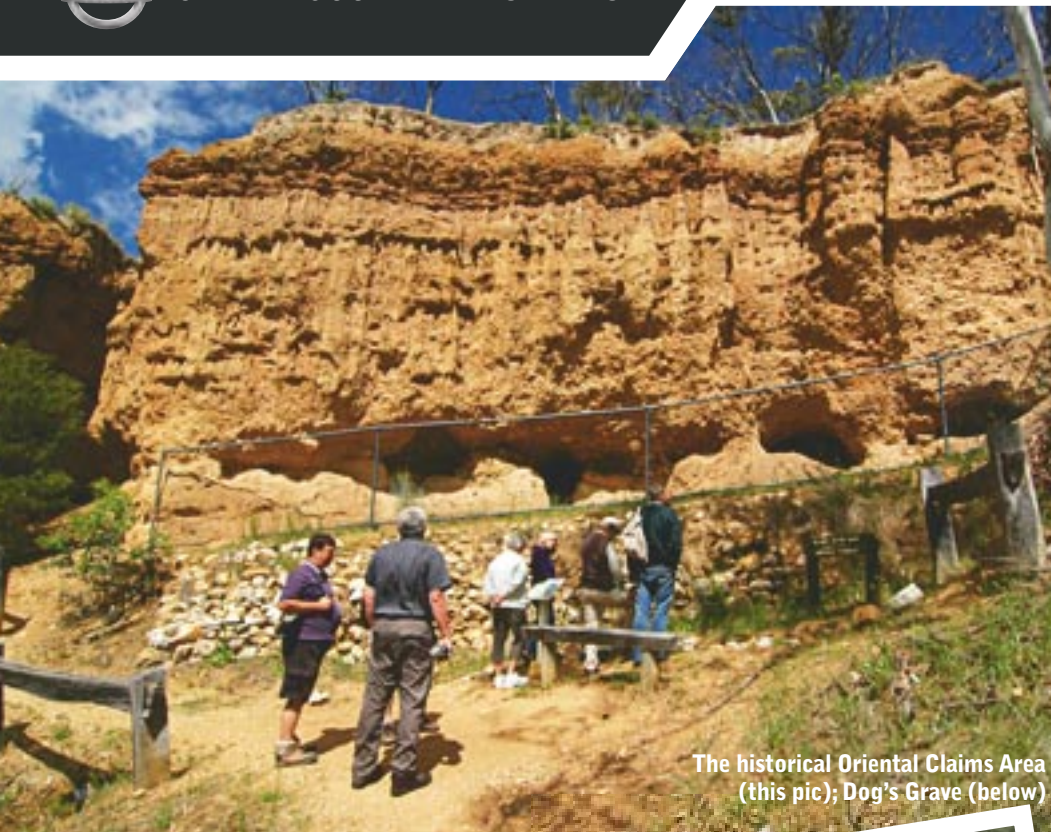


MOUNTAINS OF GOLD

Victoria's High Country is packed with tales of gold-chasing misadventure,

ALLAN WHITING travels the high roads that led to riches and ruin

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The historical Oriental Claims Area (this pic); Dog's Grave (below)

Tens of thousands of fortune-seekers flooded into the rugged mountains of Victoria's High Country in the 19th century chasing gold. Towns were swiftly created – and just as swiftly deserted – as repeated gold-strikes lured entire communities to their next potential fortune.

This comfortable two-day journey through spectacular mountain scenery, with an overnight camp near Dargo River, offers a taste of life in those heady gold-rush days. It's an easy soft-roader trip, in good weather.

Our trek starts in Omeo, a picturesque, historic town in the foothills of Victoria's Alps. It's worth taking the time to wander through town, which is rich in gold-mining history. Many buildings have been tastefully restored and the Historical Park and Museum are must-sees. Omeo has ample supplies, a camping area and several motels.

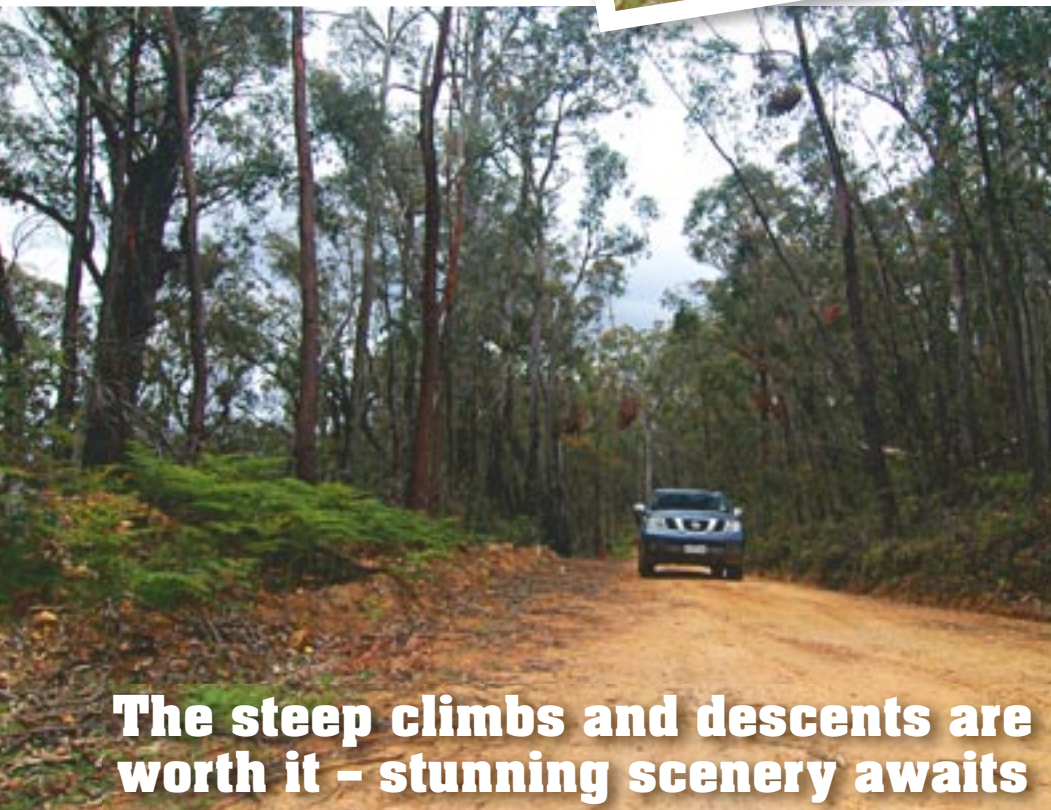
The Oriental Claims Area, 2km out of town, is the trek's first stop. When alluvial gold was discovered here in 1851 a rush ensued and Chinese workers were dominant among the miners. There's a short walk through the old diggings, with informative placards at important sites. There's ample evidence of the water-channelling needed to bring creek water to the sluices used to tear away alluvial deposits and reveal gold.

