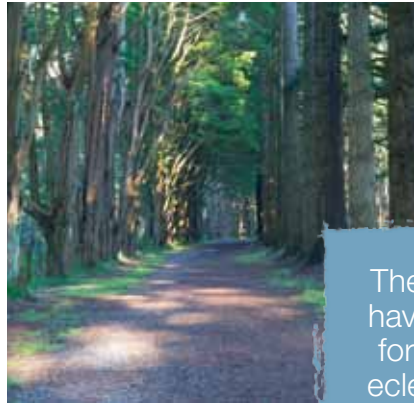
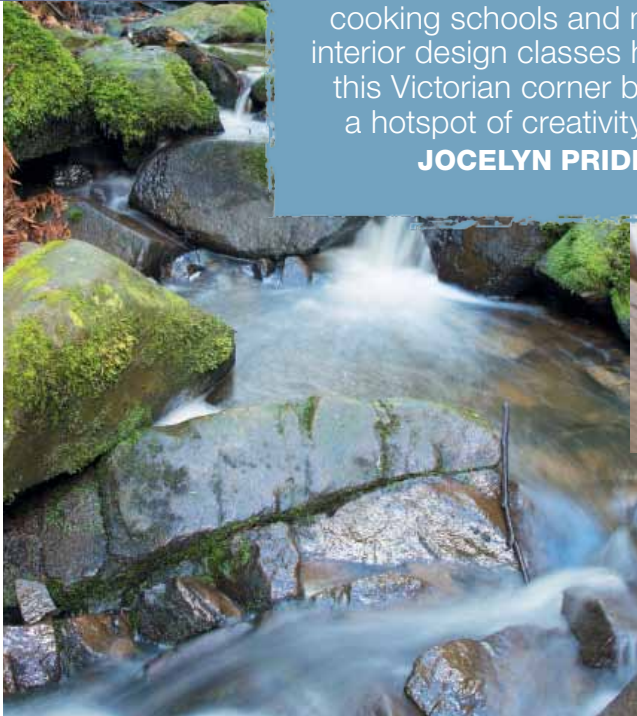


Introducing: *Your next weekend*



The pretty Dandenong Ranges have long been a quick escape for Melburnians. Now a rise in eclectic eateries, contemporary cooking schools and modern interior design classes has seen this Victorian corner become a hotspot of creativity, says

JOCELYN PRIDE



Rolling hills of fertile chocolatey soil, dense temperate rainforests, teeming populations of wildlife, the Dandenong Ranges (that's 'the Dandenongs' for short, not to be confused with Melbourne suburb Dandenong) has been a place of abundance since the Bunurong and Woiworung people first began hunting here, in summers long ago. Settling Europeans recognised its lure too, its tall timber trees an attractive proposition for nearby booming 1840s Melbourne town. By the turn of the 20th century the Dandenongs had attracted yet another group – Melbourne's artists, poets, musicians and dreamers, who turned it into what it is today. Visit and you'll find charming cottages, the smells of baking, and romantic names like Olinda, Sassafra, Kallista and Emerald (monikers of the small, European-flavoured villages here), which dot the map between the area's 35 square-kilometres of national parks.

But for all its small-town charms, there are big things happening in this little enclave. We won't call it an awakening – the creative set took care of that long ago – but there's a renewal underway; one of those cyclical revivals that seem to happen in towns where tastemakers congregate. Vue de Monde culinary mastermind Shannon Bennett didn't start the trend, but his new sustainable hotel/upscale restaurant/casual café and eatery project, currently underway on the heritage Burnham Beeches property, has certainly cemented the movement's presence – especially now that stage one of the venture is well and truly up and running. But more on that in a moment. >>





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What is there to do here?

Aside from eating? Plenty. With more than 250 kilometres of marked trails traversing the lush forests there's a myriad of hikes here, for every level of fitness. For the ultimate workout, the **1000 steps** is more than a steep five-kilometre climb through a dense rainforest. Also known as the Kokoda Memorial Walk, it's a poignant reminder of the terrain Aussie soldiers endured in PNG during the Second World War.

