



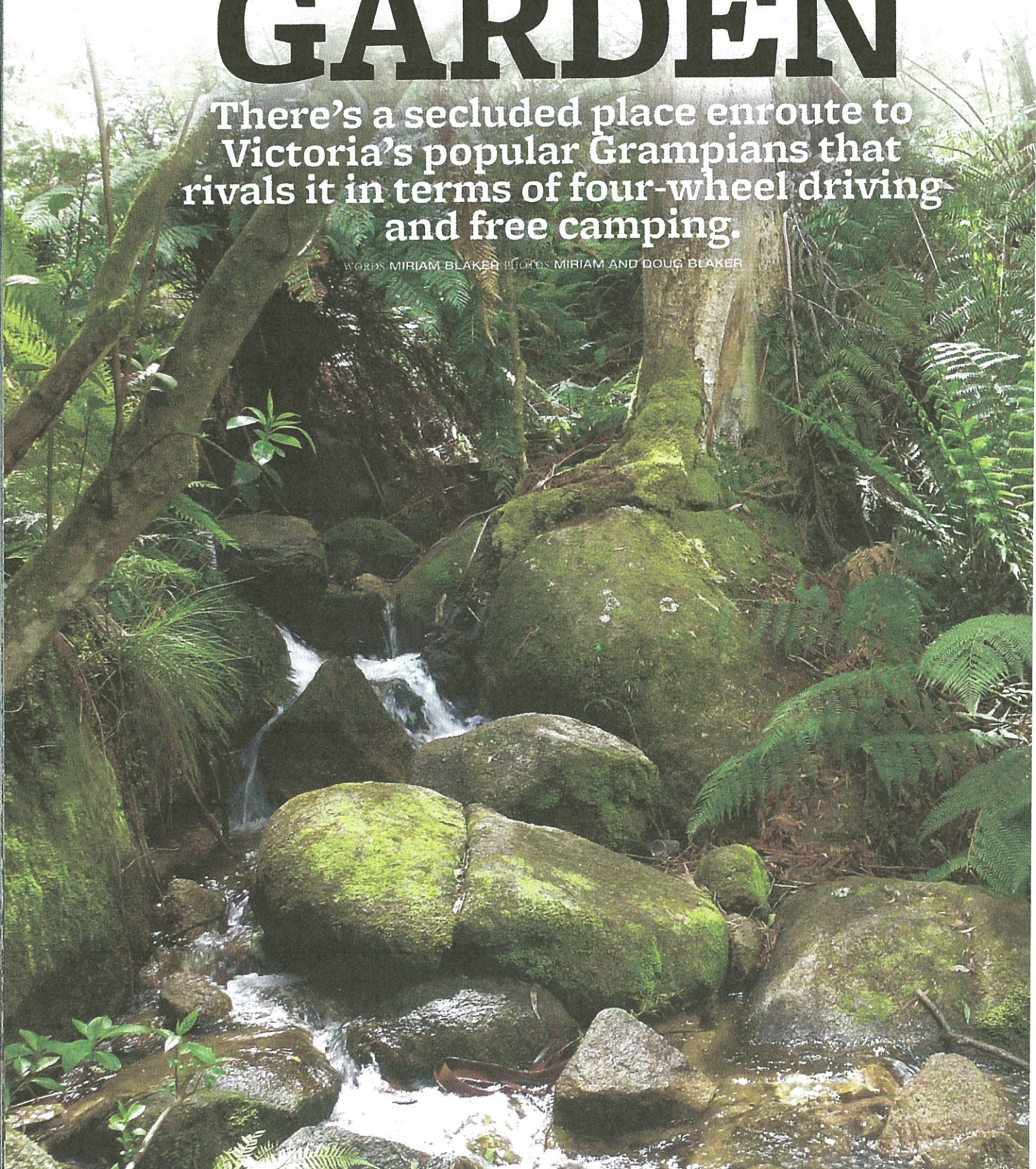
VICTORIA

MT COLE STATE FOREST

# SECRET GARDEN

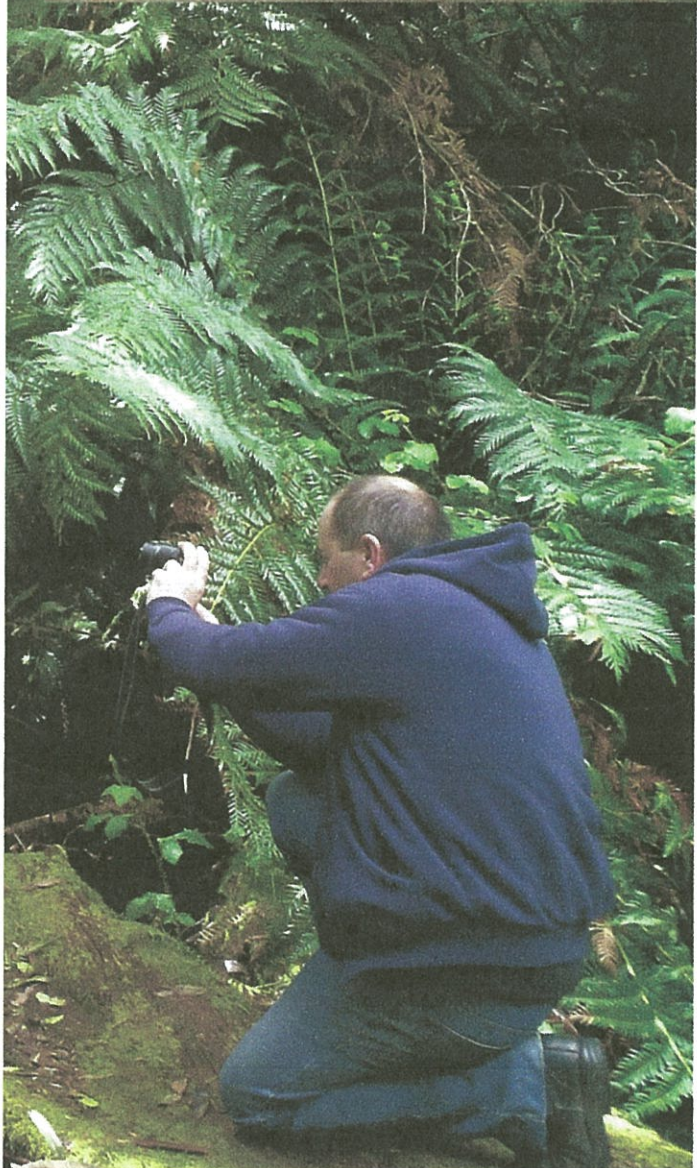
There's a secluded place enroute to Victoria's popular Grampians that rivals it in terms of four-wheel driving and free camping.

WORDS MIRIAM BLAKER PHOTOS MIRIAM AND DOUG BLAKER





La-ne Jeering  
Rock Art site.



**M**t Cole State Forest, which straddles the Great Dividing Range 20km east of Ararat and the adjoining Langi Ghiran State Park, is a hidden oasis; a place of scenic beauty and fine bushwalking. Top that off with tracks that would thrill the most die-hard offroad enthusiast and you have a camper's heaven. The best bit is, it's less than two hours from Melbourne.

We left the crowds behind on a long weekend and escaped to the bush for three days of relaxation – and some offroad adventure. Our first stop was the small town of Beaufort, just 30 minutes west of Ballarat along the Western Highway; a great place to sample local produce and Pyrenees wines.

At the information centre, we learnt that Ditchfields campground (where we had planned to camp), and the road leading to it, had been closed. Fortunately Mt Cole State Forest has a range of excellent campgrounds. Some of the smaller ones are suitable for tents only, such as Ben Nevis and Mugwamp, but other grounds suitable for camper trailers include Richards, Smiths Bridge, Ditchfields and Chinamans.

Armed with a local map of the state forest, we set off for Chinamans. To get there we continued 25km north-east from Beaufort, along the Western Highway, turning off towards Warrak. On the way we passed the sign to Mount Langi Ghiran Vineyard and, with hundreds of rows of vines and a spectacular mountainous backdrop, we made a mental note to try and return for a tasting.

Once a timber harvesting area Mt Cole, or 'Bereep-bereep', was once home to the Beeripmo balug tribe. 'Bereep' meant wild and 'Beeripmo' meant wild mount. The area sure has some wild tracks, though we're not sure this is what the tribe was referring to.

Timber harvesting began in the forest during the mid-1840s, first by axes and then by steam-powered mills in 1856. In 1889, demand from the nearby goldfield towns for firewood, building materials and railway sleepers led to 30 mills operating in the region until 1904.

