garage closed in 2003 when petrol was just 70.5 cents per litre.

That afternoon we headed back to Beechworth with our friends, who had by now joined us, to visit the famous confectionary shop. It was a holiday weekend and everyone was ready for a sugar fix. We chose our favourites and farewelled the bustling town, happy to head back to quiet Yackandandah.

We enjoyed another late-afternoon stroll along the main street, stopping to browse through quaint stores filled with local craft and the most amazing wooden furniture. Other stores, selling winter woollies stand side-by-side with bakeries and cafés.

For an interesting walk, head to The Gorge, accessed from the Yackandandah Creek in town or from the carpark on Bells Flat Road. We took the creek track. The scenic walk led to cascading waterfalls and took us through rugged countryside on a pathway that twisted and turned through native bushland.

Four-wheel driving offers a real treat around here and it was literally at our doorstep, a perfect place to try out our new Great Wall 4X4. The V200 2.0-litre LT turbo-diesel has proven itself handy at towing our camper-trailer and, back home, a horse float. On the tracks the Great Wall (GW) had no trouble with pow or traction and we were impressed with its capabilities.

Yackandandah sits in the foothills of the Stanley State Forest so it was a mere five-minute drive from our camp to reach the start of some awesome tracks. The was also a leisurely 14km Forest Drive Circuit passing several local and interesting features including The Gorge, the army training ground, the old town site at the Yackandandah sawmill. There’s still alluvial gold up in the hills and creeks.

The best way to explore the town is on foot, particularly when the roads and creeksides are heavy with fallen leaves.
festyle – ‘simply relax’. Commissioners
nd Yackandandah creeks merge here and
ow around the park’s perimeter. Trout are
bundant in its pure waters and we were
slightly informed it’s the perfect place
cast a line, but it was late and there
as no time for fishing.

On the friendly advice of Rob Syer, the
ark’s acting manager, we chose a grassy
site close to an annexe and slab. We
ad some protection in case of bad weather,
loads of space for our friends who were
ining us the next day. We also had the
reek in front of us, perfect for our canine
companions to frolic in.

With all hands on deck the camper
was promptly deployed before the sun
disappeared. The camping part of the
park was deserted with only the cabins
occupied. It seemed that most people
considered the weather too cold and only
the brave were out, so we virtually had the
whole park to ourselves.

After the camper was set up warmth was
next on the agenda. Rob kindly offered us
wood for our evening fire. Fire drums aren’t
 supplied so we had brought our own. The
troops were ravenous and so our pasta was
served, infused with extra local herbs as,
in my rush to drain it, half was lost in the
grass. I threw it back in with the thought
‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’. There were no complaints.

The next morning we woke to 0°C and a
frosted creek. Rugging up, we headed out
to explore. Just down the road we found
a retro garage sale. Barely five minutes
later we were in the main street lined with
those sturdy oaks – even with bare limbs
they were impressive.

The best way to explore the town was
on foot and it was especially fun when
There is something in the Stanley Forest for everyone, from softroaders to rigs with big lifts, diff locks and off-road rubber.

One of the most challenging was Schmidt Track, a long, steep trail which had us crawling to the bottom of a fairly big descent only to discover that a huge fallen tree blocked our way. Although we had a chainsaw, it would have been a massive job to cut through the errant wood so we decided to turn around. Fortunately, there was room at the bottom of the hill to manoeuvre a multi-point turn before crawling back up the steep track. At this stage the clouds looked threatening but thankfully the rain held off as wet weather would have made the terrain very slippery.

Parts of the forest are used for logging and army training, so it pays to watch out for other vehicles. The most traffic we saw were some horse riders on a navigational ride through the forest, as well as a group of trail bikers. The Stanley Forest is an extremely popular spot for dirt-biking.

We found great free camping spots, mar along the fast-flowing Yackandandah Creek several had well-constructed fireplace and there were even drop toilets in some locations. It would be a fantastic place to return to in summer.

Closer to town, but still on the edge of the forest, is Kirby’s Flat Pottery, run by master craftsman John Dermer. His work has been displayed in the Australian National Gallery and Parliament House. Set in the hills amid a spectacular backdrop and surrounded by Japanese gardens, his studio gallery is memorable.

It would be very easy to drive further afield from Yackandandah, to visit near mountain resorts and gourmet region. Yet this unassuming little place had all we needed and we were content staying true to the caravan park’s motto — simply relax.