



VICTORIA

Portarlington

Bellarine bound

Tim Richards takes a not-so-slow boat to laid-back Portarlington to savour the spoils of the Victorian coast >>





To me, nowhere seems more “unMelbourne” than Docklands, the city’s modern waterside suburb that wraps around the Yarra River and former docks.

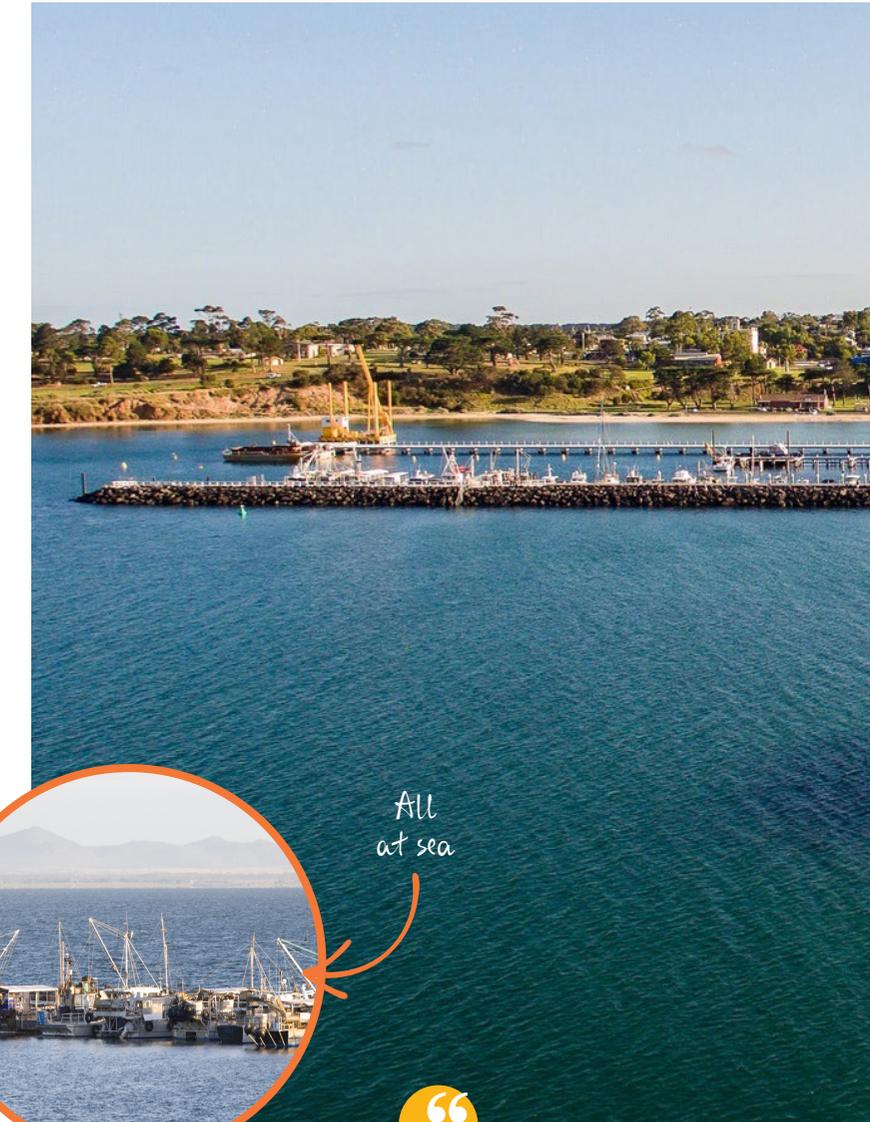
Melbourne is associated with gritty laneways, Victorian-era buildings and colourful street art. By contrast, Docklands is shiny new office buildings, and luxury apartments with sleek private yachts moored nearby.

It’s here I’ll be casting off for the 90-minute cruise to Portarlington, on the Bellarine Peninsula at the southwest end of Port Phillip Bay. The vessel, a two-deck 400-seater operated by Port Phillip Ferries, serves commuters heading to their Melbourne offices during the week. But at weekends its schedule is well suited to daytrippers wanting a break in the other direction.

