



# High Country CREAM

Laura Waters tackles the Buller Huts Trail in the Victorian Alps, discovering wild mountains, historic huts and summer wildflowers. But it's no walk in the park.

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WORDS *Laura Waters*



The gentle rush of the Delatite River flowing through a treed camp at the base of Mt Buller provides a soothing background to what is a slightly ominous brief from our group leader. "The first day is pretty much all steep down, then it's steep up for a day." Carmen trails a finger across the map spread across a picnic table, continuing her rundown of the week ahead and I see a theme arising – hills. Gnarly ones. "But after Craig's Hut it's all pretty easy from there," Aaron chimes in encouragingly. "That's the last day," I point out. We're embarking on a 96km hike through the Victorian High Country, a circuit taking in eleven peaks that rise and fall like the undulations of a crown. Not entirely suited perhaps to a team of four whose combined challenges include a fear of exposure, a policy of 'no hills', bunions and questionable fitness, but the lure of standing on some of the state's most treasured mountain tops with endless views and the summer wind in our hair has got us glossing over the details. Grade 5 Alpine Trek, the website warns. What does that mean anyway? I'll look it up when I get home.



DOWN TIME

We launch from the village tucked below the summit of Mt Buller, bagging our first peak within an hour. The Victorian Alps ripple into the distance beneath a cloudless sky forecast to stay with us for the week, and in the still air we linger, taking photos, lulled into a false sense of security by the ease of our summit.

But from there it's all downhill. Family Run, an easy ski slope in winter, delivers us to Four Mile Spur, descending steeply through the snow gums. The route is little more than a jumble of boulders and foliage, overgrown and sprinkled with fallen logs. Rocks tilt under my boots as I flick glances away from my feet to search for a rare orange marker or strip of tape dangling from a tree branch.

The forest spits us out onto a knife-edge of rock and I crawl ungainly, trying to stick myself like glue to the roughened granite. A seasoned long-distance hiker, I've got no problem with long hard days of walking but exposure is my Kryptonite. The fact that this bit of scrambling doesn't even rate a mention on the trip notes while other bits later on are causes a little flag of protest to wave in the back of my head.

Back in the forest, the steepness continues. Carola falls on her arse, Carmen falls on her knees, Aaron stuffs earphones into his ears to distract him from the pain of his bunions, but eventually we ford the knee-deep Howqua River signaling the end of an 8km descent.

It was never going to be easy. Hills are unavoidable when you're traipsing around the southern end of the Australian Alps. The tracks have been here for decades, part of a network crisscrossing the mountains for anyone hardy enough to venture into them, but only recently has someone decided to string them together to create a circuit taking in some of the region's highlights. Darren Edwards is passionate about bushwalking. He's the man behind Trail Hiking Australia, a community and online resource set up to promote hiking trails and skills. He loves walking here so much he was inspired to create the route, giving it an official identity and launching it in December 2017. Though we are embarking on it only a month after its launch, already there has been a flurry of hikers through and the words of the lady in the visitor centre on Mt Buller come back to haunt me - "Everyone's coming back saying it's a lot harder than they expected."

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Easy scrambling down Four Mile Spur



ONWARD AND UPWARD

As challenging as the first day is, the second is no easier. Straight out of camp at Eight Mile Flat we begin a 1175m ascent to the top of The Bluff. Manageable at first, it soon steepens drastically as I draw closer to the top of the enormous slab of tilted rock rising from the surrounding landscape like the prow of a ship. I use nubs of rock and tree roots to haul myself up chest high ledges through a series of cliffs to finally reach the summit and relief mingles with amazement at the expansive views.

Yellow flowers smatter the sloping plateau beneath my feet. Rather than being formed by the collision of continents as many mountain ranges are, the Australian Alps were created by the splitting apart of one giant one – Gondwana. In the stretching of the earth's crust it became thinner allowing magma from deep below to rise, pushing up the land to form the expansive high plateaus that are so common here.

To the north I spy a cluster of tiny buildings, the village of Mt Buller, distanced by the valley now between us. I used to work there. For two winter seasons I gazed across at this Bluff, marveling at the long line of seemingly sheer cliffs dusted with snow against pinky-purple sunsets. It's exhilarating to be standing on it, looking back.

Carmen is first to join me, and soon after Carola. For someone who, until only months ago, had "avoided walks over 10km, or walks with uphill or downhill sections" she's doing well. With Aaron returned to the fold we continue on and it's the stuff hikers dream of, a relatively even trail winding along the top of the Bluff giving maximum visual reward with minimal effort.



Hells Window



"Come morning my quads are as tight as trapeze wires".



Hells Window campx



Traversing the Bluff

HUT HERITAGE

The links that bind this trail are the historic mountain huts that dot the High Country. Built by early pioneers and cattlemen who used to drive their herds on the alpine grass, they now serve as emergency shelters for hikers and other visitors. Bluff Hut is our first. It's Australia's third highest and though constructed in draughty corrugated iron, the enormous fireplace inside has no doubt warmed many a weary traveller in snow and gales over the years.

