WATERLOGGED WONDERLAND

The Otway Ranges offer up prehistoric-looking forests, spectacular waterfalls and unique wildlife. Just don’t forget your wet weather gear.
We step into the plantation and feel as though we’ve entered an enchanted forest. Huge towering trunks stretch more than a hundred feet into the sky. Down beside the river giant fern glades and green mossy logs look almost prehistoric against the tall trunks. It is dark, the air is cool and barely a sound can be heard. The canopy is so thick that nothing grows on the forest floor, but it envelops us with a sense of being at one with the forest and nature.

We have stumbled across one of the most overlooked places in Victoria’s Great Otway National Park, an area known simply as ‘The Redwoods’. It is located on an old logging track off Binnis Road, not far from the Hopetoun Falls lookout, between Beech Forest and Apollo Bay. This forest of California redwood trees was planted in 1938 and is magical to experience. Yet we could have easily missed them – the small car park on the side of the road is barely acknowledged on any tourist map. Perhaps those in-the-know want to keep the place a secret as it’s nothing short of breathtaking when you step inside it for the first time.

Dandos is popular in peak times, particularly for 4WD groups, as it’s one of the few remaining free campgrounds in The Otways. We are exploring the Otway Ranges on a wet, long weekend. Our plan had been to camp at Dandos Campground but Mother Nature had other ideas. Just a fortnight before our visit, Victoria was lashed by wild storms and the Otway Ranges copped the brunt of it, with torrential rain and fierce winds peaking at over 125km/h, bringing down trees, blocking roads and making many of the tracks impassable.

Such is the unpredictability of weather in The Otways, but don’t let it deter you from visiting during winter. With its flowing rivers, waterfalls and dense fern gullies this can be the best time to visit. Even the drive here is invigorating as you weave through the saturated, emerald forests. More rain is forecast for our weekend away so we decide to book the Otways Tourist Park in Gellibrand.

Dandos Campground isn’t too far away so we check it out for a possible return in the dry months. It’s almost smack bang between the towns of Gellibrand and Forrest, on the banks of the Gellibrand River. Dandos is popular in peak times as it’s one of the few campgrounds that remained free when Parks Victoria introduced its new fee structure in 2014. Other areas have since become free again.

This area was left to the public by the Dando family and established as a campground by Parks Victoria and 4WD clubs. It has drop toilets, picnic tables and fire pits with barbecues. The area is surrounded by a huge pine plantation that was once the site of a tree nursery and features a clearing almost the size of a football field. There’s room for rigs of all sizes and it’s close to many challenging 4WD tracks. However, in the wet season, many of these are closed.

During our visit the ground is absolutely sodden and the place is deserted. On leaving Dandos our teenage daughter Natasha, having recently acquired her Learner’s Permit, takes the wheel, keen for some driving practice. Nearby the Old Beech Forest Road is perfect – a quiet, locally used road that runs parallel to the Old Beechy Rail Trail (where once a narrow-gauge railway hauled timber). Now the trail is popular for walkers and cyclists.

FERGULLY. (1) The Five Rivers Trail through the Redwoods plantation is nothing short of mystic. (2) Quaker wet roads are wary short-timers’ deterrent. (3) The cozy and quiet town of Gellibrand.
as it passes through farmland and forests, hills, flatlands and small towns.

We also let her drive on Turton’s Track, one of the prettiest sections of road in The Otways. Once an old logging dirt track, the now graded Turton’s Track meanders its way from Tanbryan to Beech Forest, a beautiful but narrow road that winds past 1850s mountain ash trees and lush rainforest gullies.

Another spectacular vantage point is The Gables lookout and Wreck Beach, located near Moonlight Head. It’s a dirt track and we have to stop along the way to let a herd of cows pass, eventually reaching the Wreck Beach Car Park. Dark rain clouds and a threatening sky have us reaching for our rain jackets.

It’s an easy walk through a grove of Sheoak trees before we reach the lookout perched 130 metres over the Southern Ocean and its reefs around Moonlight Head. This is one of the highest sea cliff areas in mainland Australia and the views are spectacular. Our cameras click furiously and then the heavens decide to open up. After a few wind-and-rain-blown photos we bolt back to the car.

Our planned walk to Wreck Beach is, unfortunately, aborted as the weather is deteriorating, light is fading and we are keen to reach Melba Gully before dark. The walk to Wreck Beach is part of the Great Ocean Walk and is not an easy one at the best of times – it descends over 350 steps before finally reaching the sands where the anchors of the Marie Gabrielle and Fiji shipwrecks still lie, haunting reminders of the treacherous nature of the sea. It’s well-known as a challenging walk down and one that should only be done during low tide and calm seas.

Driving onwards we arrive at Melba Gully with just enough light to be able to enjoy the surreal ambience of this rainforest walk. It’s a magical place, both by day and at night. The MadSEN’s Track Nature Walk features an arching canopy of myrtle beech, blackwood and giant tree ferns alongside the Johanna River.

