

AUSTRALIA

Driving Down Under

Along the B100, the tourist is wonderstruck by forests, pastures, the Twelve Apostles and a stunning blue lake



BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

When I arrived in Melbourne it was preening under blue skies and a toasty summer. If you were to be paid a dollar for every pair of jeans or jersey you saw, you'd not make much money. But if you were to pay out the same amount for every pair of micro-shorts or bikini top, you'd be beggared. Melbourne's vibrant buzz worked better than a shot of strong coffee to cure jet lag brought about by a five-and-a-half-hour time difference.

My old friend Yazad, now a chef in Melbourne, picked me up at the airport, and insisted that it was barbecue weather. We dropped off my bags, walked to the Prahran market, and bought cuts of loin steaks, tenderloin and special butcher sausages flavoured with sage and chilli. The resulting barbecue was delicious—it had to be since it was prepared by a chef who is passionate about his food and reputation. But since it was summer, daylight outlasted dinner, and we headed out to Blue Stone, a Belgian beer café on St Kilda Road. If I had been able to shut out the twangy Aussie accent that was bouncing about boisterously, I could have very well felt like I was in Belgium, for Leffe, Brugse Zot, Hoegaarden and St Feuillien—all the Belgian beers I love and cherish—were there on tap.

The next morning, rested and refreshed with my body clock synchronized to Victoria's time zone, I set off on the B100—which ranks as one of the world's best drives.

Also known as the Great Ocean Road (GOR), the B100 deserves this adulation. Running along the Southern Ocean, this tantalizing strip of tar takes the wonderstruck driver along huge cliffs, raging surf, tranquil bays, beautiful beaches and lush forests. It has delightful straights with stunning ocean views and also sections that curve more than Kylie Minogue. Though the GOR starts at Geelong which is 75km south-west of Melbourne down the Princes Highway, the sea first comes in sight at Torquay, which is blessed with fantastic beaches, and a surf culture blossomed here. Shops sell everything from surf lessons to skin suits and boards.

From Torquay to Apollo Bay, the sea is a constant companion



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

to the road. The GOR is a rapid ribbon of black, well demarcated with white lines and bordered by the tempting blue sea and sandy beaches. It also has the lush green Otway mountain range that runs along the opposite side. It's a complete driver's delight, accentuated by the uncluttered horizon that stretches out beyond the windscreen.

Apollo Bay is a seaside hamlet, and a popular spot to stay overnight for people driving the GOR. I stayed at Chris's Beacon Point Villas. Each villa has commanding views of the village and the sea beyond. Chris himself is from Greece and the restaurant that is attached to the villas serves an eclectic mix of Aussie and Greek Mediterranean food. It's so popular that unless you have a booking, you'll have to drive away hungry—a state made even worse because you'll have sniffed the wonderful aromas.

From Apollo Bay, the B100 goes inland through the Otway National Park for 78km, and then returns to the sea at Princetown. After forests and pastures my eyes were treated to the GOR's most famous tourist attraction—the Twelve Apostles.

Standing like artful sculptures, the Twelve Apostles are actually the remains of an extended cliff line that the sea and the salt-laden winds have pounded into solitary stacks of rock. When the erosion started, it carved caves into the cliff. Over centuries, these too were nibbled away and only the Twelve Apostles remained. But time is ticking for them too. Three have already collapsed and all but disappeared and a recently col-

TRIP PLANNER/AUSTRALIA

Visitors to Australia need an Australian visa. Visa applications are processed by VFS in India, and you can apply at VFS centres. For details, log on to www.vfs-au-in.com. At present, the advance return trip fares to Melbourne are:

	Delhi	Mumbai	Bangalore	Chennai
Jet Airways (Code share)	-	₹56,480	-	₹50,930
Malaysia	₹40,760	₹43,240	₹48,440	₹51,380
Singapore Airlines/Thai (Star Alliance)	₹57,840	₹54,750	₹59,600	₹56,540

Stay

In Melbourne, stay at the Art Series The Cullen Hotel (www.artserieshotels.com.au/cullen) for AU \$289 (around ₹14,000). In Apollo Bay, stay at Chris's Beacon Point (chris.com.au) for AU \$240. In Adelaide, stay at Crown Plaza (www.crownplaza.com) for AU \$169 (all prices are for double occupancy per night).

