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On a mission to the Apostles

March 1, 2008

The Great Ocean Road can't compare to the raw beauty you can see and experience on foot, writes Louise Southerden.

At first glance, the west coast of Victoria doesn't seem terribly inviting for a walking trip. It can be cold, windy, rainy, scorchingly hot, bushfire-prone. But what it lacks in stable weather, it more than makes up for in wildness and, since January last year, a trail that hugs one of the most dramatic coastlines in Australia.

Just how much it sticks to the coast is surprising, actually. It makes you realise how often the so-called Great Ocean Road veers from the sea. Don't get me wrong, I love the Great Ocean Road's forest drives, new-car-ad curves and coastal towns, and where it follows the shape of the coast, it is truly great. It's just that the Great Ocean Walk gives you more coast-hugging time.

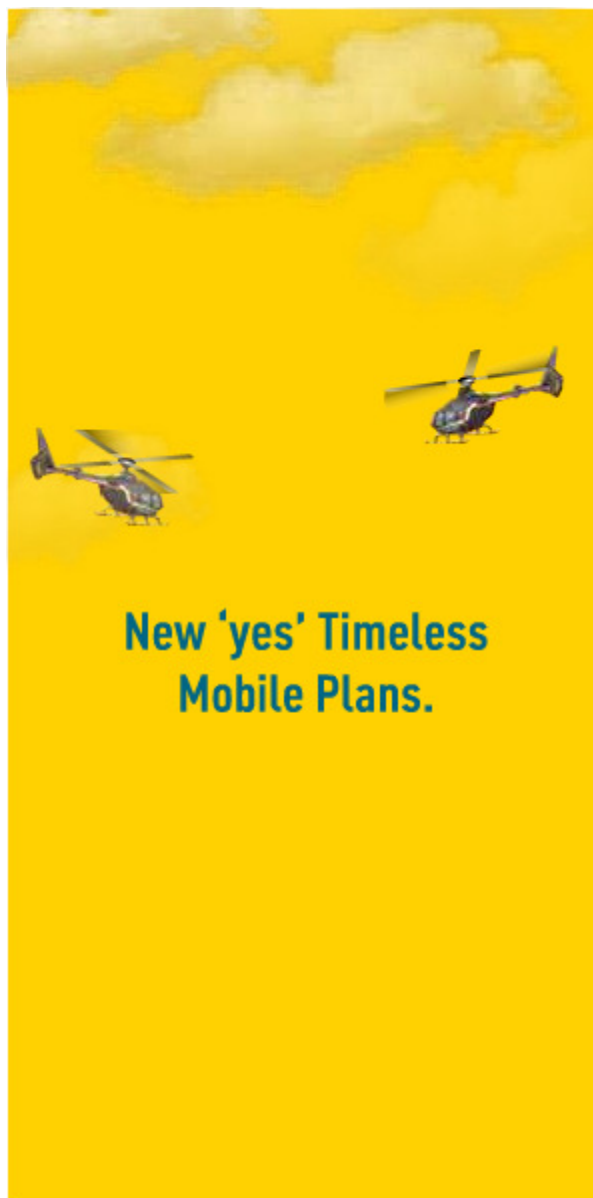
It also gives you options.

Option 1: Hike the entire 91-kilometre trail independently from Apollo Bay to the Twelve Apostles (all walkers are asked to walk in an east-west direction); that'll take you up to eight days, carrying food, drinking water and camping gear, and staying overnight in designated camp sites.

Option 2: One of the great things about the walk is that it has been designed as a step-on, step-off trail, conveniently split into day-walk-sized pieces, with plenty of road access along its length. Because of this you can walk as much or as little of it as you like. The easiest sections are closest to Apollo Bay and the terrain gets more demanding the further west you go.

Option 3: Take a three to six-day guided walking trip. A support vehicle drops you at the section of the trail you wish to walk each morning, with a packed lunch and an experienced guide, and at the end of the day you are picked up and transferred to your guesthouse near Johanna Beach for a hot shower, a hearty meal, a glass of wine in front of the open fire and, most importantly, a comfy bed.

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This is bushwalking with a dash of country hospitality - without compromising on authenticity. It is still, after all, your feet that do the walking each day, the wind in your hair, your knees aching at the bottom of a downhill section, your mind that feels spring-cleaned by the great outdoors.

The beauty of vehicle-assisted walking, too, is that you can change plans at a moment's notice - or sooner, if there's hail involved. We experienced this first-hand on the first day of our three-day trip as we drove through Lavers Hill on our way to the coast from Melbourne.

No sooner had Andrew, our guide and driver, announced that this is the wettest part of Victoria (drought, what drought?) than we were caught in horizontal rain, dark skies and hail that pelted our windows.

Our afternoon easing-in hike suddenly looked like being a sodden boot camp, even with the Gore-Tex jackets we'd been issued for the trip. So Andrew made an executive decision: we'd do this walk another day and drive to a part of the coast he knew would be sunny (he was right).

That meant doing what is officially the last section of the Great Ocean Walk first, from Princeton to Glenample Homestead (near Loch Ard Gorge), but nobody minded. Although this 5.5-kilometre section finishes, oddly, about a kilometre short of the Twelve Apostles (there's talk of extending it right to the Apostles) we could see the famous stacks from the trail and there was something gratifying about travelling towards such a well-known landmark on foot.

Not only was it the easy start we were hoping for, as the gently undulating track led us along the backs of high coastal cliffs, it was a revelation. The sea was never out of view. We could peer down at beaches and coves you'd never see from the road.

On our second day, our group did the most challenging, and rewarding, section of the track: a six-hour adventure from Milanesia Beach to Moonlight Head. It was a day of walking along windswept beaches, being caught out by freak waves that submerged two of my fellow hikers up to their thighs, a roller-coaster of a track where we encountered only a handful of other people and experienced "the wildness of walking along the edge of the Southern Ocean", as one of my friends put it.

The Great Ocean Walk is an anomaly in a way. It passes through one of the most visited regions in Victoria, but touches it so lightly you leave no trace but a few footprints, sometimes. There are places on the walk where timber boardwalks and rubber matting protect the environment underfoot. Not only that but walking gives you a chance to literally step off the beaten path and experience this spectacular part of Australia's rugged coastline, feet first.

Louise Southerden walked courtesy of Bothfeet and Tourism Victoria.

FAST FACTS

* The Great Ocean Walk is a 91-kilometre trail from Apollo Bay (three hours south-west of Melbourne) to Glenample Homestead near the Twelve Apostles; it passes through Great Otway and Port Campbell National Parks and overlooks the Twelve Apostles Marine National Park and Marengo Reefs Marine Sanctuary.

* Bothfeet offers three-day and four-day guided walks as well as six-day end-to-end trips along the Great Ocean Walk from October to May. Trip costs start at \$1385 a person for the three-day walk and include return transfers from Melbourne CBD, accommodation at Aire Valley Guest House, all meals, wine with dinner, a 30-minute massage, national park fees and experienced guides. Day packs, Gore-Tex jackets, trekking poles, gaiters and water bottles are provided. Phone 1300 767 416 or see bothfeet.com.au. Also see www.greatoceanwalk.com.au.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/02/28/1203788502610.html>