Glow worms are not, in fact, worms but the larvae of fly-like insects called fungus gnats. They emit pinpricks of light and spring up as though by magic. Make sure you take a torch if you’re visiting at night so you can navigate back to the car park. But remember, glow worms are shy and will turn off if light hits them. When you’re on the trail, turn off your torch and wait. Get down low and look up to the underside of tree fern fronds and you will see them, like thousands of tiny blue winking stars. It’s a very special sight.

The rain might have put a dampener on our 4WD plans but it proved to be the best time to rug up and explore the waterfalls. Triplet, Beauchamp, Stephenson’s and Hopetoun Falls are at their best in the

**FAST FACTS**
- Geelong is two hours from Melbourne travelling via Geelong and Colac. From Colac it is just 20 minutes to the small township of Geillbradn River.
- To reach Dando’s Campground, turn left to Geillbradn on the Colac-Lavers Hill Road and then turn left into Geillbradn East Road. Continue to Landers Track and follow it, taking note of signs to Dando’s Campground. The road is suitable for 2WD vehicles.
- Otways Tourist Park has self-contained cabins, large powered caravan sites with ensuite, unpowered sites, a camp kitchen, BBQ facilities and a solar heated pool. Rates start from $29 (for two people) off peak for an unpowered site and $42 (for two people) for an ensuite powered site. Visit [otways Tourist Park](http://www.otways.com)
- Dando’s Campground has approximately 50 sites, many with fire pits and tables. Sites are spacious and suitable for big caravans and motorhomes. Basic facilities include pit toilets. It’s BYO water and you should be fully self-sufficient. Sites are free and only available on a first-come-first-served basis.
- It’s a good idea to see the waterfalls from June to November. It’s best to explore the 4WD tracks when the weather is dry. So late spring, early summer and early autumn are more suitable. In summer, please remember to be bushfire aware.

**MORE INFORMATION**
The Colac Visitor Information Centre is a good source of maps and advice. The centre is located on the corner of Queen and Murray Street, Colac. Telephone 13 0068 9297 or visit [visitotways.com](http://www.visitotways.com)

**TAKING A BLANKET APPROACH**
The road down to Blanket Bay where there’s a busy little coastal campground run by Parks Victoria.
winter months and are very close to the town of Gellibrand.

Also close by is the Otway Fly, the longest and highest rainforest skywalk in the world. Those who enjoy a good adrenalin rush can try abseiling or ziplining from tree to tree high above the forest floor. For us, there are no Tarzan antics and our exploring is gladly done on solid ground, with Triplet Falls being the first on our list.

These waterfalls are only about three kilometres from the Otway Fly and are one of the most spectacular in The Otways. Recently re-developed with extensive raised board walks and viewing platforms, the rainforest loop walk winds its way through previously unexplored parts of this ancient forest and provides new and unique views into the lower cascades and the majestic main falls. The track is steep in places and also passes remnants of the old sawmill.

It is along this path that we spot – after much searching – the rare and endangered Otway black snail. These snails are carnivorous, eating other types of snails, as well as worms and insects so it was exciting to find one. The loop walk takes about an hour and culminates in a trio of spectacular cascades.

Hopetoun Falls is another beautiful waterfall, although with rain clouds looming we decide to forgo the steep and slippery walk to the bottom. Furthermore, there are fallen branches, scattered debris and trees blocking the path, which are evidence of the ferocity of the storm that lashed through here weeks earlier. We have a pretty impressive sight of the falls from the platform near the car park. Even from here we can hear the falls thundering down below into the Aire River – that sound really is unforgettable.

During the night it rains again. It's little wonder as the Otway Ranges are the wettest place in Victoria, raining for about 280 days of the year. Light rain continues to sweep through the next morning but that doesn't deter us from exploring. Not far from the tiny town of Forrest is Lake Elizabeth, a small mountain lake that is home to the platypus – elusive creatures of the dusk and dawn. Local tour operator Bruce Jackson can paddle you around in a canoe to spot the platypus on the still waters if you're up early enough. For us, however, a leisurely mid-morning stroll on a track alongside the East Barwon River is more fitting, before heading down into the valley that hides this peaceful lake.

Reaching Lake Elizabeth is like descending into a forgotten prehistoric forest. The glassy waters reflect giant ferns and long-dead trees that poke up like drowned ghosts. The lake was formed in 1952 after a massive landslide dammed the East Barwon River. And now, deep in the Otway Ranges, it feels a million miles from anywhere.

We don't see any duck-billed platypus, just some fish occasionally jumping out of the water's surface, but it gives us a reason to come back again in warmer weather. Dogs are allowed on a lead, but they are probably not conducive to spotting the platypus. There is also a circuit loop around the lake that will have to wait for next time. At the start of the walk, a picturesque camping ground is suitable for walk in campers.

Back in the tiny town of Forrest, with its famed mountain bike trails, we finish our weekend trip with a visit to a boutique micro-brewery, housed in the town's old General Store. The vibe inside is buzzing and the place is full of bike riders and people enjoying good food, aromatic smelling coffee and an ale or two. We opt for a beer tasting platter and toast a top weekend away – rain and all.