

PHILLIP ISLAND VICTORIA

Dawn at Woolamai Beach

fill the bill

Take time to get on first-name terms with Victoria's laid-back Phillip Island.

WORDS PAUL ROBINSON PHOTOGRAPHY KATE MORRIS



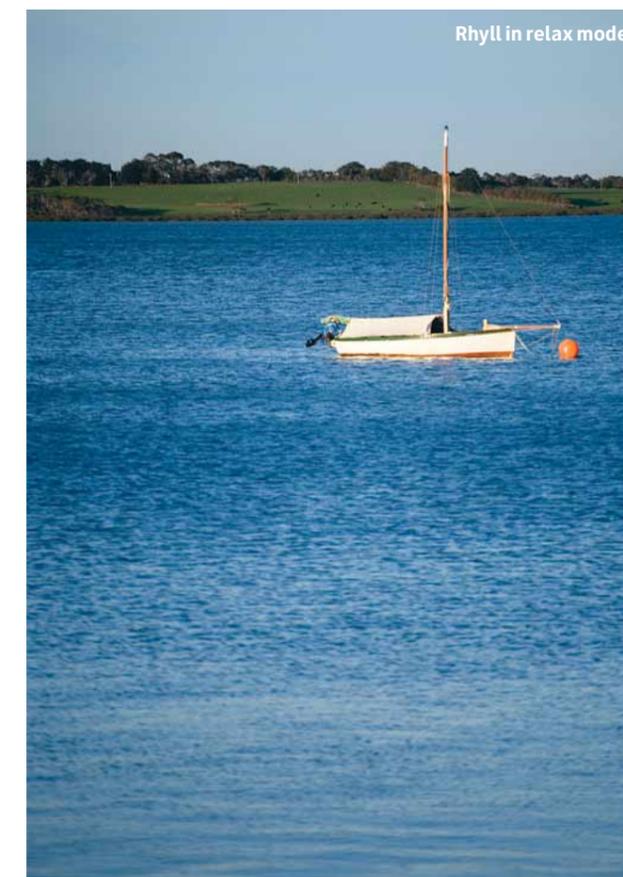
Signed, sealed and delivered



The Foreshore



Fishy business at Gulliver's

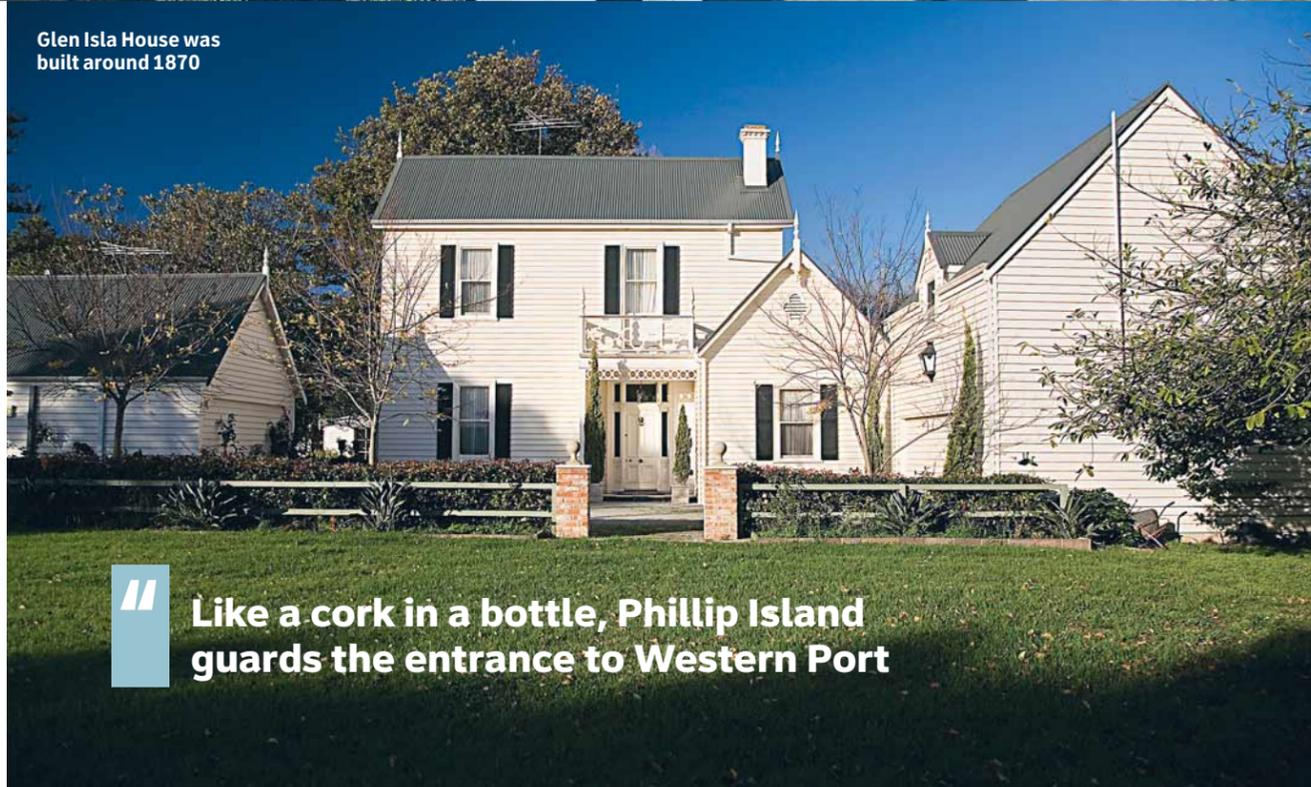


Rhyll in relax mode



The Nobbies and Bass Strait

Glen Isla House was built around 1870



“ Like a cork in a bottle, Phillip Island guards the entrance to Western Port

TWO WEEKENDS EVERY year the fresh sea air is filled (or polluted, depending on your viewpoint) with the bracing tang of high-octane racing fuel as superbikes and MotoGP machines transport the faithful to petrol-head paradise at the Phillip Island Grand Prix circuit.

However, there's a whole lot more to this Victorian enclave than two-wheeled tearaways. For a start, much of this 26km-long island (1800ha, in fact) is a nature park, with carefully nurtured environments providing a sanctuary for the abundant native wildlife – the island is rabbit-free and they're working on the foxes. Only a short hike from Melbourne, Phillip Island is the perfect spot for a three-day getaway. A relaxed two-hour drive through the flat green farmland of the Bass Coast takes you to the fishing port of San Remo, where the local fishermen's co-op supplies much of the fish you're likely to consume over the next couple of days. Cross the bridge and you've left the mainland to its own devices.