Do

- Learn to surf at the Torquay Surfing Academy (www.torquaysurf.com.au); a 2-hour surfing session costs AU \$150 per person, or AU \$200 for two, including surfboard and wetsuit hire.
- Definitely do a flight over the Twelve Apostles. 12 Apostles Helicopters (www.12apostleshelicopters.com.au); a 25km trip lasting about 10 minutes costs AU \$95 per person. There have to be at least three people, but they will club you with a group if you are alone.
- Otway Fly Treetop Adventures—this is on the way from Apollo Bay to Port Campbell. Definitely visit and do the Zipline Tour, it is fantastic fun. Also do the Treetop walk (www.otwayfly.com). A Treetop walk costs AU \$22 for an adult and AU \$9.50 for a child (6-16 years). Charges for the Zipline Tour, AU \$115 (adults), and AU \$82.50 (children).

GRAPHIC BY AHMED RAZA KHAN/MINT

lapsed one lies in a woeful pile of rubble. But eight stand tall and ready for tourist cameras.

There are at least three outfits that offer aerial sightseeing by helicopter—one near Torquay also offers Tiger Moth flights—over the Apostles. It was a clear day, and there was no possible excuse for not taking the flight. Blue skies, white clouds, cobalt water with creamy surf, and honey-coloured cliffs covered with green turf created a pretty picture.

The village closest to the Twelve Apostles is Port Campbell,



The great outdoors:

(clockwise from above) Victoria's Great Ocean Road; the foreshore of Glenelg beach; a pelican; and the Twelve Apostles as seen from Port Campbell.

pulse of the city. Corporate types rushed across pedestrian crossings and tourists sauntered along its generous sidewalks taking in museums, memorials, art galleries, statues and plaques. It was a nice place for lunch too with many cafés and restaurants.

As much as its Oval CBD, Adelaide is known for its beach suburbs and a prime example is Glenelg. It is "the" place to hang out on a sunny afternoon or evening. Lounge on the beach with a book or nurse a stubby (pint bottle) of Cooper's Pale Ale (South Australia's most loved beer) and people-watch, surf the waves or sip coffee on a sidewalk café—Glenelg can be enjoyed in many ways. I finished the day with dinner on a sidewalk café on Rundle Street. There was happy laughter, the tinkle of cutlery against crockery and a party crowd all over the street thanks to its many bars and eateries.

I had planned to call it an early night after three days on the move, but I changed my mind. I spent the rest of the night on Rundle Street, surrounded by weekend partygoers. Surrounded by warmth and friends, it was a better close to my Australian road trip than anything else could have been.

Write to lounge@livemint.com

CHILD-FRIENDLY RATING
 ★★★★★
 The sea, surfing and the Twelve Apostles form a complete outdoor learning experience.

SENIOR-FRIENDLY RATING
 ★★★★★
 Seniors will be comfortable, but there are stairs to be climbed and the viewpoints at some places are slippery.

LGBT-FRIENDLY RATING
 ★★★★★
 Australia is a very gay-friendly country. Most major cities have pride events.

and most visitors usually stop here and head back to Melbourne. But I had to go to Adelaide, another 715km west. It was on this drive that, for the first time in my five visits to Australia, the vastness of this continent hit me. Through the trip, roads stretched right to the horizon, and I spent 90 minutes at a time without passing another car. It is impossible to consider a country where you pass more kangaroos and pelicans than cars.

I crossed over from Victoria to South Australia, took a break at Mount Gambier with its astounding blue lake, had lunch at the small seaside village of Robe, and drove through the Coorong National Park to arrive 12 hours later into bustling Adelaide, the terminus of my 1,100km drive from Melbourne.

The vibrancy of busy Adelaide felt good after the emptiness of the highway. The next morning, one of my first acts as a tourist was to visit the Adelaide Oval. Hal-

lowed ground, for it had hosted cricket's most tempestuous moment when Australian Bert Oldfield was hit in the head by a delivery from England's Harold Larwood during the infamous 1932-33 Bodyline series. Fittingly, the Adelaide Oval hosts the Bradman Collection, an exhibition dedicated to the late Sir Don Bradman. It was to contain him that England captain Douglas Jardine employed those unsportsmanlike tactics.

Back in Adelaide's Central Business District (CBD), the North Terrace was the place to feel the