



GETTING THERE...

Wilson's Promontory National Park is approximately three hours' drive southeast of Melbourne via the M1 and South Gippsland Highways.

Parking is available at the Tidal River settlement and free shuttle buses operate to the Telegraph Saddle car park, the start point for hiking throughout the southern section of the peninsula.

A Jurassic Journey

The southern-most tip of the Australian mainland is a cornucopia of azure coastlines, dramatic granite cliffs and cloistered rainforests.

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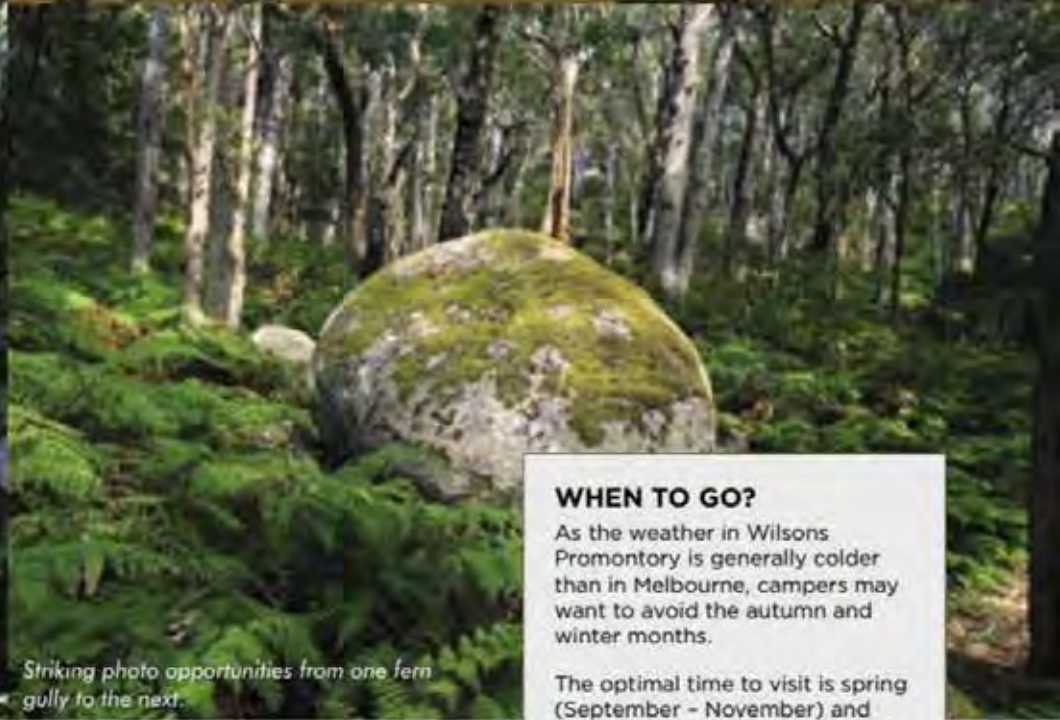
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As the path begins to descend after reaching Windy Saddle, the terrain begins to change to a more rainforestry feel.



A cloud floating just metres above the sea as viewed from the eastern side of the Tidal River crossing at Sealers Cove.



Striking photo opportunities from one fern gully to the next.

WHEN TO GO?

As the weather in Wilsons Promontory is generally colder than in Melbourne, campers may want to avoid the autumn and winter months.

The optimal time to visit is spring (September - November) and summer (December - February), when the coastal breeze and elevation offers some relief from the heat and the nights are mild.

Permits for overnight camping in any of the campsites throughout the park are generally easy to obtain by contacting Parks Vic by phone, online or in person during office hours (there is an office at Tidal River), and can be booked up to 12 months in advance. However, special rules apply for booking accommodation at Tidal River during the peak holiday seasons - camping during Labour Day, Easter and Melbourne Cup long weekends is subject to applications, which open in February for the former two and September for the latter. All accommodation during the Christmas holidays is allocated through a ballot system that opens in June.