Once I reach Portarlington, I’ll have four hours to enjoy the attractions of the town and peninsula, which include beaches, wineries and the famous Portarlington mussels harvested from the bay. In the meantime, however, there’s a cruise to enjoy – and it comes in two distinct sections.

The first, a leisurely progression down the Yarra River threading through Melbourne’s massive working port. The open rear deck is the place to be as we head downstream, past huge moored ships and beneath the impressive Bolte Bridge and West Gate Bridge.

As we pass from the river into the bay, I spot Williamstown’s historic Timeball Tower, from whose mast a ball was once dropped daily to signal 1pm. Then the ferry picks up



All at sea

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speed, carving through the waves past smaller vessels out fishing.

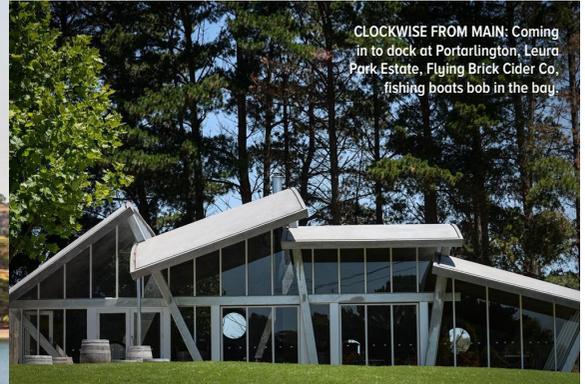
The water is so calm, with tiny wavelets breaking softly in the breeze, that I ask one of the crew members if it ever gets rough out here.

“Not often,” he says. “But about once a month, it can slosh around like a washing machine.”

Luckily that’s not happening today. Between strolls on the deck to take photos and breathe in the fresh air, I settle into my window seat and soak up the view.

The open rear deck is the place to be as we head downstream, past huge moored ships





CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN: Coming in to dock at Portarlington, Leura Park Estate, Flying Brick Cider Co. fishing boats bob in the bay.

PHOTOGRAPHY FLYING BRICK CIDER CO., VISIT VICTORIA, LEURA PARK ESTATE

landmark Grand Hotel, built in 1888 with an imposing three-storey facade. It's a good place for a quiet beer or pub meal, inside its old-school interiors or beer garden.

Nearby is Saints & Sailors, a lively, informal eatery with bay views. It hosts regular live music gigs, and diners sit close to the music, so there's an energetic vibe when a band is in the house.

But today I'm heading inland, courtesy of a Wine Wheels minibus tour. The Bellarine Peninsula is known for its vineyards, so this tour company meets the ferry four times a week to take visitors for a tasting tour and lunch.

The locations vary depending on the day. Today driver Grant is zipping our six tour members over the hilly countryside to visit our first port of call, the cellar door of Flying Brick Cider Co., its tables packed with lunching locals.

Though it also serves local wine, Flying Brick is best known for its cider. Barman Matthew deftly manages to run two parallel sets of tastings, as half our group fancies the wine while the other wants to try the alcoholic apple beverages.

