



SKY'S THE LIMIT
On the rugged coast of Victoria's Cape Otway, Sky Pods are two artfully designed off-grid cabins. Opposite: More and more electric vehicles are hitting the open road.

DRIVING FORCE

The classic Australian road-trip is being reimagined – and supercharged – with the rise of electric cars. With its towering limestone stacks, historic hamlets and destinations that embrace sustainability, the magnificent Great Ocean Road makes the ideal route to test-drive low-emission motoring.

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The path towards the beach contracts and expands as though the forest on either side of me is breathing. Before long, the track spills open and I hear the unspooling of waves rhythmically pounding the shore. Here on Station Beach, where the Southern Ocean meets Bass Strait at Cape Otway on the tip of Victoria's south-western coast, I was expecting wild scenes, but the sea is strangely calm on this afternoon in late spring. There's not a soul around. I sit down to take in the view and mull the notion that all that's between me and Antarctica is the ocean.

My journey begins earlier in the day. Released from lockdown in Melbourne, I embrace my freedom with a low-carbon road-trip. My eco-friendly expedition starts by borrowing a Tesla Model 3 for a jaunt along the Great Ocean Road, one of the country's greatest drives. Replacing cars that run on fossil fuels with electric vehicles has become an increasingly vital climate-change response, and Tesla, a front runner, has installed charging sites throughout

SWELL TIME
Port Fairy, at the end of the Great Ocean Road, offers pristine seafood, heritage walks and reliable surf.

result is a flourishing scene teeming with bird and animal life as well as wild tussocks of native grasses, swathes of eucalypts and gnarled manna gums knee-deep in bracken. On my timber deck I watch the cinematic sky morph from tangerine to peach to lavender. In the distance, the ocean is as flat as a lake.

The next morning the Great Ocean Road is enveloped in a heavy sea fog that crept in overnight and settled on the shoulders of the hills and trees, muffling the sound of the ocean beyond. Driving a car that is virtually silent makes me acutely aware of my surroundings: the sapphire flash of a kookaburra's wings and the "weeooo" calls of satin bowerbirds as I thread my way through ancient forest carpeted with greenery.

At Wildlife Wonders, just outside Apollo Bay, nature guide Jyoti Kala hands me a pair of binoculars as we walk through eucalyptus woodland and gullies of lush tree ferns and past clear, trickling streams. The leafy location has been expertly returned to pre-colonial times when the Gadubanud people occupied the rainforest plateau and windswept coastline. The 12-hectare reserve is a safe haven for native species like bandicoots, koalas and potoroos and is completely free from introduced predators such as cats and foxes. We use our binoculars to spot tubby koalas wedged high in spindly eucalypts as bird calls loop overhead. On a grassy plain, swamp and red-necked wallabies graze, unperturbed by the light rain or us.

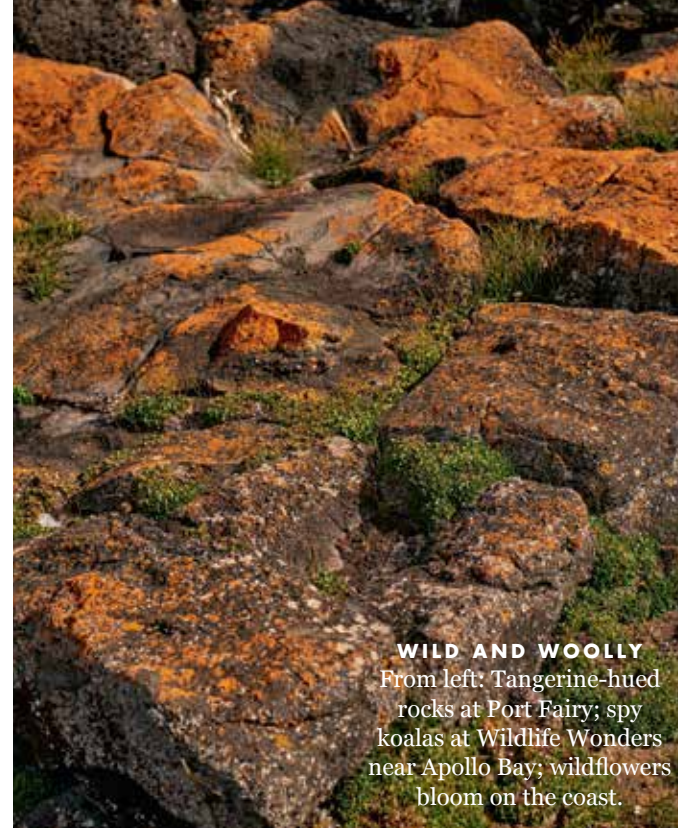
Awed by the nature immersion, I make my giddy way to brunch. There's a little bit of a learning curve when using electric cars for a longer road-trip, and it takes some additional planning for peace of mind. Thankfully, the car has a trip planner, which makes it simple to map out charging stops in advance, and the PlugShare

