

mansfield

Victoria's High Country is aptly named, because it can produce a heady mix of adventure, history, scenic splendour and total indulgence. Susan Gough Henly uses its 'capital' as a base for a high old time



The police memorial (top), the tasting plate at Jamieson Brewery (centre) and getting around on horseback (above).

Craig's Hut is a kind of shrine in the High Country near Mansfield. Built for a movie based on a poem and burned down in last summer's bushfires, people still make the pilgrimage to the site on horseback and in 4WDs. The views are ethereal, the mountain air intoxicating, the cliffs jaw-dropping. But it is the spirit of the hut, and the dozens of other tin-roofed weathered huts that provides shelter from the storms, which evoke the mountain ethos. And while the cattlemen and bushies still talk of training the movie stars for *The Man From Snowy River*, it is Craig's Hut that captures the High Country soul. It will be rebuilt by Australia Day next year.

Last summer's fires tested the region's mettle but the community banded together to survive, just like it has for more than 150 years. Indeed, the majestic mountain ash needs fire for its seeds to germinate. Today, after a winter of replenishing rain, when you explore the high country on foot, by horse or 4WD, you see the entire landscape rejuvenating.

Nestled into a bucolic valley which is surrounded by the rolling foothills of the Great Dividing Range, Mansfield is a gentle old-fashioned sub-alpine

town. Cattle runs were established in the late 1830s in the Mansfield Valley and bullock teams used to do U-turns on the wide main street. These days it is more like a boulevard with a tree-studded grassy strip down the middle and historic buildings lining either side. Mansfield supplied gold mining settlements in the 1850s before focusing on grazing and timber. Today it is a support centre for Mt Buller and the myriad outdoor activities that kick off when the snow melts.

RIDE There's nothing more exhilarating than horse-riding in the High Country. McCormack's Mountain Valley Trail Rides (5775 2886) take novices and experienced riders alike on day and weekend trips through forests of ghostly snow gums and along dramatic mountain ridges. With a stamp of the hoof and a cloudy snort in the frosty mountain air, your horse is a surefooted guide, while you whet your appetite for home-cooked meals and stories around the campfire.

EXPLORE The High Country has fabulous four-wheel drive terrain. Spectacular views and delicious

barbecue picnics are a bonus. Hie Country Scenic Tours (5777 5101) has day and twilight tours to Mt Stirling, The Bluff, King River crossings and Craig's Hut. Stirling Experience (5777 3541) does similar trips in smaller 4WDs. To survey the landscape from the air, try Alpine Helicopter Charters (0428 376 619) Mt Buller is popular for mountain biking, on the roads or the challenging official downhill course. Either way, you can ride the chairlift with or without a bike - 5777 7800.

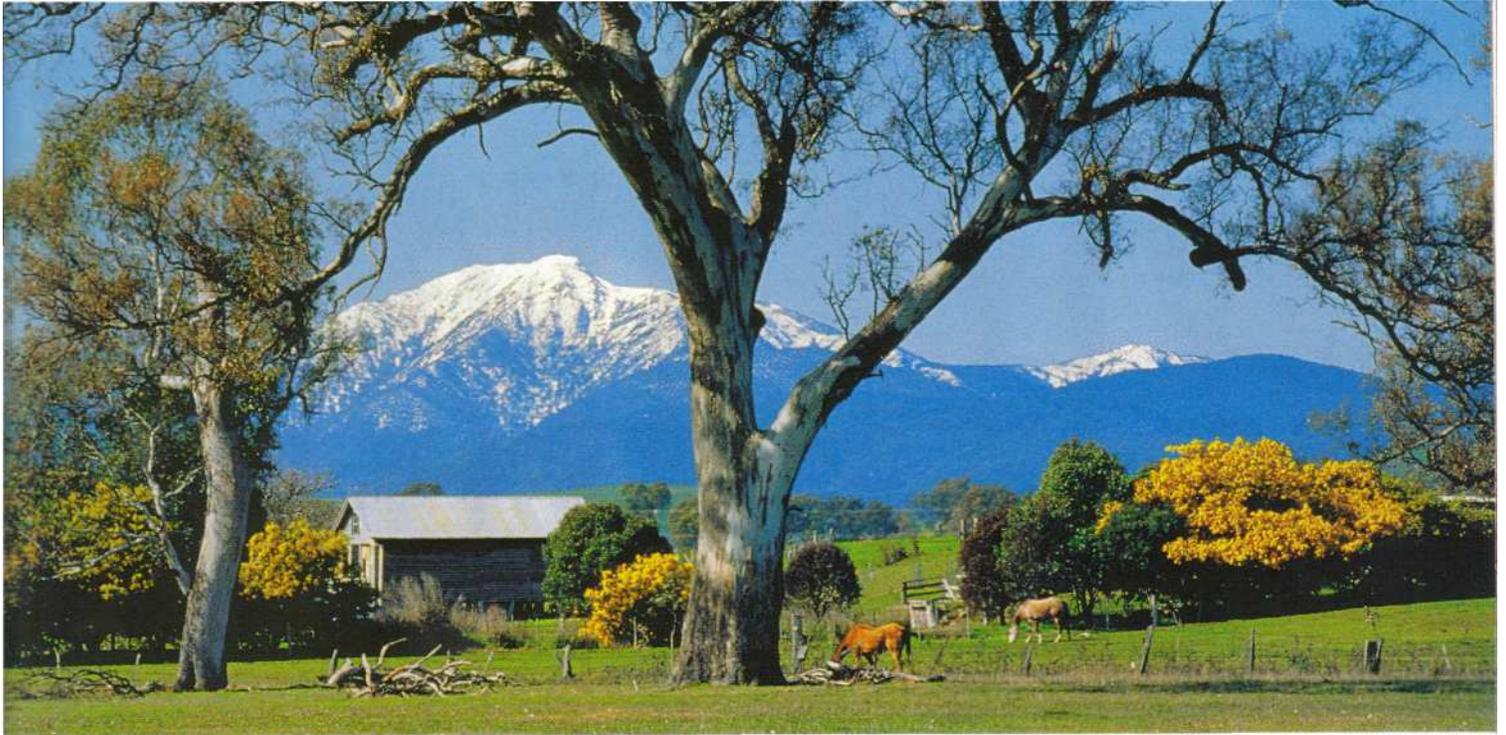
WARM THE COCKLES There is nothing like a country pub. The Merrijig Hunt Club (5777 5508), 20km east of Mansfield on the Mt Buller road, has been a staging *pos* for high-country cattlemen, gold diggers, movie stars, and firefighter; for more than 130 years and it still doubles as a post office. Chat with the locals in the front bar, enjoy a steak in front of a fire and admire the photographs from when *The Man From Snowy River* filmed nearby. The updated Mansfield Put (5775 2101) with its spacious beer garden and good pub grub, has twice been named best Victorian Country Pub. They make their own beer at the Jamieson Brewery Pub (57770515), 33km south of



