

## **SECRETS OF MALLACOOTA – By Stephanie Jackson**

*Discovering the natural wonders of the Mallecoota region of the Victorian coast of Australia, and the adjacent Croajingalong National Park.*

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I've never been very good at keeping secrets, and whenever I discover something that triggers an intense range of emotions, I have to blurt out my news to someone or risk bursting with excitement. And in Victoria, I've discovered a secret that, locals insist, is as good as secrets ever get. That secret is Mallecoota.

I was puzzled, as I explored this picturesque coastal township, as to how its many pleasures could have remained a secret for so long, and why the entire world had not flocked to this stunning part of the continent. The answer lies, perhaps, in the fact that Mallecoota is several kilometres from a major highway, and is out of sight



and out of mind as far as many travellers are concerned.

Like many coastal towns, Mallecoota has swathes of sandy beaches, but its most spectacular natural attraction is its vast waterway – the Mallecoota Inlet – that is fed by both the ocean and the Genoa River. With a surface area exceeding that of Sydney harbour, and a shoreline of more than 300 kilometres, it's divided, by an area appropriately known as The

Narrows, into two distinctive sections that are imaginatively called The Bottom Lake and The Top Lake.

There's nothing secretive about the lakes, for they are too enormous to ignore. And the extensive camping area bordered by the inlet, the ocean, and native forests was easy to spot too. But other places around the town took a little more time to



discover, although locals were eager to reveal the secrets of their neighbourhood. If I wanted to do a spot of fishing, they said, I should try my luck at Gypsy Point, a settlement on the banks of the river beyond The Top Lake. Fishing has never been my passion, and feeling as lazy as the mob of kangaroos that, having emerged from their secret places in the surrounding forests, dozed on manicured

lawns, I spent my time at this secluded settlement watching others who seemed to share my temporarily idle mood.

Teenage girls on the jetty had abandoned their rods and were soaking up the winter sunshine with a good book; the tour boat that conveys visitors to secret corners of the inlet was bobbing lazily at its moorings; and a flock of pelicans were doing nothing more than drifting with the current's leisurely flow.

Things were quiet at Karbeethong too, for here, where a cluster of houses overlooks The Bottom Lake, the only sounds were of black cockatoos chattering as they fed on pine cone seeds, of gulls fluttering down from the sky to perch on the jetty, and of the honking voices of swans. An old man, lazily dangling his rod in the water, told me a tale of a gigantic goanna that had been swimming across the lake and that had clambered into his canoe. And as he told me, with unfettered passion, about the huge numbers of waterbirds that inhabit the islands of the inlet, I decided it was time to explore beyond dry land.



Keeping an eye out for reptiles that might try to hitch a ride, I paddled my kayak out towards the islands, where spoonbills, cormorants, pied oyster catchers, and terns, unconcerned by my cautious approach, dabbled in the shallow water that lapped at low, windswept vegetation. But pelicans resented my intrusion into their secret domain and were determined

to defend their territory from the perceived threat. And as they raced across the sand towards me, their gigantic outstretched wings beating the air in a display of uncharacteristic ferocity, I got the message loud and clear that visitors were not welcome, and made as hasty a retreat as possible.

I stumbled upon some of Mallacoota's best kept secrets, places that lie well away from the inlet, as I wandered along trails that snake through forests that pour down to the sea as though hoping to conquer the oceans as convincingly as they have conquered the land. And where terrestrial vegetation licks at the sea, the waters of the narrow Bekta River trickle out to meet the water that laps at the sands of Bekta Beach.



Further west lies Quarry Beach where, in an earlier time, visitors were more intent on excavating rock rather than on swimming or lazing on the sand. And then there's Secret Beach, a hidden corner of paradise that locals like to keep to themselves. The sound of waves colliding with the land, and the pleasant ocean aromas of salt and kelp lured me

down a long series of steps that lead to this secluded sandy cove that is hidden by rocky outcrops and dunes cloaked with dense forests. It was a secret well worth the effort of discovery, but sailors on board the schooner Schah would have been less than happy to see the rugged coastline. On a stormy summer's night in 1837, their ship splashed its way into history as it became the first to be wrecked in Gippsland's treacherous coastal waters.

