



This is a short piece about a week's trip to the Dargo High Plains in Victoria. The trip took place in the autumn that was more 'Indian summer' than a precursor to winter. That's right: April 2016.

We left Adelaide early April intending to camp with friends on the Murray River near Echuca, then join a group in the high country for five days of four wheel drive exploration. Turns out we spent three days on the banks of the Murray doing nothing. Wonderful! But then we had a date with the high plains to keep. Leaving the Murray mid-morning we headed for Bright, the northern gateway to the alpine country.

We had never been to Bright, so went to the **Alpine Visitors Centre on Anderson Street** to ask about free camping in the area. These Information Centres are a favourite resource of ours in areas where we don't know anyone and have never visited. The staff have good knowledge of the area and can supply useful maps. In fact, we used Information Centers three times on this trip. Once in Echuca to find fresh water and a particular shop, then Bright, and Korumburra on the way home to find campsites. All were friendly and helpful.



Dargo is surrounded by national parks and wilderness areas, just waiting to be explored by 4WD and on foot!

We arrived in Bright mid-afternoon and having been to the Information Center, we found a camp on the banks of Morses Creek, 3km to the south-east.

Bright is a very picturesque township. The trees at this time of year add a startling splash of colour. Reds, oranges and yellows with the light and dark greens of the evergreens against the clear blue sky. And quite a variety of coffee shops.



And the cloud becomes thick.

The start of the High Country

This was the start of the High Country: tall timber, rushing creeks and steep-sided valleys. Strangely, the weather was not really cold. I don't know what the temperature was overnight but certainly nowhere near zero, as I had expected. More on that subject later. The next day was truly into the High Country: heading south down the Alpine Way to the Dargo High Plains Road turnoff.

The Alpine Way is a good tar road, but the Dargo road is dirt and rough in places as you would expect from a road covered in snow for part of the year. I would hesitate to take a trailer that wasn't off-road capable on this road. It's closed in winter.

The road from Bright to Dargo

The road from Bright to Dargo is spectacular. Deep valleys, tall slender trees, mountain ridges that hide the horizon and make one thankful for cars to travel in. We set off from Bright in the sunshine that continued to the Dargo turnoff. Then we entered intermittent low cloud that continued to Dargo.

This was true High Plains country, with large areas of relatively flat ground covered in mountain grasses, bounded either by the tree line or wooden post-and-wire fences and then dropping into the deep valleys where there was quite likely to be broad flat grazing areas.



Cattle are grazed in designated areas during the summer months and are then mustered out of the mountains into the low country for winter. That normally happens in April. There were no signs of the muster in late April this year.

I have walked through the area at this time of year (fifty years ago!) and been caught by the weather – snowed in for three days in an alpine hut. This year we were in shorts. I don't know what's happening with the weather but I still wouldn't trust it. Watch it all the time.

Dargo is a small community of about 150 permanent residents, two pubs and a general store with fuel and basic items. The community has an excellent sense of humour.



Wonnangatta Caravan Park – home base for our stay in the Dargo High Plains.

Staying at the Wonnangatta Caravan Park

We stayed at the **Wonnangatta Caravan Park in Waterford**, 7km south of Dargo. We were part of a group of ten cars and caravans, so it was convenient for us. It doesn't look much from the road but the park is over the ridge on the valley floor and is definitely worth a look. It's a beautiful place. The facilities are all there – a bit primitive but they work.

If you have a smaller group and are looking for free camping, there are many options, mainly along the valley floors. Some have toilets and that's all. The water from the rivers may be drinkable but take a good look upstream first.



All settled in for our week of 4WDing.

4WD tracks, fishing and hiking in the area

We were going to be there for five days of four wheel driving and exploring in the mountains north and west of Dargo. This area is known for its 4WD tracks, fishing, hiking, and deer hunting. I'm no fisherman so can't speak for that challenge, but the local store had a room full of fishing gear. It also had plenty of hiking equipment. Something that is not undertaken lightly in this country. I've mentioned the weather, but getting lost in this country is no joke. It is seriously up and down so getting lost can be exhausting. Maps are essential. Two good ones are the Hema High Country Victoria (1:200,000) and the SV Maps Dargo High Plains 4WD map (1:100,000), both **available from Snowys**.

Testing our driving abilities on the tracks

We had three days of brilliant weather. Bright sun and still air with warm days and cool nights. We had an experienced leader with us and on the first three days explored many excellent 4WD tracks along the Crooked River and Wonnangatta River valleys. This tested our driving ability and the car's capability and showed us some breathtaking scenery. The views from the ridge tops have to be seen to be believed, and the peace of the valleys makes one want to stay. Two only will I mention.



Billy Goat Track

The Pinnacle at the top of the Billy Goat Track gives a fantastic view of the surrounding mountains and valleys. The track itself is supposed to be one of the most challenging in the area but a bulldozer had cleaned it up for forestry work a month before, so it wasn't a huge test. But it is still as steep, as the name suggests.



The infamous Billy Goat Track near Dargo. You can see where it gets its name, right?

The second was a restored cattleman's hut. The last resident living there was Harry Smith who died in 1945. Harry was involved in the Wonnangatta Station murders in 1918, which were never solved. **Look at the Harry's Hut website**, it gives an idea of the solid strength of the people of that era. This hut and the valley where it stands are typical of the land and the people who lived there.



A typical High Country view.

Exploring the gold rush towns of Grant and Talbotville

Then it rained. So the next day was spent exploring the area on tracks that weren't made too slippery by the rain, and looking at some of the more accessible and little-known sights. The Dog's Grave. The sites of the gold rush towns of Grant and Talbotville where nothing remains. The cemetery in the bush where graves are dotted amongst the tall eucalypts.

This is a country where loneliness is common, and it breeds some strong characters. The last day was up and down tracks that we hadn't explored yet, and weren't closed by the weather.



The High Plains offers up all sorts of interesting terrain.

Heading home via the Queenscliff-Sorrento ferry

Then home to Adelaide via the Queenscliff-Sorrento ferry. This was fun but expensive. On the way, we had to spend another night on the road just past Korumburra. There were no free camping spots marked on the map so we went to the Information Centre again. No worries – 10 km west on the highway to Bena, then 7 km north to a roadside campsite. We were not alone, but there was plenty of room.

In ending this piece on the beautiful Victorian High Plains I will make two observations.

There are those who criticise four wheel drivers quite viciously. In this area, conservation is done by two principal groups. The Parks Victoria people and 4WD clubs. Without the 4WD clubs, little restoration of the area would be done, and there would be no rescues for stranded 2WDers, and hikers in trouble.

Safety considerations for the area

The second point is safety. This area can be seriously difficult. It is not country in which to go off road on your own. If you need alone time stay on the easy tracks and tell people where you are going.



Whilst we were there a trail bike rider walked into the campsite. He had been walking for four hours from where his bike failed. That night the weather broke. He was lucky. We rescued his bike in the morning. He had a UHF radio but there was difficult reception in the mountains. All in all, the Dargo High Plains is an area well worth a visit.

Have you visited this part of the country? Tell us about your trip in the comments below.