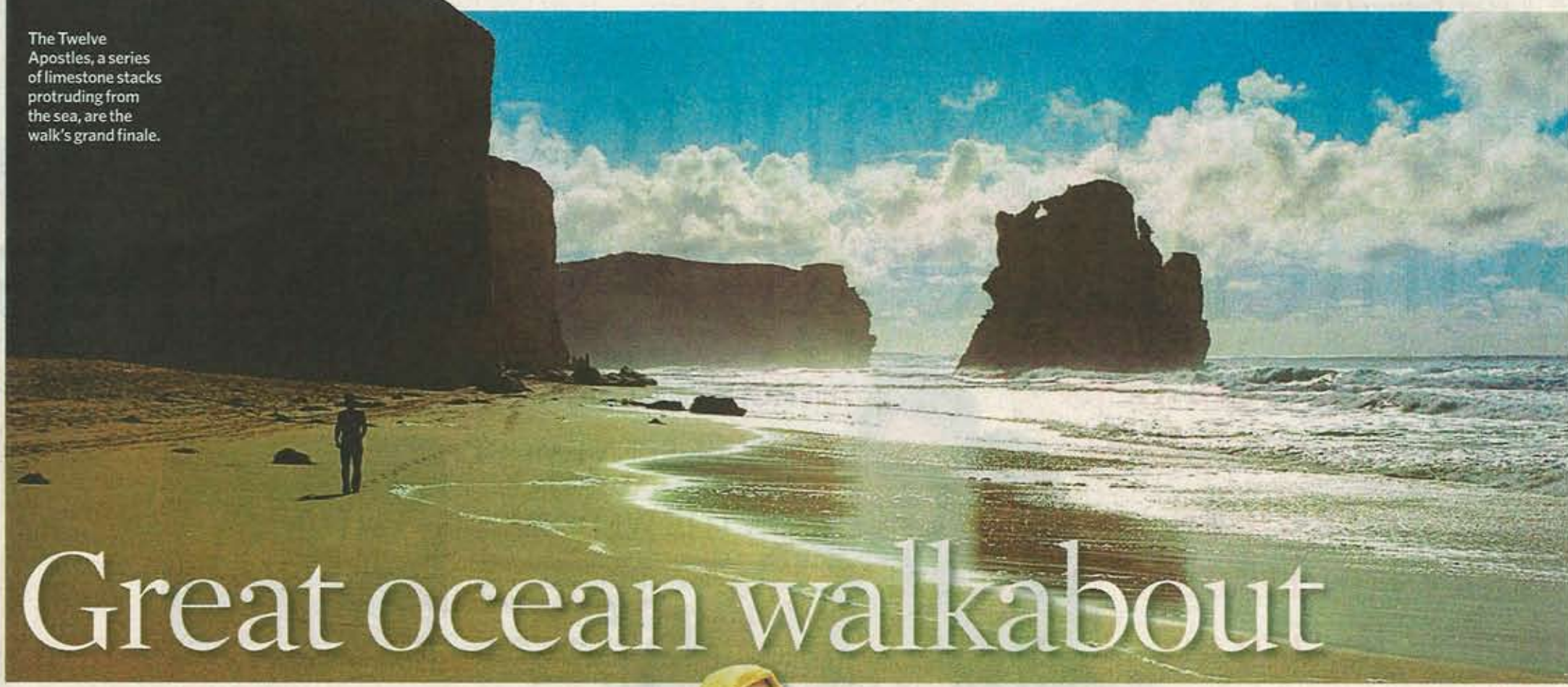


The Twelve Apostles, a series of limestone stacks protruding from the sea, are the walk's grand finale.



# Great ocean walkabout

The Great Ocean Road is celebrated as one of the world's most scenic drives, but a new trail has opened it up for walkers too. **Francesca Syz** reports

As a non-driver, I tend to be chippy about cars. They're dangerous, gas-guzzling pollutants, of course, but also, I have yet to pass my driving test. So I'm thrilled to learn that hiking trails have opened along a sizable chunk of the 250km Great Ocean Road in Victoria, one of the world's ultimate 'road trips'.

It was built by returning World War One servicemen, who chipped away with picks and shovels for 14 years, completing it in 1932. The road opened up a stretch of previously wild, inaccessible coastline for development, and changed the face of southern Australia forever. It is also a thing of beauty, sweeping past extraordinary rock formations, through fairytale forests and around cliff faces jutting above the bubbling Pacific.

But removing a car from the equation proves a short-lived fantasy: getting to the start of the Great Ocean Road involves a three-hour drive from Melbourne, so I approach my brother, Jo. He spends lots of time outdoors, makes a passable dinner from one tin of tomatoes, one of tuna and some mouldy cheese and, crucially, has a driving licence.

We plan a five-day westward walk, part camping, part B&Bs, beginning at Shelly Beach, a picnic spot in the heart of dense forest. On the first day, we plan to walk to Blanket Bay, a manageable 13km, but no sooner have we loaded ourselves

up with camping stove, pans and sleeping bags than it begins to rain. The path heads up an impossibly steep, muddy slope. Unlike Jo, I've never hiked with an overnight pack and I'm just working out how to tell him I've made a mistake and can't possibly make it up this hill, let alone to the end of the walk, when we reach the top.