Like a cork in a bottle, Phillip Island guards the entrance to Western Port – to the south the rough and tumble of Bass Strait, to the north French Island National Park. In the early days it was all about farm produce. Then the island had its tourist heyday from the end of WWI to the 1960s, when sightseers would disembark from a steamboat, lodge at grand guesthouses and visit the natural attractions on horseback.

These days the nature aficionado is spoilt for choice. Penguins, seals, koalas and mutton birds (shearwaters) comprise the holy quartet of Phillip Island wildlife and there is a dedicated wildlife corridor across the island. Every attraction is well signposted and it's easy to get around. Basing yourself in the main town of Cowes ensures you're never more than a 15-minute drive from the action.

Phillip Island has a good range of accommodation options as in summer the population swells from about 7000 to 40,000 with the annual holidaymaker invasion. Pick of the bunch is Glen Isla House, a boutique hotel/country house set

in a gracious garden close to the beach. As a bonus you'll encounter possibly the best breakfast you've ever eaten, cooked by host Ian Baker.

For “ooh-ah” value, the penguin parade is hard to beat. Every evening at a secluded cove thousands of little penguins “raft” off-shore, then waddle determinedly across the sand to nesting burrows in the cliffs. The open beach is where they're at greatest danger from predators like gulls and foxes, so they mass into battalions at the water's edge, then charge. Once across, they head for bed in single file, keeping up the penguin chitchat all the while. A well-organised, eco-sensitive viewing policy ensures penguins and punters are happy with the seating arrangements. Nonchalant about the proximity of their public, these mobile miniatures are a huge hit with the Asian tourists who comprise 80-90 per cent of the audience.