Victoria's south-west coast region. I decide to put them to the test on a three-day trip along 660 kilometres of breathtaking coastline and bucolic countryside.

To complement my climate-conscious wheels, I'm staying at off-grid and low-impact lodges, visiting nature reserves that are regenerating the environment and honour the knowledge of the traditional custodians, as well as sniffing out the best spots for local fare. This region is distinguished by its sustainability credentials. The World's 50 Best Restaurants list regularly features Brae in the town of Birregurra, where chef-owner Dan Hunter has an organic garden, low-waste kitchen and carbon-neutral accommodation. Esteemed producers such as Schulz Organic Dairy in Timboon, known for its creamy milk from Friesian and Jersey herds, are dotted throughout the district.

Initially it's a strange sensation to drive a car that doesn't flinch as you turn it on and never requires you to stand at a bowser. But as the use of electric vehicles accelerates at a rapid pace road-trips are set to be reimagined. More EVs were sold in Australia in the first half of 2021 than all of 2020, and the federal government has announced a private sector partnership to fund 50,000 at-home charging stations. Even though my Tesla has a range of around 570 kilometres, I must admit to a touch of anxiety about tackling one of the most beautiful drives in the world without a single drop of petrol.

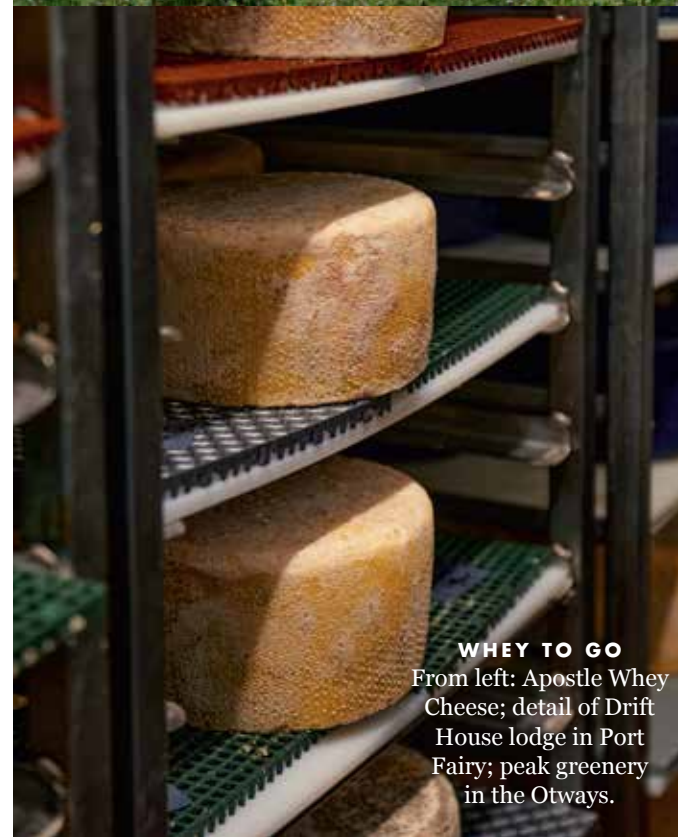
After my reverie at Station Beach, I amble back to Sky Pods, my base for the night. Its two self-contained, off-grid cabins are artfully designed with expansive windows, well-equipped kitchens and bluetooth speakers. The solar-powered pods sit lightly on a rugged wildlife refuge. With the help of conservation organisations, owners Max Vella and Lisa Doherty planted 65,000 native trees to restore the land. The