If you left your gym gear at home or just want an easy stroll, the 2.4-kilometre **Sherbrooke Forest Falls** trail is the sentimental choice. Home of the mountain ash, Australia's largest tree species, the grandeur of this forest is overwhelming. Colourful bark hangs from the trunks of majestic trees up to 100 metres tall, with the vivid green of the ferny understorey. Although not high, the falls themselves are impressive, especially after rain. This is also one of the best places in Australia to see our 10 cent icon – the superb lyrebird (and for the younger readers among us, yes, that's its actual name). As a total contrast if you're into formal gardens, there's plenty on offer. One of the most popular

is **Cloudehill** in Olinda. Wandering the series of walled outdoor 'garden rooms' is beautiful at anytime of year, but two highlights are the Japanese maples in autumn and the daffodil glade in spring. The indoor/outdoor Seasons at Cloudehill restaurant overlooks the gardens and serves scrummy breakfasts and lunches.

Meanwhile, Billy Connolly called **William Ricketts Sanctuary** at Mt Dandenong 'the most impressive thing I've seen in Australia'. A place of tranquillity, the 90 life-sized clay sculptures hidden amongst the ferns was the life work of artist William Ricketts. Meticulous in detail, each figure is based on a real person and reflects the importance of the environment in Aboriginal culture.

And, even if dangling your legs over the side of an open sided train carriage doesn't appeal, you must at least see (and hear) Australia's oldest steam train. For more than 100 years **Puffing Billy** has puffed its way along the same mountain track from Belgrave to Gembrook. The historic Trestle Bridge in Belgrave is a great vantage point and each year, thousands of runners try to beat the train in the 13.5-kilometre Great Train Race.

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The best of the plates

After the best sleep you'll have had in a while, you'll want to experience what you came for: the food. With market gardens and orchards scattered throughout the region or the nearby Yarra Valley, the fresh produce here bursts with flavour and is low in food miles. Start at **The Deli Platter** in Mt Dandenong village, where everything is made locally. Specialising in 'real wholesome food' including tarts, small goods, artisan breads and cheeses, it's great for food intolerances and complements the fruit and veg next door at the **Organic Fanatic**. Finish with a stop at one of the area's roadside stalls and you've got yourself the makings of a perfect, low-key meal.

But if you want to eat out, well you are well and truly sorted. No less than three big-name Melbourne foodies have made the recent move to this area, and with the area's 'Europe among

the gum trees' reputation we suspect it's more than coincidence that they're all French.

The perfect start to your day would be at aforementioned chef Shannon Bennett's \$65 million project – the renewal of **Burnham Beeches**, a local icon and lavish, three-storey Art Deco mansion and surrounding gardens built in 1933 (by the founding family of Aspro, incidentally). Stage one, the **Burnham Bakery** and **Piggery Café**, is set in an old pigsty, opened last year, and it's the kind of provincial setting where hay bales meet marble, the wait staff dress in chequered shirts and the car park is full by 9am. The indoor/outdoor café overlooks the work-in-progress idyllic country scene – a bowling green, croquet lawn, vegetable garden, truffiere (with 500 French Oak trees thriving on the rich soil), and a bunch of rescued emus, who provide large 'golden' green eggs for the revered 'emu egg sponge cake'. When the reported 'six-star' accommodation is added, part of the grand plan is for guests to experience something money can't buy – digging in the garden, lending a hand in the bakery or even taking a resident dog to hunt for truffles. And there'll be a reward for hard work – a reduction of the bill. The café serves food all day, every day. For breakfast, don't miss the cassoulet with corn fritters and for lunch try the melt-in-your-mouth pork belly BLT with a glass of wine from a nearby Yarra Valley vineyard.

If you'd prefer to start your day off crowd-free,

head to **The General Food Store** in Emerald. Small in size but big in *The Age Good Food* accolades, husband-and-wife/chef-and-graphic designer team Paul and Belinda Douglas craft their monthly menu based on what's in season. With quirky pardon-the-pun dish names like Peachy Keen (the type of honey-roasted juicy peaches you don't mind dribbling down your chin), Heading South (eggs with the works including chilli jam), and Grab a Granny (as in apple granola with rhubarb swimming in pistachio yoghurt), the menu is as creative as the food. The café caters perfectly for food intolerances and is committed to stepping lightly on the earth – check out the worm farm in the courtyard.