WILDLIGHT

Fry's Hut, one of the many historic huts dotting the hills around Mansfield.

A perfect picnic setting.



TOURISM VICTORIA

The Great Dividing Range is the perfect backdrop to the serene scenery around Mansfield.

Mansfield - it has raspberry ale, brown ale and a gutsy IPA. Try the beer tasting platter. Ask about the High Country Pub Trail, which takes in 10 local country pubs.

SIP The Upper Goulburn Valley produces cool-climate wines with distinctive aromas. Delatite Winery (5775 2922), off the Woods Point road about 10km south of Mansfield, is the granddaddy of the region. Try its Devil's River and Dungeon Gully red blends. Just down the road is Kinloch Wines (5777 3447), which has a delightful cellar door and a cafe in a converted hay barn, with a terrace overlooking the vines and the mountains.

DETOUR A 30-minute drive through rolling grazing land and open eucalypt forest, past the meandering Howqua River which has fabulous trout fishing, takes you to the pretty hamlet of Jamieson (population 100), which was once a thriving supply town during the gold rush. Stroll the main street to see the historic post office, court house and tiny museum. Perkins and Grey is an airy cafe with a tree-shaded terrace, the sort of place you could lounge all day reading the papers. Start with great coffee and free-range eggs and move on to mixed berry muffins and passionfruit sponge

NED KELLY The ghost of Ned Kelly floats over the entire area. Stringybark Creek, about 25 minutes north of Mansfield, is the site of Ned's murder of the three local policemen, which brought about the proclamation (read from the steps of the Mansfield Courthouse) that declared the Kelly Gang as outlaws. All three policemen are buried in the Mansfield Cemetery and the monument at High and Highett Sts was built in their honour.

EAT The Magnolia Gourmet Country House (5779 1444), on the Mt Buller road on the outskirts of Mansfield serves up inspired fare, with a hint of Austrian influence from chef-owner Christian Bergmoser's homeland, in a beautiful early 20th century building or on the terrace under a 100-year-old magnolia tree. You can stay there in style as well. On the main street of Mansfield, enjoy the rustic chic of the Mansfield Produce Store (5779 1404) for delicious sandwiches on stone-ground bread, a glass of wine and perhaps a prawn laksa with rice noodles. You can also buy homemade preserves, local tomatoes, biodynamic eggs and local pottery.

MORE INFORMATION The Mansfield-Mt Buller High Country Visitor Centre 1800 039 049, www.mansfield-mtbuller.com.au.

Susan Gough Hen/y is a Melbourne travel writer.

RACV CAN HELP For your next Mansfield visit, RACV has full-colour holiday maps, the Experience Victoria touring guide, the RACV Vicroads Country Street Directory plus other holiday resources and accessories - all at discounts to members. Visit any RACV shop, go online to racv.com.au or call the HolidayLine on 13 1329. And every month RoyalAuto's Holiday and Leisure pages list regional accommodation options all over Victoria and interstate - see page 82 of this issue.



