

The Victorian Riviera: Gippsland Lakes

Report by Di Ross, general photographs by John Batty



The Gippsland Lakes, long promoted as a boating Mecca, gives the boat owner all the freedoms to explore, take in the sights and enjoy your boat and all the activities associated with cruising to the maximum. Sounds idyllic, or too good to be true? Well, we were keen to check it out for ourselves, and share our experience with you.

The lakes system consists of four main bodies of water, Lake King, Lake Victoria, Lake Reeve and Lake Wellington. The renowned "Big Three" rivers, the Mitchell, the Nicholson and the Tambo flow into Lake King. The Macallister, La Trobe and Thomson Rivers merge, flowing through swamp land and the Avon meanders through marshy flats to eventually join Lake Wellington.

Why the Gippsland Lakes from such a distance you may ask? Well, during the winter of last year, we were enjoying a little of the northern warmth and stopped for a short time at Yamba. Watching the pelicans and gulls scrap over trimmings as some fishers cleaned their catch, and with a line cast out just for luck, conversation struck up with a delightful couple enjoying the same.

They hailed from the Gippsland Lakes, Newlands Arm in fact, having spent most of their lives in the area and been part of the boating scene in many ways. The profile of the area they gave us was inspiring - it convinced us that our plan to visit should be put in place sooner rather than later and again proving that everyday people provide the best in tourism representation.

Despite The Bushfires

So let's go... with no particular reason, launching at the eastern end of the lakes system. The sun is shining, it's warm, almost balmy, ideal for boating activities. It's a shame that the smoke from the bushfires around Omeo linger and have done so for several weeks.

Whilst it is a little disappointing, we spare a thought for those in the highland regions that have suffered loss, their homes, personal possessions, fodder and stock, but thankfully, no lives. Visibility, both onshore and offshore, is at the mercy of the wind direction, with the smoke often casting a gilt edge to the rippling waters, producing an eerie perspective and some spectacular sunsets. That's Australia and regardless, the smoke cannot detract from the peace and serenity of the lakes and the surrounding wilderness which

so many people speak about.

Lakes Entrance (pop 6000+ which near doubles during the Christmas and Easter holidays) is a thriving tourist town with a cosmopolitan atmosphere, boasting to be Australia's largest fishing port. Regardless, it is certainly the premier fishing port in Victoria, with more than 100 boats in its commercial fleet, which moor in the protected waters of Cunninghams' Arm.

The wharves become a hive of activity when the trawlers are dispersing their holds of lobsters, scallops, prawns, abalone, pilchards and "catch of the day" species. The operators/workers are a very friendly lot and seem to enjoy interaction with the public.

For example, Steve Melissakis, Fleet Master for Kivelos Fisheries gave us a run down on the scallop processing industry and explained that much of the harvest is exported with only a relatively small percentage sold for domestic use. Granted it is the "off season" for scallops, but Steve kindly invited us into his office (a converted work vessel) to "chew the fat" and take in the activities close at hand.

Whilst fresh seafood is available direct from some fishing trawlers there is also a wholesale/retail co-op on Bullock Island (accessible by water and road) in case your catch tank is empty. A well patronised viewing platform nearby gives you a close up look at the unloading of commercial catches. The town is also a main depot for the large Bass Strait oil rigs, some of which can be seen from Kalimna (Jemmys Point), just before the highway descent down the escarpment, into the town.

The necessary infrastructure to logistically support the operations and maintenance aspects of this industry has indeed benefited the town and no doubt employment levels. The man made entrance to the lakes system is reportedly one of the most dangerous in Australia, with a long history of mishaps, some minor, some tragic.

It is very shallow by standards and requires constant dredging as do many of the channels around the nearby islands. There is a set protocol for vessels traversing the entrance in either direction. Some large sand bars have formed in Reeve Channel adjacent to Rigby, Fraser and

Brief History of the Gippsland

The Brabralong and Tatungalung clans of the Kurnai people were the original inhabitants, later generations now being the elders, are still within the area. Many archaeological sites and middens containing shellfish remains, charcoals, pebbles and implements evidence their activities over 10,000 years back.

The first European to see the Gippsland Lakes and Wilderness were the crew of Captain James Cook's "Endeavour" in April 1770. Zachary Hicks, the first lieutenant aboard, spied the rocky headland, subsequently named Point Hicks. The first European to traverse the lakes district was Polish explorer Paul Strzlecki. He titled this lush rain forested fertile area Gippsland, in honour of Governor George Gipps, the Governor of New South Wales during 1838 to 1846.

The first settler in the area was Angus McMillan in 1840, who named the Mitchell River. Shortly after, in 1842, the MacLeod family settled the area which is now Bairnsdale. Archibald Macleod established a sizeable cattle run which he called "Bernisdale" after his birthplace on the Isle of Skye. It is believed the name was altered to fit local pronunciation.

The early settlers avidly cleared the natural forest in their ventures and today there remains but a few original rain forest outcrops, mostly higher up in the Great Dividing Ranges. The original seaward entrance to the lakes system was reported by John Reeve also in 1842. This entrance silted up and rendered the lakes land locked, except during peak floods from highland thaws when fresh water would spill over the dunes into the Tasman along the Ninety Mile Beach. Whilst there have been many shipwrecks along the seaboard, the earliest and still evident today is that of the "Trunculo" which came to grief in 1852.

With the gold rush hit in the 1850's came an influx of miners from all walks of life and many Chinese. The forests were felled for the construction of mines and associated settlements. As a result the township of Bairnsdale prospered and after the gold dwindled many chose to stay returning to their original professions and/or turning their talents to market gardens and farms.

Bairnsdale was formerly declared a town in 1860. The area was renowned for hops, wheat, maize and oats crops grown along the fertile river flats of the Mitchell where the steamer traffic hustled and bustled. The rail came to Bairnsdale in 1888 and extended through Orbost in the east in 1916, the natural forests, providing a ready source of materials, were again heavily harvested.

The present entrance from the sea was man made, completing in 1889. The Lakes Entrance Salmon Company commenced commercial operations in 1900. Oil was discovered at Lake Bunga, to the east of Lakes Entrance, in 1924 adding to local development by way of this industry.

In 1939 vast areas of forest in other parts of Victoria were razed by fire and Gippsland became the primary source of hardwood timber. Consequently, there was a call for conservation of the diminished forests paving the way for National Parks and Conservation Reserves.

The 1960s saw the opening of the first large fishmeal plant and during the 1970s and 1980s, the Lakes Entrance commercial fishing fleet became one of the most important seafood resources in Australia.