

{ DESTINATION AUSTRALIA }

Worth the detours

The signage is woeful in Victoria's Macedon Ranges but there's much to discover and enjoy

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IT'S Valentine's Day 1900 and a party of students from an exclusive Melbourne finishing school is picnicking at Hanging Rock in Victoria's Macedon Ranges. By day's end, three girls and a young teacher are missing, lost deep in the rock, never to be seen again.

Joan Lindsay's famous novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, immortalised in film by director Peter Weir, has long haunted Australians. Fact or fiction? Did the ethereal Miranda and her friends exist or were they a figment of Lindsay's fertile imagination? It remains a mystery, but in the late '80s Weir said cryptically, "Joan Lindsay would never say whether it was true or not and the newspaper files of the day tell of no such tragedy... the not knowing was what the story was all about."

I never believed Lindsay's haunting tale but I'm beginning to doubt my own conclusions. I am lost in the Macedon Ranges and, perhaps as Miranda did more than a century ago, am starting to wonder whether I'll ever find my way out.

Things are already getting tense in the car, which carries no road atlas; the hire company has decided all one needs is a GPS device, which in our case has inconveniently gone up the gash. My friend and I have just left The Village Larder cafe on the main street of Woodend and are keen to see Hanging Rock before checking into our accommodation about 20 minutes' drive to the northeast. But with nary a road sign to be found, despite the rock's international fame, it's proving difficult. In fact, tourist directions of any kind are as rare as hen's teeth.

Everybody seems to know everybody in Kyneton and the locals are friendly

Admittedly there are many worse places to be lost than this beautiful region 40 minutes north of Melbourne; but our displaced state will be a familiar feeling this weekend. After a quick glimpse of the rock (we find it eventually), we drive right past Rochford Lodge's unimpressive front gate. "Everybody does that," says owner Greg Ashmore, once we've retraced our route.

Our mood lifts when he opens the door of The Old School House, a rural classroom built in 1879 and painstakingly converted by Ashmore and wife Sarah into a chic romantic escape for two, featuring white linen bedding, an open fire, overstuffed sofas and a kitchenette stocked with an espresso machine, wine, chocolate and breakfast provisions.

It's a beautiful and cosy nest, as is the adjacent Principal's Residence, a three-bedroom French provincial-style getaway.

Rochford Lodge is an excellent base from which to explore Macedon wine country and there is just time to pop into nearby Curly Flat vineyard before the day is out. Again, finding it does not prove easy; we eventually come to a T-junction with signs pointing left and right. "Eureka!" I yell, before my myopic eyes focus and I realise the signs read simply "winery" in both directions.

We make the wrong turn, doubling back and driving at a snail's pace to look for even the smallest of clues as to Curly Flat's whereabouts.

It's a terrific winery, as it turns out, even if it likes to hide its light under a bushel. Jeni Moragaban, who runs the place with her ex-husband Philip, talks us through some of the vineyard's best drops and I am immediately smitten by Chewbacca, 10kg of ginger cat that I initially mistook for a dog. Chewbacca is a permanent fixture and looks forward to collar-doe handlings and the prospect of someone to fuss over him. I imagine he must be in his element when guest chefs arrive to hold wine lunches at the impressive 26-seat Nicholas Dattler table that runs the length of the tasting room.

Piper Street, in nearby Kyneton, is one of the best ex-

amples of the flourishing food scene in the ranges. In the past two years the former route to the Victorian goldfields has been transformed into a destination restaurant strip.

Annie Southern Bistro, run by the sunny Southern, is much lauded and she is planning to open a small bar in the premises soon. Sprung up around her are many new kids on the block, including Mr Cassis, run by husband-and-wife team Clare and Matt Fegan. The Fegans fell in love with Middle Eastern food during their travels and their well-executed menu features a great baker's lamb kebab and an even better Turkish delight semifreddo sandwich dessert.

The Fegans are no strangers to the area, having worked at the Royal George Hotel on the opposite side of the street. This pub should be the envy of any hotelier and its cosy and eclectic bar is the perfect place for a glass of local wine or a boutique beer before dinner or somewhere to make a night of it with friends. Haven't got any? No problem; everybody seems to know everybody in this town and the locals are friendly.

The Royal George also has a good restaurant, headed by chef Patrick Dang, fresh from a stint at Shanghai's celebrated 78 restaurant, who turns out an accomplished menu in one of the most elegant dining rooms in town.

Equally enjoyable is the rustic Dhuba at the Mill Indian restaurant where chef Jassi Singh is currently looking over a long-vacant floor mill and turned it into one of the social hubs of the neighbourhood. But if you want to try Punjab-born Singh's food, get there early. No bookings are taken and Singh often runs out of curry by 8pm.

A number of eclectic shops have popped up, the latest being the buzzing Stockroom, a well-curated mix of art, design and fashion from more than 100 local creatives. Owners Jason Waterhouse and Magali Gentric used to own Wolf at the Door in nearby Hepburn Springs but moved to this new space, eager to be part of the Piper Street pods. Stockroom is housed in a former bottle factory and is enclosed, its oversized light fittings fashioned from old wood barrels. A rabbit warren of smooch rooms out the back have been turned into artists' studios.

The couple also wants to introduce live music gigs and could do worse than ripping down to the John Lloyd Gallery a few doors away for some inspiration; artist Lloyd is a former drummer with *kybouse* and *flowers*.

We spy two of Lloyd's paintings on the wall at the elegant Circa 1880, the terraced guesthouse on Piper Street at which we stay for our second night and from which we can see Kabsnett, another shopper's paradise, sporting an eclectic arrangement of treasures from Bulgarian posters to old theatre seats, maps and vintage children's books.

Once shopping fatigue sets in, I head for a thoroughly divine massage at Tanya Fairweather Beauty Therapy & Massage at No. 26, before reluctantly contemplating the trip home. As we load up the car, we begin chatting to the affable Lindy Priest, owner of the street's Macedon Ranges Interiors store.

"We've loved it here, we tell her, but are intrigued as to why it's such an effort to find anything around these parts.

Are the locals trying to keep their good fortune to themselves?"

On the contrary. "We've been pleading with council to improve the signage to Piper Street and to the region in general and have had a document with them for consideration for five years," the exasperated shop-owner says. Here's hoping the slow winds of bureaucracy will not impede a speedy ride for the Macedon Ranges to the top of the next trendy destinations list.

Michelle Rowe was a guest of Tourism Victoria.
• visitvictoria.com/macedonranges
• rochfordlodge.com



Hanging Rock looms over an old farmhouse and prime grazing paddocks



The Old School House, now a chic romantic escape



Local art and design on display in Stockroom



Kyneton's Kabsnett sports an eclectic range of treasures