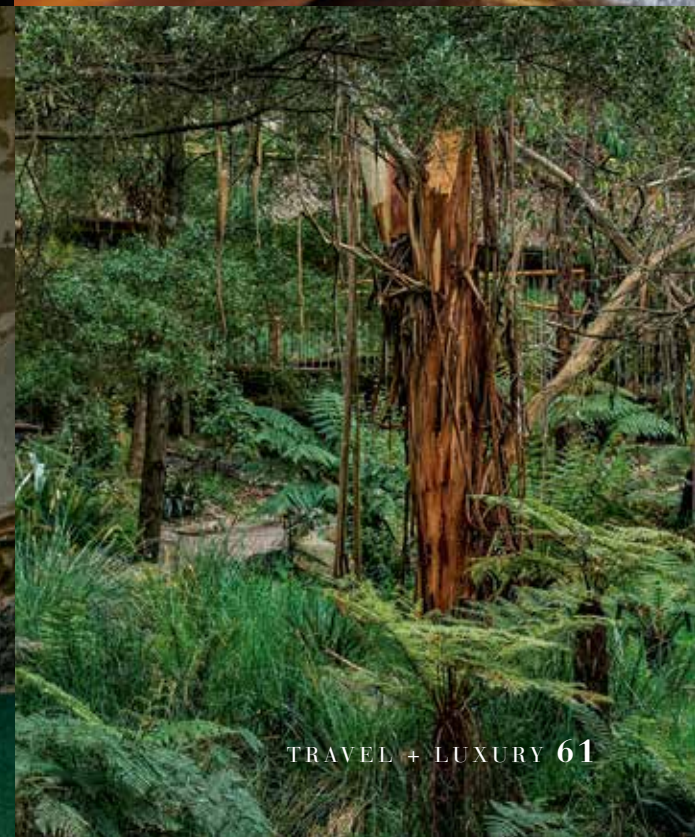
WILD AND WOOLLY
From left: Tangerine-hued rocks at Port Fairy; spy koalas at Wildlife Wonders near Apollo Bay; wildflowers bloom on the coast.



BEER ESSENTIALS
From far left: Levi Geebung in his possum-pelt cloak at Tower Hill Wildlife Reserve; view from the driver's seat; craft beers at the Great Ocean Road Brewhouse in Apollo Bay.



WHEY TO GO
From left: Apostle Whey Cheese; detail of Drift House lodge in Port Fairy; peak greenery in the Otways.



For a few glorious minutes the sun breaks through the clouds, bathing the towering limestone stacks in golden light.

ROCK STARS
The limestone rock stacks of the Twelve Apostles shift in colour depending on the time of day.

app is a handy back-up for locating EV stations. There are two Tesla Superchargers (fast chargers that can add up to 327 kilometres in 15 minutes) in Colac and Geelong, and 15 destination chargers in the region (which take a little longer to top up). I plug the car in at the Great Ocean Road Brewhouse in Apollo Bay and wander down to Icaro, a tiny wholefoods café that serves vibrant and virtuous meals. The menu is brimming with “medicinal elixirs”, smoothies and smoothie bowls and hearty options such as the Mexi breakfast bowl with house-made baked beans, goat’s milk feta and local sourdough.

As the battery charges, I head to the Brewhouse to try a couple of beers. With a family history in Apollo Bay that dates back to 1903, owner Andrew Noseda is no stranger to the rudiments of weather. All his beer is made with rainwater collected from deep in the Otways, and he plans to install a wind generator to power new electric-vehicle chargers. Among the amber- and mahogany-hued beers is Prickly Moses Spotted Ale, produced to support the conservation of tiger quolls – an endangered carnivorous marsupial once endemic in the Otways.

The sky is ashen and the wind snarling as I unplug the car and hasten to my final destination for the day. It’s about an hour’s drive to Alkina Lodge, comprising a trio of generous four-bedroom retreats with sharp lines and glossy white surfaces. Built with handmade bricks and using filtered rainwater, they’re sustainably designed for passive solar heating. Soon a gleaming post-box red fireplace is lit, wine is poured and a leek and cauliflower pie is baking in the oven. Without the distraction of blue skies and a glittering ocean, this trip makes me reflect on the forces of nature that shape this wild coastline and how these potent forces also sculpt the way we live and travel. As the world struggles to inhibit global warming, it’s obvious that low-carbon, sustainable travel will become a necessity. Rather than the weather being an inconvenience, it’s a welcome reminder of how we can embrace and harness the Earth’s power.