If you're game to eat lunch after that, **Ranges** in Olinda is the place to go. Head chef Garth Talbot is another foodie with a background in French cuisine (and the requisite pedigree in Melbourne hospitality, having served his time at long-standing icon Koots Salle a Manger), and his new venture – while casual – serves a serious range of food in a lovely leafy setting. >>

Dandenong Ranges

Lunch or not, you'll probably welcome a 2pm pick-me-up. When it comes to coffee, every region needs a best-kept secret and here, it's **Café de Beaumarchais** in Sassafras. Blink and you may walk past it, but please don't: inside you'll find a chic bistro atmosphere of gold picture frames, darkened walls, dramatic chandeliers and oak tables. Four years ago when passionate Francophiles Neil and Lisa Harvey revamped the street's oldest standing building to 'bring a touch of Paris to Sassafras', they knew their timing was right – the café was quickly adopted by local caffeine connoisseurs and consequently deemed a 'Top Cafe of 2013' by *beanhunters.com* (a feat all the more impressive when you consider the competition was all Melbourne-based). The food is good, sure, but the cake selection is exquisite – éclair with espresso cream and hazelnut praline, white Lindt chocolate and lime cheesecake. As for the coffee, well it's fair trade and beautifully made, but what's even better is the Parisian hot chocolate. Here's the mental picture: pure melted chocolate in a cup with a bit of milk. Now add a croissant on the side for dunking. Total indulgence.

And the French connection continues into the night. For a nice dinner out, **Le Voltaire Bistro Francais** in Belgrave – which only sprung up last June – is the type of place you wish just opened in your neighbourhood. That's how locals feel about this cute little restaurant, owned by newcomer Jean-Noel Langlet, who moved here after 20-odd years as *the* waiter at Melbourne institution, France-Soir. Offering all the Gallic classics (with a few Australian twists), his menu mightn't win any awards for boundary-pushing, but it has won a legion of fans – advance bookings are in permanent order on weekends. Expect all the favourites – boeuf bourguignon, canard à l'orange, oysters shucked in front of you and, of course, snails – but with in-house churned butter, bread made from scratch and a well-balanced wine list of new- and old-world styles. Much like the area itself, actually.



Where to stay?

Being so close to Melbourne, the area is renowned for its collection of ultimate city-dwellers' escapes – particularly its beautifully renovated cottages. High in the treetops is **Lochiel Cottages** (from \$350 per night) which, though located in the heart of Olinda, is hidden in two hectares of rainforest. With a 'no lace' policy, the contemporary, tri-level timber cottages bring the outside in on every level, from sitting on the balcony listening to an orchestra of birds or soaking in the large spa to relaxing in front of the open fire. Owned by local Alan Olney, the tariff also includes breakfast at his popular Ranges restaurant nearby.

Also in Olinda is snuggle-up-in-front-of-the-hearth **Wild Orchid** (from \$460 for a two-night stay). Nestled in the trees, the exterior is straight out of a fairytale and the surprisingly spacious interior is elegant, but super cosy. Expect to be spoilt by mother-and-daughter team, Delyse and Samantha Jenkins with a generous grazing platter and bubbly on arrival, a fridge bursting with local provisions for breakfast and complimentary slippers waiting by the front door. The upstairs bedroom is dreamy – white-washed wooden walls and vaulted ceiling with a stylish sleigh bed, swimming with pillows – and a private deck looks into the trees. There's even a telescope set up for stargazing.

And for a splash-out **The Blackwood**, a one-bedroom luxurious retreat in gorgeous Sassafras (from \$310 per night) is the stand-out. Owned by Melbourne interior designer Justin Bishop, The Blackwood's combination of contemporary design and the traditional setting takes country living to another level. Each nook and cranny of the spacious lounge, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom and private deck looks and, more importantly, feels just right. Elegant vintage furniture and quirky collectables blend with the indulgences you'd expect in a five-star escape – Nespresso coffee machine, fluffy bathrobes, complimentary slippers, free wi-fi, gourmet mini bar, full size hairdryer, large spa. If you fall in love with The Blackwood (and you will), Justin runs styling design workshops throughout the year and also offers home consultations – so you too can live the country lifestyle of the Dandenongs. ■



HOW TO GET THERE

As the Dandenong Ranges is only 47 kilometres south-east of Melbourne, it takes less than an hour from the CBD or a little more from the airport. Once off the highway you'll head uphill, breathe in the fresh mountain air and hear the laughter of kookaburras. Covering a large area, the region takes in many villages like Ferntree Gully, Sassafras, Olinda, Belgrave, Monbulk, Emerald, Kallista and Kalorama. It's also easily accessed by metro train and there's a regular bus service linking the villages.