Equally wet and wild are the inhabitants of Seal Rocks. At the extreme western end of the island, The Nobbies are a jagged collection of rocks and home to Australia's largest fur seal colony. During breeding season, up to 16,000 of these slippery customers loll about, groom each other, bellow and posture (the bulls) and have swimming lessons (the pups).

The seal watcher has two choices. At The Nobbies marine centre perched on the barren, rocky cliffs you can learn all about the immediate marine environment and watch seals secretly through telescopes, or snap candid shots using remote-control cameras positioned on the rocks and under the water. The views over a roiling Bass Strait from the cliff-top boardwalk are powerful, as is the blowhole at high tide.

However, to really get amongst it seal-style, a cruise is the way to go. Wildlife Coast runs daily trips from Cowes Jetty on the *Kasey Lee*. On the outward leg we're escorted by a large pod of grey dolphins, at least 50 of them. They're on a mission, swimming with the tide and not too interested in performing for us. Impressive, nonetheless.

Two kilometres offshore, Seal Rocks loom bleak, windswept and wall-to-wall seal. The noise is intense – coughing and >



Koala in control



Penguins on parade



Churchill Island Heritage Farm



Nobbies Centre

barking, these guys don't believe in running silent. The smell is even more attention-grabbing: thousands of fish dinners processing. The adults eye us from their rocky sanctuary, but the pups, not as blasé about tourists, jump in and cavort around the boat en masse. It's a dangerous business, as sharks are on regular patrol. Fortunately, we witness no law-of-the-sea dramas and return to Cowes eco-sensitively sated.

At the Koala Conservation Centre we stroll the boardwalk at gumleaf level where koalas feed, groom and, of course, sleep. Accustomed to seeing these curious creatures from such a distance they look like someone's old jumper bundled on a branch, this is a rare treat. Staff even place signs to help the hopelessly unaware spot the sleepy beasts. The centre runs a breeding program in tandem with bush regeneration and welcomes some 130,000 curious marsupial groupies each year. The woodland walk could also lead to encounters with possums, wallabies, snakes and echidnas. Senior Ranger Ashley Reed gives us a hot tip on the 3 Parks Pass, which offers a substantial discount on admission to penguins, koalas and Churchill Island Heritage Farm, plus a handy map. ➤

SEE & DO
PENGUIN TOUR
(03) 5951 2830.

www.penguins.org.au
Any closer and you'd be pecked. Daily at sunset. No cameras, no startled birds.

SEAL ROCKS ADVENTURE

Wildlife Coast Cruises
1300 763 739. www.wildlifecoastcruises.com.au

Two-hour cruises depart Cowes Jetty daily November-April.

KOALA CONSERVATION CENTRE

Phillip Island Road, Cowes. (03) 5952 1307.

www.koalas.org.au
Raised boardwalks get you up koala-close. Open daily 10am-5pm.

NOBBIES CENTRE

Point Grant. (03) 5951 2800.
www.nobbies.org.au

Open daily 10am until one hour prior to sunset – so no penguins become road kill.

CHURCHILL ISLAND

Phillip Island Road, Newhaven. (03) 5956 7214. www.churchillisland.org.au

Heritage farm open daily 10am-4.30pm.

NATIONAL VIETNAM VETERANS MUSEUM

Veterans Drive, Newhaven. (03) 5956 6400. www.vietnamvetsmuseum.org

Memorabilia from Australia's longest war. Open daily 10am-5pm.

GRAND PRIX CIRCUIT

Back Beach Road, Cowes. (03) 5952 9400. www.phillipislandcircuit.com.au

The island has had a long association with motor racing. Check out the museum then have a hot lap or go go-kart crazy.

EAT & DRINK
THE FORESHORE

11 Beach Road, Rhyll. (03) 5956 9520.

www.theforeshore.com.au

Great view, ambience and food – the bangers and mash made with local beef, thyme and mustard seed are perfect with Phillip Island Vineyard The Nobbies pinot noir.

INFUSED

115 Thompson Avenue, Cowes. (03) 5952 2655.

The rib-eye steak is delicious, the absence of local wine curious.

GULLIVER'S

62-66 Thompsons Avenue, Cowes. (03) 5952 5070.

Upmarket fish and chips in the day, wine bar at night.