Wilsons Promontory lures the intrepid bushwalker with its 3-day trail and multiple campsites. It also attracts walkers opting for the shorter hike and the luxury of the caravan to come home to at dusk. What both types of walkers tend to agree on though is the beauty of the unique and richly varied natural features, wildlife and manmade attractions that Wilsons offers. The area has been protected under a national park arrangement for more than 100 years, though during World War II the land was temporarily reassigned as a training camp for commando soldiers. The wide variety of terrain on offer, from steep mountain slopes and sheer cliffs, to open woodland and vast beaches, would've made it the ideal theatre to prepare for combat scenarios. More recently, the 'Prom', as it's affectionately known, came under a different kind of fire, when the infamous 2009

'Black Saturday' bushfires ravaged much of regional Victoria. Most of the damaged forest quickly regenerated, though leafless, slightly charred trees can still be seen lining the slopes of the walking tracks, most likely a product of regular back-burning activities carried out by park rangers. Tidal River, situated on the western side of the peninsula, is Wilsons Promontory's only permanent settlement and the start point for adventure. Its namesake winds its way east toward Sealers Cove, where it grows darker and darker from the colour infusion of the many tea trees found there. The park ranger's office, ample parking and various types of accommodation, can all be found here. Visitors who choose to establish a base here can explore the area through day trips to nearby Mt Oberon, Mt Bishop, Squeaky Beach (named for its especially squeaky



Bathers enjoying a late afternoon dip at Refuge Cove.

rounded quartz sand), Picnic Bay and Whisky Bay.

But for those with the vim and vigour (plus a decent backpack and pair of hiking shoes), there are a range of overnight hikes that give visitors a broader view of this spectacular slice of the Australian wilderness. One of the more popular options is the hike to Refuge Cove camp, a moderately difficult trek, which takes the hiker from the western to the eastern side of the peninsula, through the full spectrum of terrain types showcased within the national park.

After checking in with the rangers and obtaining an overnight camping permit, visitors can catch the free bus service to the Telegraph Saddle car park, the starting point for the moderately difficult 17km journey. The winding dirt track cut into the northern face of Mt McAlister is flanked by scrubby slopes and the occasional granite boulder.

While it's an uphill climb, the grade is moderate and will not cause too much concern for an experienced hiker.

Within a 3km hike is the Windy Saddle Elevation, a grassy clearing 300 metres above sea level. It's a decent place to stop for morning tea, despite the gusty reference its name offers. Relief can be found within the dense, squat shrubs that shelter the clearing. After this point the terrain levels out, then starts the gradual decline toward Sealers Swamp. The flora begins to undergo a gradual transformation. The sparse trees and scrubby grasses give way to a more rainforestry feel. In parts the walk is sheltered by a canopy of trees. Bracken ferns spread like a thick green carpet and the granite boulders now wear coats of lush green moss. The fauna becomes more apparent too, with colourful birds like the superb Blue Wren and the Crimson Rosella common to

the area. Lucky hikers may even see bigger animals like emus, kangaroos, wallabies and wombats, although it's entirely possible that the only signs of these reclusive mammals are their droppings.

As the track meanders down a slight drop in temperature and an increase in humidity is palpable, the approaching coastline is imminent. But the first glimpse of water will not be the aquamarine glint of the Bass Strait, rather the gleaming tannin-brown of Sealers Swamp, fed by the Tidal River, which flows across the Promontory.

This section of the trek is furnished with a wooden boardwalk, covered with a wire mesh to prevent slips in the marshy wet conditions. Ferns and tall slender eucalypts dominate the flat area. It's reminiscent of a setting from 'Jurassic Park'. The imaginative trekker could almost expect to see a velociraptor emerge from the dense vegetation.