Shipwreck Creek, where the weary survivors dragged themselves ashore, would, I assumed, be another pleasant place to paddle my kayak, and to camp. But the untold secret here is that the creek and the adjacent beach are more than 500 metres away from the camping and parking area, and with countless steps to negotiate, kayaking was struck off the agenda.



Shipwreck Creek is part of the immense Croajingalong National Park that surrounds Mallacoota and that has a coastal boundary of more than 100 kilometres. And this wild place, where more than 300 species of birds, including lyrebirds and rare ground parrots, live among the more than 1,000 plant species that are found in the region's heathlands,

rainforests, and open woodlands, has many secrets to share.

The forest's of Croajingalong initially appeared bland and uninteresting, but as I made my way slowly and cautiously along the rough and bumpy gravel tracks that weave their way through the mayhem of vegetation, I stumbled across several of nature's secret treasures. Tiny yet gaudy wildflowers that freckled the windswept heathlands; colourful birds that sipped the nectar of banksia flowers; swamp wallabies that scurried through seemingly impenetrable clumps of melaleucas; and furtive bower birds were all here.

I set up camp close to one of Croajingalong's most imposing hidden places, Wingan Inlet, the vast estuary of the Wingan River that is protected from the changing moods of the ocean by its shawl of tree cloaked dunes. I paddled across its calm, dark waters as fish revealed their secretive presence with glints of silver as they leapt momentarily from the water. I watched the setting sun illuminate the weathered timbers of the jetty. I heard the nocturnal barking voices of fur seals that live on rocky offshore islands. And at dawn, I dawdled along a shaded walking trail to the beach.

In the days that followed, more of the secrets with which nature has entrusted Croajingalong National Park were slowly revealed. There's Tamboon inlet, where the Cann River unites with the sea, and where locals who came to fish warned me of the treacherous currents that rip mercilessly through the estuary's gaping mouth.

Between Wingan and Tamboon inlets lies the Thurra River. Its dark, tannin stained waters ambled lazily out to an ocean that, wiped up by ferocious winds, was in a far from idle mood.



The lighthouse at the summit of Point Hicks, a promontory named in honour of Zachary Hicks, a naval officer who accompanied Captain James Cook on his epic voyage of discovery in 1770, and who was the first European to sight the eastern coast of Australia, alerts ships to the dangers they face as they pass this rugged coastline. But as I wandered along the trail towards the lighthouse, flotsam strewn among rills

of decaying kelp on the sands of a picturesque bay provided a stark reminder of the ocean's fury, for here lay the remains of a wooden craft that the ocean, in her latest violent tantrum, had reduced to little more than splinters.

From the headland, the view was of immense sand dunes, the ocean, sprawling forests, and the wild world that hides Mallacoota and its many secrets.



Mallacoota, I initially assumed, would be merely a clone of other small coastal towns, but I was wrong, for this is a town with a character all its own, one born from its location beside the ocean, beside the great inlet and the lakes, and beside the national park that wraps the town in its sylvan embrace.

In summer months, when Mallacoota's secrets have been discovered by hordes of holiday makers, the more than 600 sites at the beach front camping area become a sea of human activity, of billowing canvas and gleaming caravans, and the town's population of 1,500 swells to 10,000. Demand for sites at Croajingalong's camping areas is at a premium too.

For travellers who, like me, prefer a quiet time, the secret is to arrive when Mallacoota is still dozing. Then, when there are no crowds, when birds and other wildlife are unflustered and undisturbed, when boats are bobbing idly at their moorings, and when life is less hectic and no one appears hurried, the secret natural wonders of this spectacular region can be discovered and admired at leisure.