HARRY'S ON THE ESPLANADE

17 The Esplanade, Cowes. (03) 5952 6226.

Local meat, seafood and in-house bakery on the bay.

“ The grand prix circuit is surprisingly tranquil without the racing machinery



The Island Food Store



Anderson Cottage at Glen Isla House

WINE & PRODUCE

PHILLIP ISLAND VINEYARD & WINERY
414 Berrys Beach Road, Ventnor. (03) 5956 8465. www.phillipislandwines.com.au

PURPLE HEN WINES
96 McFees Road, Rhyll. (03) 5956 9244. www.purplehenwines.com.au

THE ISLAND FOOD STORE
Shop 4/75 Chapel Street, Cowes. (03) 5952 6400.
 Pasta, boutique beer, oils and chocolate.

ISLAND PRIMARY PRODUCE
511 Ventnor Road, Ventnor. (03) 5956 8107.
 Happy meat from paddock to plate. Also herbs, some organic fruit and veg. Closed Tue & Sun.

STAY

GLEN ISLA HOUSE
230-232 Church Street, Cowes. (03) 5952 1882. www.glenisla.com
 Stylish, secluded, just don't try booking during the MotoGP weekend when the Ducati team sets up camp. From \$265.

ALL SEASONS ECO RESORT
2128 Phillip Island Road, Cowes. (03) 5952 8000. www.theislandecoresort.com.au
 Luxury studios and villas from \$120.

HILL OF CONTENT
33 Rhyll-Newhaven Road, Rhyll. (03) 5956 0100. www.thehillofcontent.com.au
 Luxurious couples' retreat in sleepy seaside village. From \$185.

Wildlife-wise, three out of four is our score, as the mutton birds only visit between October and April. They have a rookery in the sand dunes at Cape Woolamai at the eastern tip of the island, where they chill out after flying in from Alaska and Japan. It's a two-hour walk from Woolamai Beach to the Cape, at 109m the highest point on the island. Other good walking tracks include Rhyll Inlet, where a boardwalk trek through paperbark woodland and mangroves gets you into the wetland environment, home to a Noah's Ark of migratory birds.

If you're natured out, it's probably time to hit the beach. There are 26 to choose from. On the sheltered north side, swimming, kayaking, sailing and fishing are the go. The south coast is more rugged: black rock cliffs, minimal vegetation and wild surf. It's one of the more consistent Australian surf spots (the Roxy Pro is held here in January) and you can usually find a sheltered break to tackle.

Island hop over to Churchill Island. Farmed continuously since the 1850s, this island is a chance to travel back in time. Wander about the restored heritage homestead and its gardens, meeting assorted animals – and colonial farming types if the local historical society is having a dress-up day. Every Easter there's a Working Horse Festival where Clydesdales strut their stuff – and also a farmers' market on the fourth Saturday of every month. A stroll around the island will probably necessitate a restorative pit stop at the cafe.

Speaking of pit stops, check out the grand prix circuit back on the big isle – home to the Australian Motorcycle Grand Prix and the Superbike Championship. The big V8s are also known to visit. It's surprisingly tranquil without the racing machinery. Explore the circuit or the motor racing memorabilia museum, book a few "hot laps" in an HSV Holden, or get your thrills closer to the ground racing SLR performance go-karts at 120km/h – an awesome experience.

Just as awesome is the National Vietnam Veterans Museum. The military gear – tanks, Huey Cobra helicopter gunships, artillery – and memorabilia are impressive; more so are the quiet reminiscences of the war veteran guides.

Refuelling is paramount. Several good restaurants use the best local and Gippsland produce and have access to seafood straight off the boat. Local wineries produce award-winning wines. What better way to end the weekend than munching on gourmet cheese, sipping a glass of pinot and inhaling that ocean-fresh air at Phillip Island Vineyard? Nice. 🌐

📍 www.visitphillipisland.com; www.phillipislanddirect.com
Australian Motorcycle Grand Prix, Phillip Island, October 12-14. For details check out bikes.grandprix.com.au

✈️ **For airfares call Qantas on 13 13 13 or visit qantas.com. For holiday packages to Victoria call [Qantas Holidays](http://QantasHolidays.com) on 13 14 15.**