When I moved from Melbourne to the Great Ocean Road, one of Australia’s most renowned stretches of coast, it wasn’t just the promise of sun-drenched surf days that swept me away. That played its part, sure, but what really drew me in was the magic of the inland mountains and the little-known spots that only a local could know.

“The diversity of adventure is what makes me love where I live,” says Chris Ord, director of Tour de Trails, specialists in trail-running tours that take in sights such as Lorne’s fern-fringed Cora Lynn Cascades and the Phantom and Erskine Falls.

“I can walk, run or ride a mountain bike along the Surf Coast Walk (44km), right from my doorstep,” Chris explains. “There’s a secret clifftop lookout between Point Addis and Anglesea where I stop and contemplate life, especially on a full moon. The view over the ocean is huge and it makes all your problems seem very small.”

The area from Anglesea to Point Roadknight and Aireys Inlet (marked by Split Point Lighthouse) hums with seachangers, six-metre-long camper vans and seriously fun festivals such as Kids Adventure Outdoors (April), which encourages families to walk, run, ride, paddle and fish together.

You can rent all kinds of water paraphernalia – surfboards, paddleboards, boats and kayaks – from any of the major towns, at any time. But overwhelmingly, the Great Ocean Road is known for its world-class surf.

“Bells Beach and Winki are famous,” Chris says. “But there are plenty of secret breaks and waves – suitable for anyone from beginners to surf professionals – all within ‘coo-ee’ of a decent latte.”

Kelly Irving follows the trail of Victoria’s Great Ocean Road from the world-famous surf beaches at Torquay to its pretty seaside towns and stunning hinterland.
**Surf central**

Keanu Reeves and Patrick Swayze put Bells Beach on the map in the 1991 movie *Point Break* (even though the dramatic finale was really filmed at a stand-in beach in Oregon). At that time Bells’ closest town, Torquay, was best known for local success stories Rip Curl and Quicksilver. Now the town is synonymous with the annual Rip Curl Pro Bells Beach, Australia’s first professional surfing event that started in 1973 with little more than petrol and food money as prizes, and now draws surfers and spectators from around the world.

These days, Torquay pops with coffee caravans, taco trucks, beach bars and creative start-ups such as U&I – a surfwear brand for women who want to make the most of the ocean.

Founders Jodie Hayes and Emma Bäcklund started out at the back of a 1940s surf shack before moving to their shop-cum-studio. Here, they dream and sketch designs (everything is hand-stitched in Melbourne) as shoppers browse the racks, often with Jodie’s dog Scout nosing around.

“Torquay isn’t known for year-round white sandy beaches and sun,” says Jodie. “It’s a lot more raw and rugged than that. The glowing red cliffs and dark blue oceans inspired the strength behind our label, and it’s what keeps us from leaving the area.”

There are a lot of other local products to admire – such as Regina Middleton’s jewellery, and Teak Candle Co.’s hand-poured soy candles. You’re going to need some fuel for all that shopping.

Try Fisho’s in Torquay for seafood with a seaview, or newcomer Olè for tacos. For something sweet, try the Great Ocean Road Chocolaterie and Ice Creamery, or grab cake at 4Kings Coffee, Anglesea.

Another must is the Aireys Inlet Pub, which has a story as fantastic as the onsite brewery and big garden. After the pub closed in 2011, a group of townsfolk banded together to rescue the much-loved local from city developers and gave it a revamp. It’s an Aussie battler tale that says a lot about small-town camaraderie.
Coast with the most

Some of the most beautiful parts of the Great Ocean Road are found off the actual road. A favourite detour is The Farmer’s Place: a working farm and café in a converted shipping container, 15 minutes west of Torquay in Freshwater Creek.

A true paddock-to-plate experience at the start of the Otway Harvest Trail, ingredients are grown onsite or sourced locally. Flip the menu to see where your pork belly or pumpkin came from.

“We promote sustainable practice and living to our customers and the wider community,” says James McLennan, Education Program manager. “Our programs cover many aspects of sustainability... and the impact food and waste choices have.”