INNER SANCTUM
Alkina Lodge offers three exquisite residences on a hilltop overlooking the Southern Ocean.

Evening falls, the full-throated wind howls and the kangaroos outside become inky shadows. In the morning, debris is strewn all over the road. I drive slowly past branches protruding from the forest like arrows frozen in mid-flight. The Twelve Apostles are only 20 minutes away and a few hardy types are on the viewing platforms. My scarf whips my face as I steady myself enough to take a photo. For a few glorious minutes the sun breaks through the clouds, bathing the towering limestone stacks in golden light.

Inland, high above green fields speckled with cows and sheep, wind turbines slice through the tempest. As I head to visit an artisan cheesemaker, any initial apprehensions I had about driving an electric car have diminished. In fact, given the constant stream of text messages I've received from friends and family who are clearly coveting a Tesla, I'm starting to wonder whether I can hold onto it for a little longer. At Apostle Whey Cheese I try a dozen rich cheeses made on-site, from the oozy Loch Ard Gorgeous Camembert to the warming havarti-esque Spot and Dot studded with black peppercorns. A farmer who diversified into cheese-making, owner Julian Benson adapted to the changing climate after a drought in 2002-2003. "When it's beautiful weather, it's great being a farmer," he tells me. "But when it's like today, it's even better being a cheesemaker."

The storm has punctured the power supply in towns all along the coast, so I have to skip lunch at Forage on the Foreshore – a Port Campbell restaurant where foraged ingredients such as watercress, warrigal greens and sea parsley are paired with local produce and wild-caught seafood. Sadly, my plan for dessert at the solar-powered Timboon Fine Ice Cream is also scuppered. Instead, I head to the historic fishing village of Port Fairy, an hour and a half away, its roads lined with soaring Norfolk pines. Here the wind waits in the wings and the sun takes centre stage. Checking in to Drift House (and plugging the Tesla into one of its chargers) feels like a welcome escape.

The six suites are woven around an original Victorian house. I'm staying in suite four where the partially exposed bluestone walls of the heritage building sit comfortably next to sleek furnishings. The elongated room's spine contains the kitchen, toilet and bathroom, all cleverly concealed via sliding

