



Travel

A break away hit

No longer the place tourists bypass on the way to the Great Ocean Road, Geelong is a fun, hip destination in its own right, plus a gateway to the indulgent Bellarine Peninsula.

WORDS *by* SUSAN HORSBURGH



As the sun rises over Geelong's Eastern Beach, I stroll along the esplanade, crossing paths with a clown, a mayor and a bevy of bathing beauties, all before breakfast. The two-hour-long Bollard Trail might be old news to locals – the quirky 100-plus painted-pylon sculptures of historic Geelong figures have stood sentry along the shoreline for three decades – but to newcomers they're a delightful introduction to the bayside city's colourful past.

No longer a manufacturing powerhouse, Geelong has reinvented itself. The factories have shut down, but Victoria's second city is booming as Melburnians flock to the Bellarine Peninsula, lured by cheaper homes, beaches and a more relaxed pace of life. With the "Gee-changers" have come funky bars and eateries, creating cosmopolitan pockets and more tourist appeal, making G-Town and surrounds an excellent weekend getaway.

Historic & happening

Despite the facelift, Geelong hasn't forgotten its past. Take North Geelong's Federal Mills, near the Spirit of Tasmania's new home base (services start on October 23): the red-brick boiler house that once powered the woollen mills where



World War I military uniforms were made has found new life as 1915. It's a split-level restaurant with sensational Mediterranean-inspired food (don't miss the ancient-grain salad) and a major wow factor, thanks to its soaring vaulted ceiling and century-old curios. Next door at Anther Distillery you can meet the 300-litre still, "Arnie", and taste the Geelong Dry Gin, flavoured with salt bush foraged from the nearby shoreline.

For a shot of Geelong history, visit the CBD's National Wool Museum, a restored 1872 bluestone wool store now showing works by local Wadawurrung artist Deanne Gilson, then the Geelong Gallery, home to Frederick McCubbin's *A Bush Burial*. And if you prefer your history with a side of action, try stand-up paddleboarding at family-friendly Eastern Beach, with its Art Deco-era boardwalk and sea baths, built almost



Clockwise from below: The National Wool Museum; Federal Mills' restaurant 1915 features vaulted ceilings; sculptures on the Bollard Trail; Geelong Cellar Door.



a century ago. These days it's a summer hot spot for locals, who picnic on the lawns or grab a smashed avo at the heritage-listed Pavilion, while their kids paddle in the beachside swimming pool.

After sunset, the epicentre of Geelong cool is Little Malop Street, where Geelong Cellar Door showcases

hundreds of Bellarine wines in a cosy, Parisian-style setting. I have a glass of 2017 Oakdene Yvette Vintage Sparkling, which hails from a local Wallington winery, before heading to Felix, a relaxed fine-dining restaurant with a modern French menu starring succulent slow-cooked pork belly. Afterwards, a nightcap at The 18th Amendment Bar is a must. Hidden up creaky stairs and modelled on a 1920s speak-easy, the dimly lit bar boasts cocktails such as Patsy's Punch, with theatrical touches of smoke bubbles and liquid nitrogen.

It's in the 'burbs, though, that Geelong breaks new gastronomic ground, with Splatters in Pakington Street, the only cheese train in Australia. "Cheese your own adventure," says owner Jo Bangles, as 20 varieties snake by on a conveyor belt, but take it from me: don't pass up the camel feta.

Beautiful Bellarine

After 24 hours – and about 24,000 calories – in Geelong, it's time to go beyond the city limits to sample the charms of the Bellarine. The ideal base is Portarlington, a sleepy fishing village that's been revitalised by the multimillion-dollar renovation of its 1888 landmark hotel. At nearby Jack Rabbit Vineyard, enjoy lunch with a jaw-dropping panoramic view of Port Phillip Bay, or stop by Terindah Estate for a similarly scenic afternoon tinkle in its W-class tram-turned-wine bar. To taste premium cool-climate wines, settle in at Scotchmans Hill's farmhouse cellar door or buy a picnic box there and lunch among the vines. And if spirits are more your bag, there's The Whiskery, where moustachioed owner Russ Watson tells tales of his dogs' derring-do



Clockwise from left: One of 18 rooms at the Portarlington Grand Hotel; fine dining at Felix; views to Melbourne from Scotchmans Hill.

while doling out his signature Teddy and the Fox Gin.

Back in Portarlington, you can work off the indulgence on an electric bike (bellaebikehire.com.au) and whiz along the Bellarine foreshore, passing sparkling calm waters, bathing boxes and the SS Ozone shipwreck. When paddle-steamers plied the bay in the late 19th century, the towering Portarlington Grand Hotel played host to many a holidaying Melburnian. Now thoughtfully refurbished, it's been restored to its former glory, and then some. Ensconced in a balcony room, I drag myself away from the sunset bay view and order a French martini in the elegant, timber-panelled Front Bar before dinner at the Bistro, which serves elevated pub fare, including famous Portarlington mussels.

On a summer day, the hotel's Atrium is the place to be: nab a spot under a sunny yellow-striped umbrella, order a wood-fired pizza and enjoy the seaside vibes. Half an hour before the ferry leaves Portarlington Pier, the hotel rings a warning bell, so day-trippers know when to down their last drinks and reluctantly head for home. **AWW**

Best HOTELS

Where to stay

R Hotel On the edge of the CBD, Geelong's revamped R Hotel, with its historic façade, is a 10-minute walk from Little Malop Street and even closer to Eastern Beach. Its corner apartments feature wraparound balconies with panoramic views over Corio Bay, taking in the ferris wheel and the Botanic Gardens – a perfect perch to watch the sun go down.

Portarlington Grand Hotel This beautifully restored landmark hotel is a knockout. Only 70 minutes by ferry from Melbourne's Docklands or 40 from Geelong, the boutique hotel marries modern luxury and period detailing, offering 18 rooms with bespoke furniture, two with full disability access, and six with sweeping views over the bay.