In 1918 the Forest Commission was established and soon after Mt Cole State Forest was closed for timber harvesting. Today, the only timber harvesting is done by campers who clear up the forest litter for chilly nights around the campfire, and for cooking over bush barbecues.

Chinamans Campground is in a perfect spot, just off Main Mount Cole Road; it's easily accessible, yet feels remote. And there are plenty of spacious sites, some with seating, fireplaces, shelters, tap water and pit toilets. Nearby horse yards make it popular among horse riders. Watch out for them when on the tracks – as well as log trucks and kangaroos which are in abundance in the forest, not to mention other wildlife.

From the moment we arrived we felt as though we were surrounded by an army of frogs. At dusk on our first night we enjoyed a walk which looped through the campground and down the hilly track, past the dam with golden reflections shimmering in the water, the sound of croaking frogs never far away.

Mt Cole is a walker's paradise – there's something here for everyone, whether you prefer a short bushwalk or an overnight hike. The tracks vary in length from the Grevillea bushwalk at just under two kilometres to the two-day 21km Beeripmo Walk. This walk starts off from the Richards Campground and winds through myriad vegetation and changing landscapes. The trail begins gently but climbs quickly as the landscape changes from woodlands to ferns and moss coloured rocks.

From there the trail continues to Cave Hill where the forest begins to change from tall eucalypts to more sub-alpine vegetation. You can camp at Beeripmo Campground, which is only accessible to walkers, and a true reward for

those who take this trek. From there the track climbs to Mugwamp Hill for breathtaking views across to Mt Langi Ghiran, and the Grampians. For those who prefer something a tad shorter, the five kilometre Borella Walk starts at Chinamans Campground and ends at the summit of Ben Nevis. Or you can drive to the lookout and explore some tracks along the way.

As we climbed Mount Cole Road on our way to Ben Nevis fire tower, and turned onto Ben Nevis Road, the temperature dropped – by the time we reached the top it was freezing. However, the cool air was worth it for the spectacular views.

Ben Nevis is popular with rock climbers and offers three distinct cliff faces: Red Rocks, North Cliff and Centre Cliff. It's also used by hang-glider pilots. There's a small area at the base of the tower with a hut, barbecue, table, pit toilet and room to pitch a tent. We peeked inside the hut to find someone had left a roaring fire burning – lucky for us. The cosy hut was a welcome respite from the freezing cold.

Right of here is Red Rocks, a favourite place for hang-gliders. Walking out on the sheer rock face, it's not hard to try and imagine what it would be like for hang-gliders. The views spanned to the volcanic plains of the Western District, the Grampians and Mount Langi Ghiran through to the Pyrenees ranges, and are truly breathtaking.

Coming down the mountain we took a right-hand turn off Ben Nevis Road onto Telephone Track, and this is where the fun 'really' began. Telephone Track is a very steep and rocky track and engaging low gear is the best option. This leads back down to Chinamans Campground.

That afternoon we ventured into the adjoining Buangor State Park, located about 20km west of Beaufort and accessed via Ferntree Gully Road from the Western Highway. The mountain is the highest in the area and, dotted with snow gums, it looms majestically over the surrounding area. Within the park there's car-based camping available at Bailes, Middle Creek and tent-only camping at the smaller Ferntree areas.

## Mt Cole is a walker's paradise and there's something here for everyone



# Travel planner

## GETTING THERE:

To get to Mt Cole State Forest take the Western Highway to Beaufort, approximately 160km from Melbourne. From Beaufort, travel west on the highway, through Buangor, and then turn right at the Warrak turn-off (Buangor-Ben Nevis Road). Travel 12km to Warrak then turn right. After four kilometres take the left fork to Chinamans Campground.

## WHERE TO CAMP:

Mt Cole State Forest has four main campgrounds that are suitable for camper trailers: Ditchfields, Richards, Smiths Bridge and Chinamans. Campsites are free and on a first come first served basis. Chinamans has pit toilets, fire places, water (untreated) and shelter. Drinking water is needed in all campgrounds. Dogs are allowed in the state forest and firewood is allowed to be cut and collected.

## WHEN TO GO:

In the winter months (from June through to early November) many of the tracks might be seasonally closed. Check with Parks Victoria on 13 1963. Otherwise, it's fantastic all year round. Flies might be a nuisance in summer, so take repellent and a fly tent. Beaufort is the closest town for supplies and has fuel, food, supermarkets, an information centre and most other services. The Beaufort Community market runs on the first Saturday of each month.

