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A cup of tea and a stunning view at Kolukkumalai

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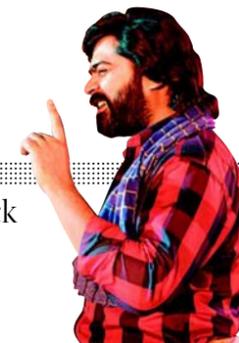


Architects tell you how to create a sustainable home

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'Simbu has a stock of 1,500 songs'

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Get there before the rest of the world does

Australia is much more than glitzy Sydney, Melbourne and the coral reefs. Hike through Buchan Caves, sample fancy cuisine in the town of Chippendale or simply segway through the oldest European settlement on the South Coast of New South Wales



:: RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

All my months of being lazy in Mumbai were now telling as I huffed and puffed my way up the trail. Walking with me was Nazeer, an Afghan youth that I had met. He had emigrated to Melbourne to study, and found every reason to stay and none to go back to Kabul. "Just a kilometre more. I guarantee it's worth it," he encouraged me.

I was at Wilsons Promontory (affectionately known as 'the Prom'). The southernmost point of the Australian mainland, it is arguably the most loved national park in Victoria. Granite headlands, mountains and forests frame its 130-kilometre coastline and fern gullies.

Tidal River, 30 kilometres inside the park boundary, is the small camping township, where the Visitors Centre and a small store are situated amongst camping grounds, log huts and fancy cabins. The park contains the largest coastal wilderness area in Victoria.

I had arrived in Melbourne a few days ago and spent a happy four days checking out cosy coffee shops and appreciating street art that seemed to be burgeoning in the state capital. Hosier Lane, just off the corner of Flinders and Russel Streets, has walls full of street art. The shoes hanging overhead are a take on the days after the possession of LSD was criminalised in the late Sixties, and shoes were the flower power code for where you could find your fix. But for someone like me who simply loves coffee, the city's coffee shops were a delight to discover. Café owners often travel to the source of the coffee – Africa or South America or India – and spend days in careful consideration, choosing the very best bean that will feature in their percolators.

Local choice

My aim during my visit to Australia this year was to travel to where the locals holiday; I found myself at the Prom, about 250 kilometres southeast of Mel-



bourne. The two days I was there, I spent working off my food excesses in Melbourne. Nazeer was right. The walk up to the Tidal Overlook was fantastic, and from my high point, I had great views out to Leonard Bay and Norman Bay. Besides that, there were beautiful beaches to explore and swim at – Squeaky Beach, named because the quartz in the sand makes the sand 'squeak' when

trod on, being one of them.

From Wilsons Promontory, I headed through the beautiful Gippsland Lakes Coastal Park, again off the international tourist radar, but very popular with locals.

Here, often with your room or cottage, you get a little motor dinghy to explore the lakes, and this I found was best done at sunrise. The sense of peace and calm

Vibrant wilds (Clockwise from top left) Children paddle on Tidal river; the Loo-Erm track at Wilsons Promontory; and Whisky Bay ■ RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

on the glass-like water is profound. Locals mentioned the Buchan Caves near the border of Victoria and New South Wales, and intrigued by the fact that you could walk through a part of this honeycomb of caves full of spectacular limestone formations, I headed there.

Old finds

The ranger who took a group of us crawling and crouching through the Royal Cave had such interesting facts and information about the geology and history of the caves. The caves are so old that when they were first discovered, a skeleton of a wombat the size of a horse was discovered on the cave floor – the wombat is long extinct.

My final halt before heading to Sydney was the Coolangatta Estate, which was the first

European settlement on the South Coast of New South Wales and 150 kilometres South of Sydney. The property is huge and houses a farmland and a vineyard. I spent an enjoyable hour segwaying through the estate, over hills and across meadows, as David from Segway Tours told me stories of perseverance and determination that the first settlers displayed to forge Australia into what it is today.

I drove into Sydney with 2,600 kilometres on the odometer since I had left Melbourne, and with

just two days to spare before my flight back home. The city of Sydney always has new surprises in store; this time around, I stayed in a suburb called Chippendale.

Art centre

With its rich, varied history and architecture, Chippendale has become the home of choice for dozens of art galleries, production houses and graphic and fashion design studios, besides Sydney's most exciting new restaurants, cafés and bars. In fact, my hotel, the 62-room Old Clare, stretches across two iconic heritage-listed buildings – The Clare Hotel pub and the Carlton & United Breweries Administration Building.

To meet an old friend of mine, I went to Sydney's newest precinct of Barangaroo that is as yet evolving. It is again the place of fantastic food, and Cirrus is one such restaurant. The Moreton Bay bug in Cognac sauce (lobster tail, actually) that I had there was a fitting finale to my time in Australia.

ZIP THROUGH

Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way is one of the longest defined coastal routes in the world. It is 2,500 kilometres long, with stunning views of the sea, cliffs, green meadows, dainty houses and charming villages.