Come morning my quads are as tight as trapeze wires but I reassure myself with the thought of the short day ahead. It's only 13.5km to the next camp at Hells Window but a lack of water at the small creek hiding in an adjacent gully means we are forced to push on down a detour to Macalister Springs and our 'short day' turns into the longest yet at 11 hours.

But it's the multitude of highlights along this route that make it so good. When the body is flagging, there's nothing like a little

eye candy to take the mind off things. There are havens of twisted snow gums with white daisies clustered around them like adoring fans, the historic Lovick's Hut and then Picture Point with spectacular postcard views. The track joins the Australian Alps Walking Track, descending through dense pockets of wildflowers in white, yellow and pink, before climbing again over Mt Magdala. Hells Window is heavenly, an abrupt cutout from a fin of rock thrusting steeply from the landscape, perfectly framing the mountains beyond.

The oval plateau of Mt Howitt's summit sprawls for three quarters of a kilometre offering endless views but I get cold waiting for the rest of my crew. Aaron is quiet but stoic on arrival. I ask him how his bunions are. "Oh it's okay." He smiles bravely. "They only hurt when I go downhill."

By day's end my muscles are screaming. I voice my concerns about the gnarly nature of the trail to a fellow hiker already camped at Macalister Springs. The next day is billed as a hard

one – a traverse of Crosscut Saw, an exposed ridge with jagged little undulations, then over Mt Buggery and on to Mt Speculation – and I wonder how we will fare if we are to face anything tougher than what we've already experienced.

"This trail is not for everyone", says John and I have to agree. For the slick website that tempted us, it's a wild and rough route and in this way it bucks expectations. There is no tidy string of signs saying 'Buller Huts Trail' – in fact very little signage at all. This is terrain for people who know what they're doing – people who can navigate, read the weather, make good decisions and know when it's safe to cross rivers [everything, I later discover, that defines a Grade 5 walk].

THE HIGH LIFE

We leave at dawn, climbing back up to the main trail to tackle the Saw. The rising sun shimmers through folds of mist slotted between distant valleys. The trail is narrow in places with steep

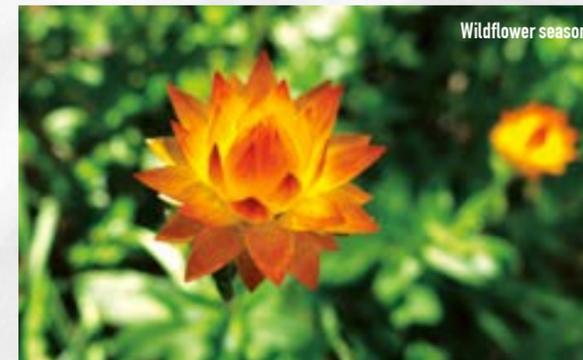
Scrambling up Mt Speculation



# Buller Hut s • TRAIL •



The iconic Craig's Hut



Wildflower season



Mt Speculation camp



There are six river crossings

drops to either side but the surface is solid underfoot, the weather clear, the air still, and we savour the spectacular views. Mt Buller gazes back at me again from a distance, showing me another side of her sprawling bulk.

We sweat and burn, over Mt Buggery and on to begin the ascent of Mt Speculation. From a distance it looks fairly gentle, up a grassy ridge cut with steps of tilted rock, but once upon it I realise the 'steps' are a series of sizeable scrambles. I grunt and whimper unhappily, hoisting body and pack upwards while bracing outstretched legs on small footholds just a foot's length away from precipitous drops. One after the other come the 'waves' of rock, interspersed with grassy fields of flowers, but finally I crest my last to summit the peak.

Perhaps everyone has found their feet or perhaps they dig deeper, rising to the gauntlet thrown down by this trail, but somehow by early afternoon all of us are perched on top of Mt Speculation, our walking day done. One of the finest campsites in the High Country, its expansive views encompass a few more of the regions highlights including the notoriously rugged cliffs of The Viking, and the soft pink sunset and burnt orange sunrise are truly dazzling.

### IT'S A WRAP

The final few days are markedly shorter if not easier. The descent of the Muesli Track feels little more than a rock chute sprinkled with patches of dirt that we slip and slide to reach camp at King River Hut in time to escape the forty degree heat in the river's icy waters. Day six gives us five decent river crossings and a 675m climb to our last camp where Craig's Hut stands amidst a high grassy meadow, owning the landscape like the movie star it is. Built as a set for 1982 film The Man From Snowy River, it is the classic mountain hut, perfectly framed by Mt Cobbler in the background.

Spots of rain greet our last morning, building to a steady drizzle as we leave the summit of Mt Stirling for the final few hours back to Mt Buller and I thank our lucky stars we've managed to avoid it until now. Rain, wind or limited visibility would have made the trail an entirely different creature, one that might have punished us squarely for our cavalier approach to it.

As it is, the route claims a total of four toenails and strips a good few kilos from our bodies but it was all undoubtedly worth it. The complexities of the trail's multiple land managers and the desire to keep it somewhat wild means that extensive signage and track maintenance are unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future, but in a world where the wild is increasingly sanitized for the mass market I actually like it this way. Like anything in life, when the challenge is great, the reward is greater. **0**