We are transported to an extraordinary landscape – part *Where the Wild Things Are*, part Narnia. Tree ferns and ancient myrtle beeches cover under giant gum trees whose bark peels off like banana skin. The only sounds are the high-pitched piping of white-throated treecreepers and the chatter of kookaburras. As the light begins to fade, everything is bathed in a leafy green glow.

We reach Blanket Bay at dusk, a well organised little campsite on a deserted sandy cove. It's one of seven new sites built to service the walk. Our spot is on its own little hillside by a waterfall. Jo's pasta has never tasted so good. We crawl into our tent and fall instantly asleep.

Early next morning we weave 10km along cliff tops, through forests of manna gum trees and dense fern gullies to Cape Otway, whose lighthouse is Australia's oldest, built in 1846 after 400 lives were lost in a shipwreck.

We are spending the night at the Great Ocean Ecolodge, a research and wildlife



The hiking trail takes Francesca through fairytale forests and past beautiful beaches.



centre run by a driven young couple called Lizzie and Shayne. As well as running a great little B&B, they nurture injured animals, and work at reforesting huge swathes of over-farmed bush.

We're soon ensconced, boots off, in a large, warm drawing room. After tea and home-made cake, Lizzie and Shane dispense binoculars and we head out for a dusk nature walk, pausing to examine birds or watch koalas in the eucalyptus trees. In a misty clearing, a mob of eastern grey kangaroos lollop past. Further on there are swamp wallabies. Back at the centre, Lizzie lets me help her feed a pair of kangaroo joeys she has been nursing for several months. Later, we join a few other guests for a delicious organic spinach and feta pie and excellent local Newton's Ridge sauvignon blanc.

Next day, a 10km stroll to Aire River proves an arduous trek through sand dunes and along calcified cliffs, but the weather is fine and the views are amazing. A couple of kilometres beyond the river is Castle Cove B&B in Glenaire, run by massage therapists Bryan and Marianne. Within moments of our arrival, they set to work on our backs, heads, hands and feet before packing us off for dinner at the Bend, a cafe across the street run by a guy called Paul.

Paul's restaurant feels like someone's

living room, but with tables. He's sitting at one, reading the paper. There's no menu. He asks what we feel like eating and we tell him we're easy, so he whips out a bottle of delicious Otway red and rustles up exquisite duck with glazed greens in a tequila berry sauce. When we

## A mob of eastern grey kangaroos lollop past us in a misty clearing

ask for the bill, he strokes his beard for a moment and plucks a preposterously low figure out of the air. There must be something in the water round here.

Back at the B&B, I make an announcement: I shall not be carrying my rucksack tomorrow. It's our toughest day and I want to enjoy it. A saintly local named Abby makes a living delivering bags from A to B for people like me. After a quick call, it's arranged. Abby will collect our things in the morning, we'll carry day packs and meet him late in the afternoon near the next campsite, 19km away.

We're spending the day with Andrew,

from local hiking company Bothfeet. Every rock and nook has a tale, and Andrew seems to know most of them. At Johanna Beach we learn of the cargo ship wrecked there in 1843. It was packed with brandy, and nearby Port Fairy saw six weeks of drunken brawling.

We continue to Milanesia Beach, one of the loveliest on the Great Ocean Road, reclaim our rucksacks and walk the final hour to Ryan's Den. There can be few more beautiful positions for a campsite than this, atop a lush headland. We put the tent up in record time and sprint to the highest point to watch the sunset.

Less than 12 hours later we hit the trail again, bound for Moonlight Head. It's only a few kilometres away but there are some serious highs and lows and the day proves our muddiest yet. We arrive at Moonlight Head lodge feeling less than presentable. The most expensive accommodation on the Great Ocean Road, Moonlight Head looks from outside like a brick farm building; inside it's a vision of luxurious white, with huge glass walls maximising views out over the wilderness.

The staff kindly offer to wash our filthy gear while I am whisked off for a horse ride by Neil Henry, a local horse-whisperer. That evening we dine on herb-crusted lamb with rosemary potato rosti, and a rich merlot/cabernet blend from a tiny vineyard north of Melbourne.

Next day, the guys at Moonlight Head drive us the first few kilometres so we can do the final stretch (17km) to the Twelve Apostles at a leisurely pace. We pass Wreck Beach, where you can still see two huge anchors from separate wrecks embedded in the reef.

Finally, we make it to the Twelve Apostles, a series of limestone stacks protruding dramatically from the sea. They're the *piece de resistance* of the Great Ocean Road, with coach-filled car park and visitor centre to prove it. But it's a bit of a shock being among so many other tourists. We join the couples, school groups and families taking pictures of each other grinning in front of the Apostles, and do the same. But we agree that this is one adventure where the getting there has been as good as the arriving.

## ESSENTIALS

Flight Centre (0870 499 0042; www.flightcentre.co.uk) offers a seven-night Melbourne and Great Ocean Road package from £999 per person, including return flights from Heathrow to Melbourne with Emirates, six nights' accommodation and three days' car hire. A three-day trek with Bothfeet (www.bothfeet.com.au) costs from £569pp, based on two sharing.

Contacts: Cape Otway Centre for Conservation Ecology (00 613 5237 9297; www.capeotwaycentre.com.au); Castle Cove Bed & Breakfast (00 613



5237 9100); Moonlight Head Private Lodge (www.moonlighthead.com); tent sites costs AU\$20 (£8) per pitch per night (www.greatoceanwalk.com.au).