The Farmer’s Place also hosts a monthly market for local producers to sell their goods to those in the know, with animals and plenty of space to keep the kids busy and often a musician playing mellow acoustic tunes.

Get even further into the heart of the Otway Ranges in Forrest, 40 minutes inland from Lorne. It’s hard to know what is this old timber town’s biggest claim to fame – its world-class mountain bike trails or its beer.

The Forrest Brewing Company was once the old general store, overrun with blackberries and possums. Now it’s the inviting meeting point for anyone on two wheels (or legs). The cute cottage next door is perfect for overnight stays, so you won’t have to wobble too far home.

Otherwise, camp nearby at the otherworldly Lake Elizabeth, where you may be lucky enough to spot a platypus or two.

Sleep on it

After all that exploring you’ll need to unwind, and Lorne’s laidback holiday vibe is perfect. A long-standing favourite, the Lorne Sea Baths has a pool, steam room and, until April, a pop-up day spa from Hepburn Wellness.

Set up camp at one of the many local sites. “One of our favourite spots near Lorne is Cumberland River Holiday Park,” says Beth Brown from Twilight Glamping. “The setting »
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is beautiful, with a flowing river against a cliff backdrop. It’s perfect for a spot of fishing or a quick dip. It’s directly opposite a stunning beach, near walking tracks into the Otway National Park and close to town.”

Not only will Beth give you the inside scoop on what to see and do around the region, she’ll even set up your bed for you, in a luxury bell-tent no less. The only struggle is choosing between the several sites from Torquay to Kennett River.

“We love that there are so many adventures to be had here. You can surf, paddleboard, kayak or hike to stunning waterfalls, bike or horse ride and indulge in local produce,” Beth says. “The surf coast is a special place.”

The hard part is keeping it to yourself.

Travel info

Jetstar has great low fares to Avalon and extensive car hire choices.

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Nikki Van Dijk

Victorian pro-surfer Nikki Van Dijk explains why the Rip Curl Pro Bells Beach is the highlight of her year.

Nikki Van Dijk has been playing in the waves along the Great Ocean Road ever since she could walk. It was there she had her first brush with surf royalty, when legend Layne Beachley plucked her out of the way of a dunking and granted the excited four-year-old an autograph. Fast-forward a decade or so, and Nikki found herself taking on her idol in a heat of the renowned Rip Curl Pro Bells Beach.

The world’s best surfers have been competing to ‘ring the Bell’ since 1973, making Bells the longest running professional surfing event in the world. Rain, hail or shine, the crowds stream in to vie for a spot on the natural amphitheatre formed by Bells’ red cliffs to watch the next generation of legends and the who’s who of surf.

Since winning a wildcard entry in her mid teens, Nikki has surfed at the last seven Bells Beach Pros, and looks forward to the event every year.

“It’s my favourite time of the year. My whole family comes over and my friends. Victoria is such a good state to have grown up in and I just feel at home when that event is on. The fact that it’s the most prestigious event, it’s the longest (Championship Tour) running ever ... when I’m in a heat out there and turn around and look at the big rocks, and all the stands, I just have such a crazy feeling ... it’s such a pristine place.”

Surfing is in Nikki’s blood. When she was just a toddler, her family took off on a round-Australia trip, stopping at every surf beach so her dad could catch waves. It was watching her father and older sister surf that got Nikki on the board.

Nikki’s little brother Joe is also a Bells veteran, having taken out top place in the Junior Challenge at Bells Beach for the past two years. “He rips, he’s such a freak, he teaches me everything,” Nikki says.

The family settled on Phillip Island but found themselves constantly back on the Surf Coast. “When you’re hunting for surf in Victoria you have to head out Torquay-way,” Nikki says. Along with Bells, Nikki frequents the Jan Juc and Winki breaks. “There’s so many hidden spots to surf as well,” she adds.

Nikki is enjoying a rare spell at home in the lead-up to the Pro. Spending nearly 10 months on the road each year, Nikki relishes a competition so close to home. “It’s only three hours from home, not three days on a plane,” she laughs. “My heart is warm every time I surf out there because it’s my (home) state.”

Rip Curl Pro Bells Beach

12 to 24 April, 2017

ripcurl.com.au