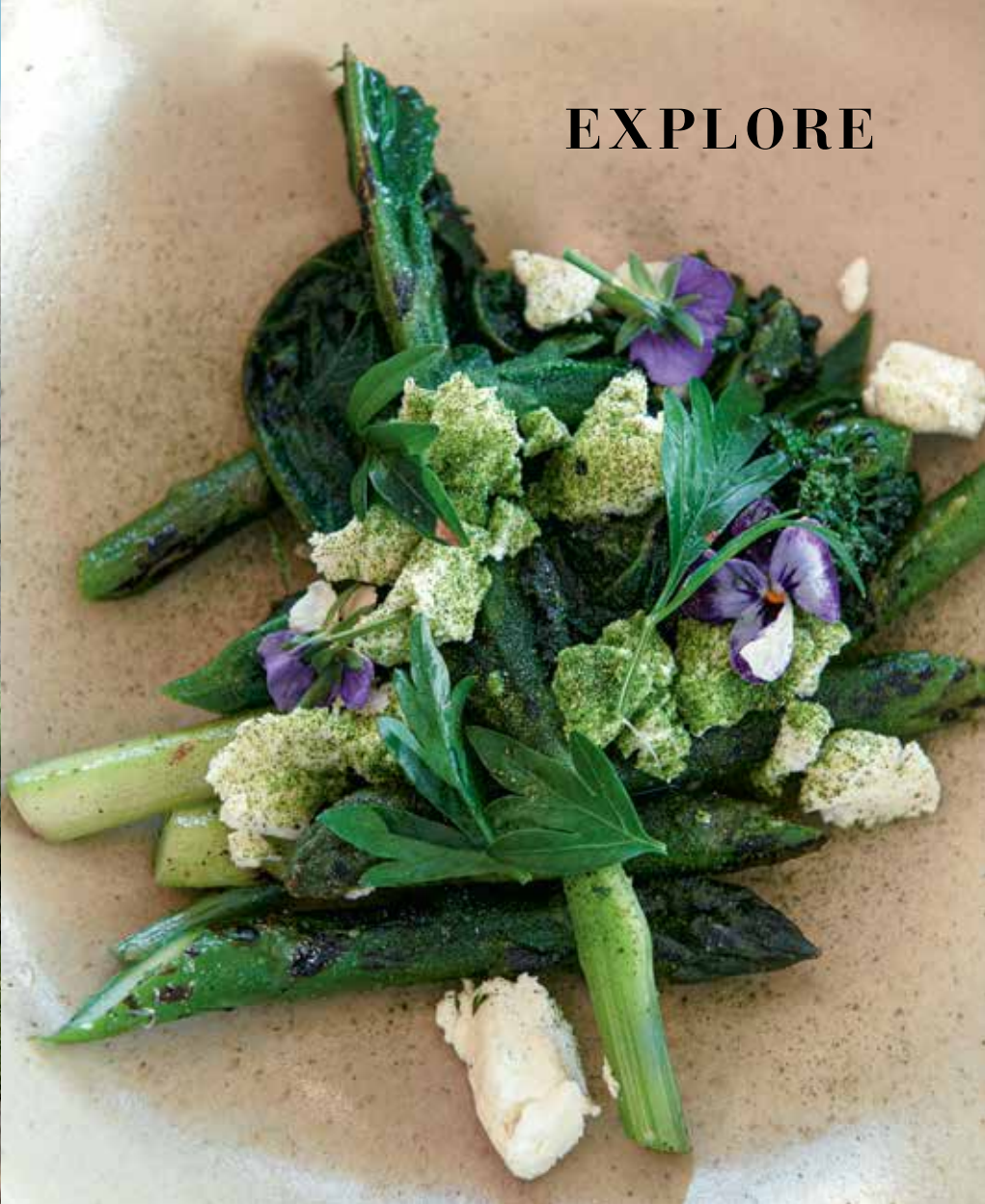
doors. There's a real sense of thoughtful design here, from the salvaged timbers and charitable donations for every direct booking to the homemade yo-yos.

Exceptional cooking is a feature of this seaside hamlet, and at Conlan's Wine Store I feast on dishes such as organic radishes with whipped rosemary yoghurt, gnocchi with spring vegetables from nearby Merri Banks Market Garden, and a gloriously wobbly panna cotta with berries and pecan crumble. In the morning, the Tesla's battery is fully charged and so am I.

On my way home I visit Tower Hill Wildlife Reserve, which sits in a volcanic crater. Levi Geebung, a Bidjara-Gunditjmara guide, presses greenstone axe heads and basalt tools into my hands. Excavated artefacts like these confirm the presence of Aboriginal people in the area when the volcano erupted 30,000 years ago. As interest in green travel blossoms, recognition of the deep knowledge held within Indigenous cultures is also blooming. Geebung tells me how proud he is sharing his heritage with the increasing numbers of visitors who are genuinely keen to learn about how his ancestors managed the land sustainably.

Although the volcano is dormant, there's a resonant fire flickering in Geebung's stories. He shows me grinding stones, thousands of years old, used to make bread from native grasses, the same grasses the Vellas have seen thrive on their Cape Otway property. Geebung plays the yellow-box didgeridoo he painted with his dad that tells the story of the Murray Darling River. He puts on a possum-skin cloak that was an Aboriginal person's "passport, birth certificate and criminal record". The etchings on the cloak convey stories of topography, places, totems and food. They speak of a region shaped by the sun, wind and water. These are the stories of ancient wisdom, of walking lightly on the Earth, and of the raw elements that have shaped the past and will continue to drive us into the future. 🍷

The writer travelled as a guest of Visit Victoria.



GREEN ZONE
Clockwise from above: An extension at Drift House is clad in perforated metal; asparagus salad at Conlan's Wine Store in Port Fairy; inviting interior at Drift House; volcanic hills at Tower Hill Wildlife Reserve.