## FURTHER INFORMATION:

The Beaufort Visitor Information Centre is at 72 Neill Street, Beaufort. Open 7 days from 9am - 5pm Telephone: (03) 5349 2604 Visit [www.pyreneestourism.com.au](http://www.pyreneestourism.com.au) for more information on the area

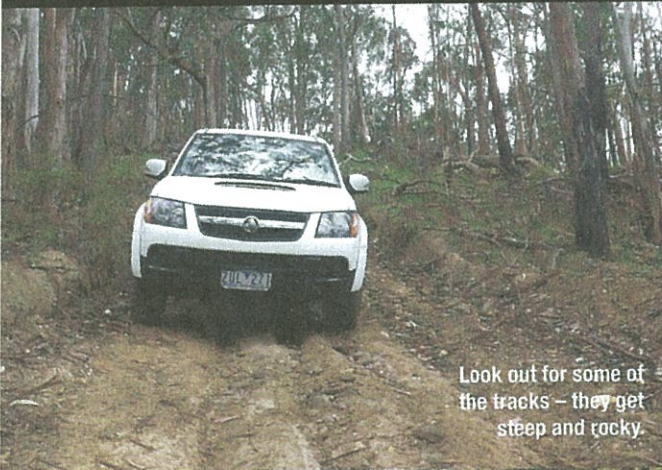
A web of walking tracks links the park's camp areas, including the Two Mile Circuit Walk, the six kilometre Middle Creek Walk (which starts from the Middle Creek or Ferntree Visitor areas) and, a favourite, the Waterfalls Nature Walk. This walk is nestled in a beautiful forest setting and begins in the Ferntree Picnic area. The one kilometre track weaves through lush ferns, and over bridges, before descending to the beautiful falls.

From here, it's a short drive to Mt Langi Ghiran, located between Ararat and Beaufort, on the Western Highway. The mountain is an imposing sight from the highway, accompanied by the hundreds of wind turbines. The region has a number of wind farms, including the Challicum Hills Wind Farm which produces large amounts of renewable energy to the National Electricity Market.

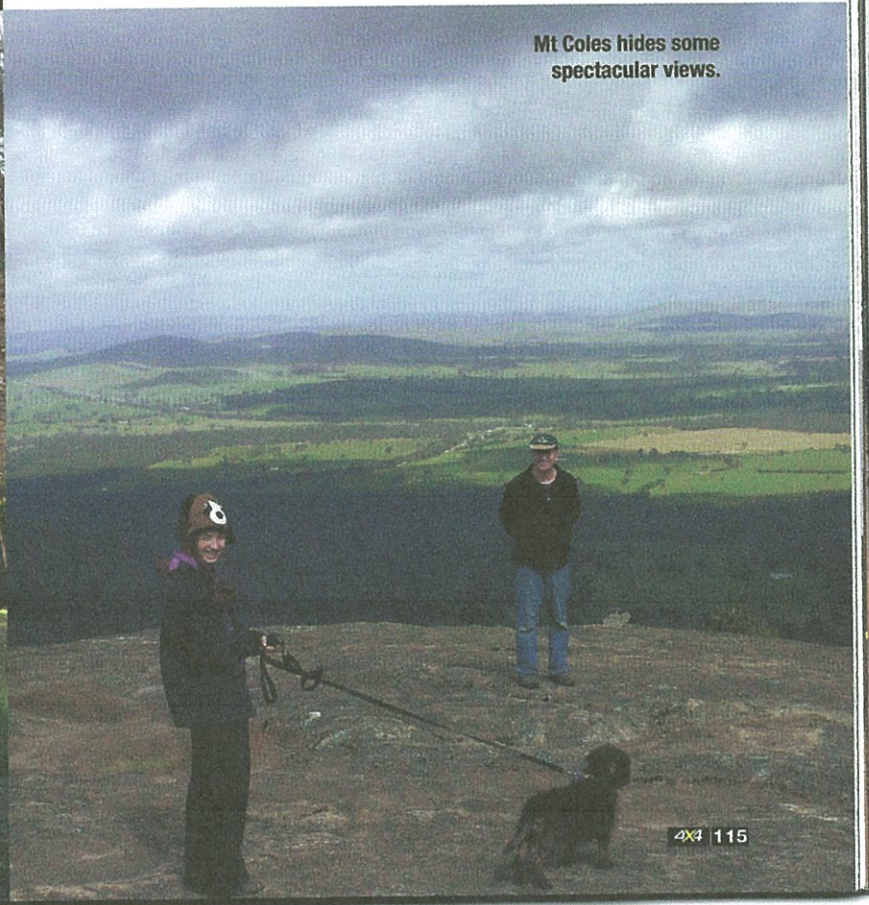
Within Mt Langi Ghiran State Park the six-kilometre one way Langi Ghiran track leads to a picnic and camping area. There's also a track that allows you to drive, or walk up, the Reservoir Track along Easter Creek. It's worth a drive to the main reservoir. From here we took the 4WD track which led to the site of a stone water race. This old channel once carried the Ararat water supply to an amazing pipeline, that still delivers water by gravity from Ararat Reservoir nine kilometres to the west. It's an interesting area to explore with a scenic lookout close by.

