



The Howqua Hills Historic Area, colloquially known as Sheeppyard, is just a 40-minute picnic destination from my Mansfield backdoor and a 3-4 hour drive North East of Melbourne. Overnight picnics are our favourite, but it's a great day trip destination past undulating pastureland and, if the season is right, snow on Mt Buller and surrounding peaks.



You might catch a glimpse of Mt Buller.

Turn right at the sign 3km past Merrijig and feel the stress and worries disappear as you pass through the beautiful Mansfield State Forest.

You're now on Howqua Track. A windy 16km dry weather access gravel road, suitable for even the smallest 2WD driven to the conditions.



Be careful of the blind corners on the track.

Stick to the left and keep your wits about you. The track has many blind corners, and it's not uncommon to meet a knucklehead kicking up dust and coming too fast.

The corners are not too tight for a caravan or a horse trailer, just take them carefully.

Pullover, and let anyone caught behind you go past. You'll both benefit from the decision.

Not far in, just after the Timbertop Track sign, I recommend you stop at an often-missed lookout across the Mansfield Valley. The view is remarkable even on a hazy day.



On the drive up, stop to see the view over the Mansfield Valley.

A prime spot for a refreshing dip

Once you arrive at the Howqua River, you're at Sheeppyard Flat. Check the noticeboards at the shelter shed just over the bridge. There are ranger notices, general advice and a map indicating the assortment of day areas and campgrounds at various river flats nearby.



You're now on the Howqua Track.

Avoid if you can, Christmas and Easter holidays when literally thousands descend on the valley. In the warmer months, it's still crowded, but not as chaotic. We like to visit in the cooler weather to have the pick of the whole place.

Much of the area is seasonal camping only. Roads and tracks are closed from June to November and locked gates should not be tampered with. This is not only a safety issue but protects the environment too. Dates and road closures can be found on the [Parks Vic website](#).



The campsites at Sheeppyard Flat.

The campsites are flat, and grassy after rain and the drop loos are clean and maintained.

Swimming in the often icy river is refreshing. There are deep swim holes and shallow toddler-friendly spots by the bank. After the snow melts or it rains, the current can be strong, so be wary when you're in the water.



There are some spots near the river that are suitable for families.



Stroll into the past

The Friends of Howqua Hills and Parks Victoria have joined forces to explain the hardship of the early settlers and gold miners. A key result of this collaboration is a 3km return walk between Sheepyard and Fred Frys Hut at Frys Flat.



Check out the path that leads to Frys Hut.

Allow two-hours for a comfortable return trip. The uneven self-guided track is well-trodden and suitable for a young family, but not a pram.

Starting from Sheepyard, the walk to the little bridge is about a third of the way and a good indication of the terrain towards Frys. If your children find that difficult, turn back. If they're not happy, you won't be either.

The interpretive signage scattered along the shady path highlights the area's gold mining and indigenous history.



During the walk, you'll see the heritage-listed chimney.

Halfway along the track you'll come across a heritage-listed chimney used when ore was furnace roasted to coagulate the elements and fine pieces of gold. This was a relatively common practice in the 1860s. The chimney is a rare and valuable example of the purpose-built gold rush infrastructure.

Bring a picnic, or snacks, a drink, your hat, swimmers and a towel. There are easily accessed spots to stop for a swim or paddle close to the path and at Frys Flat.



Take a picnic lunch to enjoy with the family.

Active in the outdoors

Howqua Hills Historic Area is the perfect base for many activities.

Closeby, Tunnel Bend provides another history lesson. The 100m tunnel entrance can be seen near the base of the steps at Tunnel Bend, and the old water race on the road above.



This spot is a great base for bushwalking.

Bushwalkers are well served with the Timbertop Track hike, Lickhole Creek and Eagles Peaks and the high and low Track walks along the Howqua.

There are a couple of horse yards available too for those who prefer horseback. These must be pre-booked, and use is limited between November and May.



If you like to ride, you can book a horse yard in advance.

If touring with your 4X4, mountain or motorbike, scenic and challenging tracks abound. Motorbikes must be ridden by licenced riders and on formed roads.



You have to have a licence to ride on the tracks.

Local police, motorbike units and rangers visit regularly to advise and ensure everyone is keeping to the 4X4 tracks and staying safe. They'll gratefully trade their best tips over a cuppa if they've time.

Bring your own firewood for use in the established fire pits. Collecting or cutting wood for



personal use is not allowed at Howqua Hills or the neighbouring Mansfield State Forest and Alpine National Park.



Be safe out on the tracks.

Fire ratings and guidelines

Bushfire safety is your responsibility.

It's important to stay aware of the weather conditions and forecast, especially during bushfire season. No fires may be lit on Total Fire Ban days.

If you're concerned, pack up and leave, drive out to where there is phone service or to Merrijig and stop at the pub and ask for updates.



Bring your own firewood from home.

Howqua Hills Historical Area is in the North-East fire district. The VicEmergency website, smartphone app or 1800 226 226 Hotline, are great resources to have before leaving home. The info hut will give you some information, but bushfire safety is your responsibility. Ask your camp neighbours or the park's staff for updates. Do not depend on your mobile as service is limited.



Ensure your campfire is extinguished.

At all times, always ensure your campfire is attended or extinguished. It's not enough to simply pour cold water over the top of the coals, be sure to check the coals under the ashes too.

Don't forget, all rubbish must be taken out with you. Take it to the Mansfield transfer station or back home with you for disposal. Fines apply if you're caught leaving it behind or dumping it in the council street or a local's rubbish bin.



Whatever you bring with you has to be packed out.

Delivery to your door

There are two good supermarkets and many other traders in Mansfield. If you need to top up, ice and some basic supplies can be purchased from the Merrijig Motor Inn and High Country Hotel on Mt Buller Rd at the top of Howqua Track.



Drive up to Sheeppyard Flat to explore or relax.

To truly relax, use this insider's tip.

If camping in peak season, drop in at the Mansfield Mt Buller info centre for the latest news. Ask if the fellow who delivers newspapers, ice and other provisions to Howqua Hills is working. Get his number and place an order.

Then drive in and set up, sit back and listen to the river.

What's the most interesting historical site you've visited in Australia?