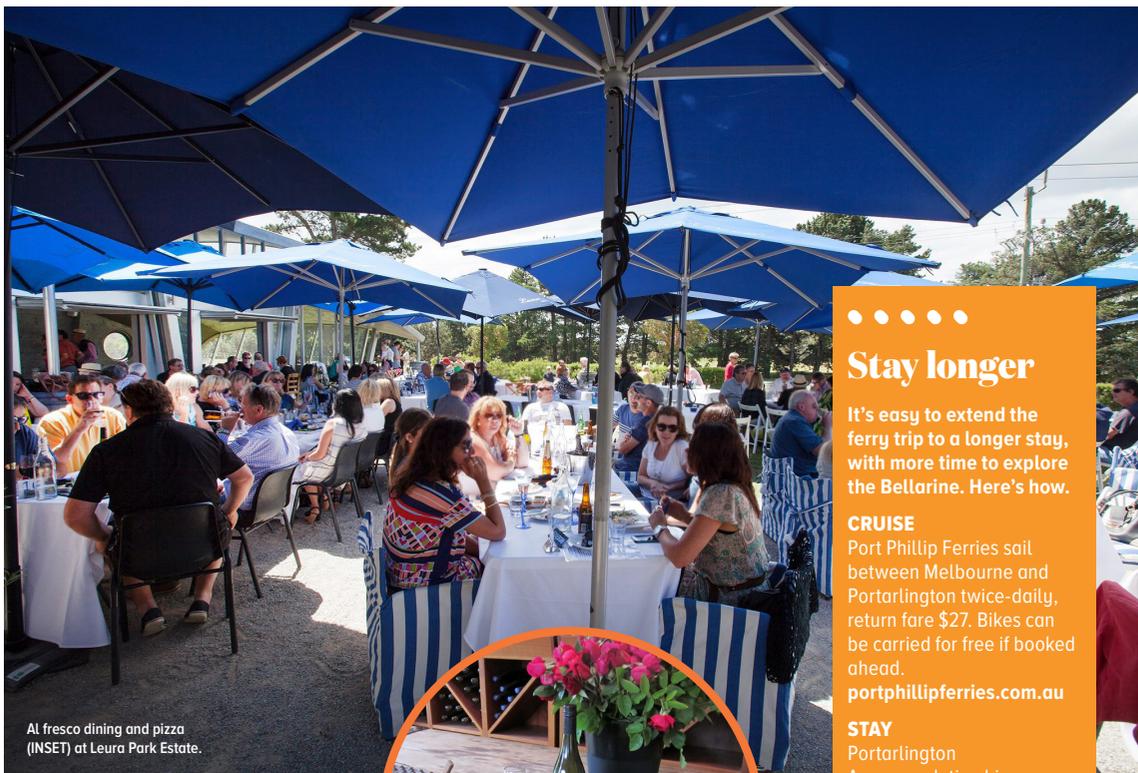
I'm in the cider faction, and we're soon enjoying samples. The Flying Brick Original (made from Pink Lady and Granny Smith apples) is popular, but our overall favourite »

Stepping from Portarlington Pier onto dry land, I see Rockwall just back from the water. This restaurant serves breakfast and lunch, with the midday menu featuring local seafood. A highlight is Portarlington Mussels, "fresh from the pier".

These molluscs are also the stars each January of the popular Portarlington Mussel Festival (13 January), which combines food stalls and live entertainment.

Up the slope from the harbour on the town's main street is the





Al fresco dining and pizza (INSET) at Leura Park Estate.

is the Pachinga, which contains no apple at all; rather it's a feisty blend of pear, chilli, ginger and lime.

Then, we're back on the bus and off to Leura Park Estate. Its cellar door is a beautiful space, with tables decked out in blue and white cloth beneath umbrellas on a stretch of lawn. Our group has become quite chatty, and we compare notes as waiters bustle around our table, bringing impressive antipasto plates and the first of our wine tastings.

One of the gang tells me she's a regular user of the ferry as she catches it to Melbourne on weekdays, followed by a tram ride to her office. Today, though, she's doing the wine tour to catch up with friends in a laid-back setting.

We drink a toast to friendship with the second of the wines and my favourite, a sparkling pinot chardonnay, which seems made for a hot sunny day.



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We drink a toast to friendship with the second of the wines

A set of flavoursome pizzas and a few more tastings later, our tour draws to a close and Grant reappears to drive us back to Portarlington.

The ferry ride home is just as pleasant, but I'm not as active. Full of food, wine and sunshine, I'm happy to recline in my seat and watch the water slip by. ✈️

Tim Richards travelled courtesy of Tourism Greater Geelong & The Bellarine.

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Stay longer

It's easy to extend the ferry trip to a longer stay, with more time to explore the Bellarine. Here's how.

CRUISE
Port Phillip Ferries sail between Melbourne and Portarlington twice-daily, return fare \$27. Bikes can be carried for free if booked ahead.
portphillipferries.com.au

STAY
Portarlington Accommodation hires out holiday homes, including renovated cottages in the centre of town.
portarlington-accommodation.com.au

TOUR
Wine Wheels operates regular wine tasting tours.
winewheels.com.au

FERGOS BONGO TOURS
tailors tours to farm doors and wineries, some via an electric tuk-tuk.
fergosebongotours.com

BELLA E-BIKE
hires out electric bicycles at Portarlington Pier.
bellaebikehire.com.au

Travel info

Jetstar has great low fares to Melbourne and Avalon from across the network and extensive car hire options.

To book, visit JETSTAR.COM