TOP 5 HIGHLIGHTS

1. Tread the boardwalk through the ferns at Sealers Swamp and step back into a prehistoric landscape.
2. Photograph one of the many sweeping vistas of mountains rising from the ocean on the track between Sealers Cove and Refuge Cove.
3. Stop to check out the curious 'wood and whalebone wall of fame' constructed by boaters who have moored at Refuge Cove over the decades.
4. Enjoy a sunset dip at Refuge Cove beach.
5. Take a day trip to Mt Oberon or Squeaky Beach from Tidal River.

The boardwalk track trails through the prehistoric terrain of Sealers Swamp.

The weird and wonderful 'wood and whalebone wall-of-fame' at Refuge Cove.

Fortunately, the next surprise gifted by Mother Nature is a much more pleasant one – the lush rainforest gives way to the soft beige sands and blue waters of Sealers Cove. After hours of trekking, the journey to Refuge Cove is beyond the halfway point. Many tired travellers succumb to the temptation to kick off their walking boots and feel the sand between their toes. Some even pop on bathing suits and take a quick dip. The water of Bass Strait can be a little frigid, but is bearable in the spring and summer, especially after 10 kilometres of hard slog.

Sealers Cove is the point where the Tidal River meets the sea, the dark stained creek water mingling with the fresh briny ocean. It's important that hikers take note of tide times and coordinate their crossing with low tide, otherwise they and their belongings may not make it over unscathed.

This next section of the hike is arguably the most scenic, with the curving coastline offering up amazing views of the vast waters of the Bass Strait, sheer granite cliffs and panoramic mountain ranges. Avid photographers will find themselves making repeated stops for happy snaps as every few minutes a new vista presents itself.

It's reminiscent of a setting from 'Jurassic Park'. The imaginative trekker could almost expect to see a velociraptor emerge from the dense vegetation.

The terrain does become a little hillier, or at least seems that way after hours of hiking. But mercifully, the final stretch to Refuge Cove is a downhill stroll into once more a now familiar fern-covered rainforest.

Just before reaching the popular Refuge Cove campsite, trekkers are treated to an interesting landmark. The cove is a popular mooring spot for boaters, and over the decades these intrepid ocean voyagers have erected a memorial of sorts to their way of life: a ramshackle wall of fame composed of pieces of timber emblazoned with ships' names, around which the ground is strewn with the large, curving ivory of what must be whale bones.

The campsite is now just a stroll away. The popular spot offers a shaded area just metres from the beach in which to pitch a tent. Compost toilets are also onsite, as well as a spring from which to collect water, although it's important to note that the water is untreated and may need to be purified before drinking.

Walkers with enough energy left in the tank, and enough daylight hours, may even want to press on a further 7 kilometres to the next campsite at Waterloo Bay, but for many the prospect of a relaxing swim and a cup of tea before sunset is a more attractive option.

Indeed, one could spend days or even weeks exploring the myriad attractions throughout the 500-plus square kilometres of the national park reserve. Notable spots include the lighthouse on the southeast tip of the peninsula, Roaring Meg campsite, the historic Halfway Hut and even the islands to the south of the Prom, many of which could be included on a return itinerary from Refuge Cove, though trekkers should be aware that the hikes become more arduous towards the southern tip of the peninsula.

This place has a Jurassic way of recharging and rejuvenating its trekkers. Great reason to experience the 'Prom'. ■

MUST KNOW...

1. Visitors planning an overnight hike must obtain a permit before departing from Tidal River. Don't forget to hand it back to the park ranger's office upon return, to assure them of your safety.
2. Fires (including campfires) are not permitted in the National Park at any time. On 'Total Fire Ban' days, campers are not allowed to use camp stoves, even in huts.
3. Campers venturing outside Tidal River should bring their own water and/or water purification tablets as the creek water is unsafe for drinking without first being treated.
4. Hikers should bring their own toilet paper as it is not provided. Travellers to the more remote southern section may even want to bring a small shovel, as there are no toilet facilities.
5. Take note of tide times before attempting to cross the Tidal River where it meets the ocean at Sealers Cove. Hikers should cross at or close to low tide.

One of the many stunning panoramas encountered after the Tidal River crossing at Sealers Cove.