After leaving the park and following Langi Ghiran track from the campground for about five kilometres it's worth a stop at the La-ne Jeering Rock Art site. The aboriginal rock art sits within a granite rock boulder, and is a sacred site to the Djab Wurrung people. The walk is easy and takes about 30 minutes.

On leaving Mount Langi Ghiran our plan was to venture through the state forest and check out some of the other tracks and campgrounds; however we got thoroughly lost and ended up in Elmhurst, which ended up being a good detour as we discovered a new recreation area, and facilities, available to the public. A new amenities block, hot showers, flushing



Look out for some of the tracks - they get steep and rocky.



Mt Coles hides some spectacular views.

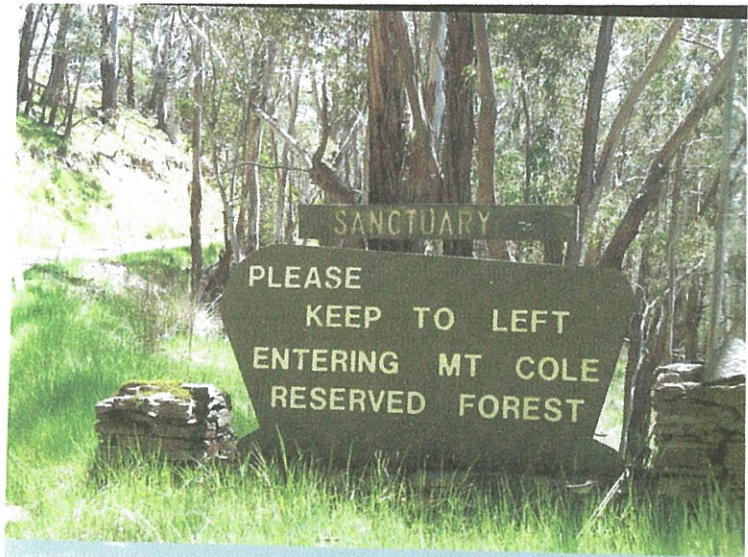
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toilets – it was just a shame we didn't have our towels.

It took us until the last day to return to the vineyards of Mount Langi Ghiran, nestled at the base of the 540-metre cliff face of the mountain. We tried many of the wines, including a \$100 award winning Shiraz, but didn't overindulge as we had some offroad driving planned for the afternoon. From the vineyard, you can check out Victoria Mills and Mugwamp Camp, but we found a lot of the signage in the forest has disappeared so it can be a challenge – many parts of the forest contain old logging tracks and are so rugged they are unsigned and not shown on any maps.

Instead, we took a right-hand turn up Sandy Pinch Track which started in reasonable condition but soon turned steep, rough and rocky. At one point the track forked with no signage. We turned back but had we continued down one of the tracks, we discovered later, we would have reached the Mt Cole Reservoir. We eventually found Victoria Mill, and the remote Mugwamp Camp, both beautiful places to pull out a thermos and savour the sounds of nature.

On our last night we felt as though we were the only ones in the entire forest, except for that noisy army of frogs. With secluded camps like these and some 250km of tracks in the forest, there's no shortage of places to explore – whether on horseback, motorbike, 4WD or on foot. Just watch out for log trucks and kamikaze kangaroos, and take care as the roads are narrow and winding and you never know what could be around the next corner. **4x4**



Nothing like a glass of local wine to calm the nerves after some steep offroad tracks.

**MOUNT COLE STATE FOREST, VICTORIA**

**West Victoria**

