

GREAT OCEAN WALKING

Feel like communing with nature – and getting fit too? **Carrie Hutchinson** might have just the adventurous holiday for you

BY THE TIME we descend to Johanna Beach everyone is exhausted. “From here, we have to walk through soft sand,” guide Mike Howell tells us. Everyone stares at him in disbelief.

“It’s only about 500 metres, though,” our leader adds. Turns out, he’s lying. But telling a group of tired hikers the truth – that they have to trudge 2km further before the day’s hike is truly over – might just make them sink their heels into that soft sand and refuse to go further.

We’re approaching the end of day two of the Great Ocean Walk, which covers almost 100km of Victorian coastline, from Apollo Bay to Glenample Homestead, just short of the Twelve Apostles. When we’d started at Blanket Bay on Friday we’d been promised vistas not visible to motorists.

The sheer beauty of Johanna Beach and the surroundings is enough to keep us going through that sand – for a while, anyway. This has to be one of the whitest, wildest stretches of beach in the country. The waves make a sound like thunder as they tip onto the sand, and you quickly come to realise why it’s recommended that people don’t swim here. Not that you would anyway: a quick wade into the cold shallows is enough to cause anyone’s feet to numb. Our boot-sore ones, especially. >>

The Great Ocean Walk offers this spectacular view from the track leaving Johanna Beach – overlooking Milanesia Beach



A breathtaking view of the Twelve Apostles (top); the author, Carrie Hutchinson – back row, fifth from the left – with her fellow track-weary walkers (above)

Today, we've covered 22km of ground: little of it was flat; most of it wound through sand dunes, up hills, around coastal cliffs, to the Aire River. The entire day was like a sightseeing tour with

spectacular views around every corner and over each hill.

Now the only view I want to see is a big plate of carb-packed pasta, followed swiftly by a hot shower and a pillow. Thankfully, RAW Travel has not only been walking with us, they've also sorted that side of our trip. For two nights we're staying in cabins at Bimbi Park, near Cape Otway.

Bimbi's catchphrase is "camping under koalas" and it's obvious why. The grounds are surrounded by gum trees and in many of them a fat-bottomed ball of grey fluff has taken up residence. There are so many koalas that the novelty of spotting them almost wears off.

Dinner is scoffed down and eyelids start to flutter not long after darkness falls. No doubt about it, the Great Ocean Walk is a challenge even for the fittest in our group. The sustained exertion required to tackle all those hills, plus the length of each day, means muscles tighten and energy flags. Despite plenty of rest breaks and the freedom to travel at our own pace (there's a guide at the front and back of our small group), it's a journey not to be taken lightly.

Day one took us from Blanket Bay, past the Parkers River inlet, and on to Cape Otway, site of a magnificent lighthouse – in all, a total of 13km.