You can also try your fly-fishing hand in the nearby creek.

From the carpark it's a short drive to turn-offs leading into the hills. Upper Livingstone Road and Birregun Road are well-graded gravel surfaces that climb to a plateau, before heading down into Dargo River Valley.

Interesting sites along the road are the old hut, that still serves as emergency accommodation, and Dog's Grave.

Dog's Grave is a beautiful memorial to a drover's dog. Cobungra cattleman Peter Meehan's dog, 'Boney', died here and Peter

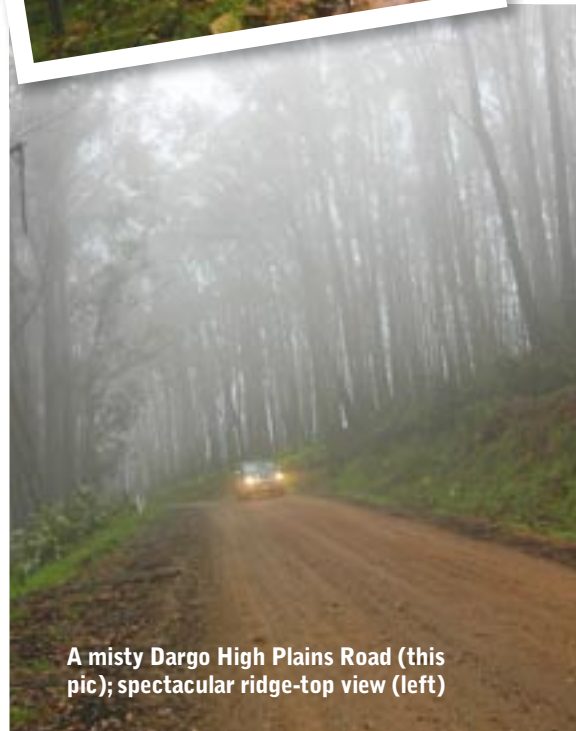


The steep climbs and descents are worth it – stunning scenery awaits





The banks of Dargo River make a fantastic camp site



A misty Dargo High Plains Road (this pic); spectacular ridge-top view (left)

erected a cairn in the dog's memory. Since then, a Melbourne monument maker has replaced the original pile of stones with a gravestone worthy of a prince. Bush poetry, inspired by the event, is engraved nearby.

Dog's Grave makes an ideal lunch stop and from here it's an easy 30km run to our suggested campsite at Upper Dargo. The best positions are close to the river bank, near the shade of trees lining the bubbling waterway.

In summer, Dargo River is an ideal swimming location and a perfect fishing spot.

Upper Dargo Road intersects with Dargo High Plains Road only 5km from the camping area. The township of Dargo is a further 15km south.

However, our trek turns north onto Dargo High Plains Road and heads for the alpine

beauty around Hotham Heights.

The trek takes in a short detour to the Grant Historic Area, site of the former Dargo Crooked River Goldfields. The gold rush started in 1860, with the discovery of alluvial gold on Crooked River. This strike had been largely depleted by 1864 and the population of nearby Bulltown had dropped from 1000 to less than 500.

A larger strike in 1865 led to the formation of Grant, a town with more than 2000 people, 22 pubs, four banks, a post office, a stock exchange, several stores and its own newspaper; *The Crooked River Chronicle*.

The nature of the mining turned to hard rock and the cost of the venture went up. Even so, the Good Hope Mine won nearly 48,000 ounces (about 1.4 ton) of gold during a

lifetime that endured until 1916. Sadly, there's not much left of Grant these days, just sign-posted sites of the town's former businesses.

On the tracks around town are some mining relics, but nature has assumed ownership of this once-populous area.

From Grant, our trek returns to Dargo High Plains Road and continues north through the High Plains region to the intersection with the resort road from Bright to Mt Hotham. This stretch of good gravel road is one of the most beautiful drives in the High Country.

Along the way there is evidence of the summer cattle-grazing lifestyle that is soon to be no more. As has happened at Grant, the fences and gates will one day be gone and nature will rule this high altitude country once again.