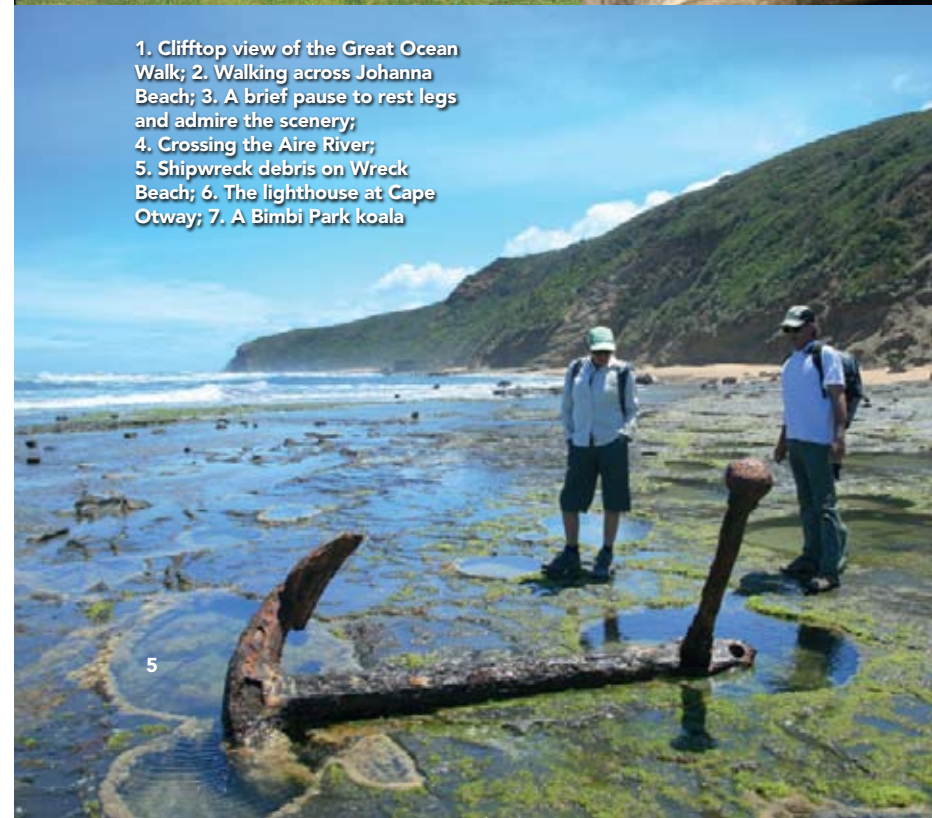
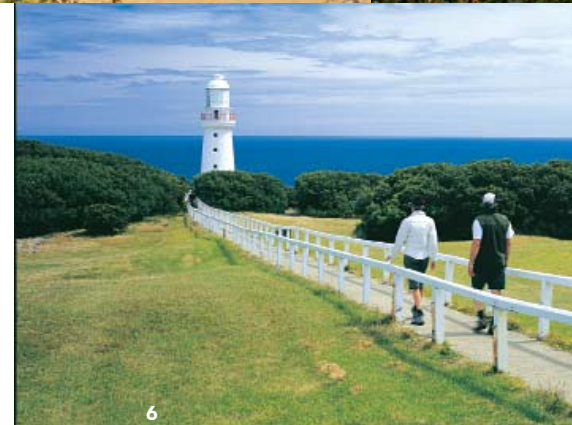
Along the way we'd met historian Mark Bracks, who fed us dried kelp and told us about the scores of ships lost between this coastline and King Island. "Right here," Mark told us, "ships used to come in to drop off supplies for Cape Otway." We all looked at the narrow distance at the mouth of the river and the huge, pounding waves. And this was a calm day. "In 1896, a supply boat from the *Lady Loch* capsized here [in Blanket Bay in the Cape Otway region] and three men drowned." No wonder this area is also known as the Shipwreck Coast.

It's day three, with the sun still low in the sky, and we've already done what feels like a week's exercise. It seems like we've been struggling uphill for days – slipping in mud, gasping for breath – rather than the hour or so that is the reality. Finally we pause and look back. "Wow, we just walked all that way," I say to no-one in particular, surveying the landscape.

Behind us, green hills dotted with dairy cows roll back down to the wild ocean. The sun is out, the weather is beautiful and, aching legs notwithstanding, I am engulfed by a strong sense of achievement. I've done it – and lived to tell the tale. ✦

RAW Travel organises three- and seven-day journeys along the Great Ocean Walk throughout the year, including accommodation, meals, guides and support vehicles. For details call 1300 208 245, or visit www.rawtravel.com, www.greatoceanwalk.com.au or www.greatoceanrd.org.au.

PHOTOS: CARRIE HUTCHINSON; PARKS VICTORIA, WWW.GREATOCEANWALK.COM.AU



1. Clifftop view of the Great Ocean Walk; 2. Walking across Johanna Beach; 3. A brief pause to rest legs and admire the scenery; 4. Crossing the Aire River; 5. Shipwreck debris on Wreck Beach; 6. The lighthouse at Cape Otway; 7. A Bimbi Park koala