



In April 2016 my wife Linda and I hiked the Great Ocean Walk along the south coast of Victoria. For a comprehensive guide of what to expect on the track – **where it is, length, supply points, water availability, accommodation**, and so on, go to the end of the article.

Apollo Bay to Elliot Ridge (via Princetown)

The mist was slowly clearing as we made our way along the sandy track. It had been a cold night, but we were warmed by the strengthening sun. The coastline was still not to be seen, though we could hear the waves as they crashed ashore below us.

This was our first day and we were heading to the end of the Great Ocean Walk so we could start at the beginning. Sounds a bit strange I know – it worked like this.

Linda and I had left our car and caravan at Princetown, which is around 7km from the end of the walk, at The Twelve Apostles. The official end of the Great Ocean Walk is Gibson Steps. The Twelve Apostles car park is a little past the steps but it was where we would catch a bus to take us to the start of the walk at Apollo Bay.



Serious hikers have messy campsites, right?

Starting at Princetown

Princetown was the only secure place we could find to leave our vehicle while we did the walk. It also meant that we would be walking back to our car. So, doing the last 7km first meant we would finish back at our car which saves doing any car shuffling.

Once on the bus, it was a relaxing ride along the Victorian coast to Apollo Bay. There we had lunch, made a quick visit to the information centre to get the latest track report, and we were off. Of course, the first thing we did was head along the wrong road out of town, but we soon sorted this out and were then on track.

Length, walking options and accommodation

The Great Ocean Walk is 100km long and can be done from end-to-end as we were doing, or as a series of day or shorter multi-day walks. It's easy to access shorter sections as there are numerous car access points along its length. Guided walks are also available with transfers and accommodation. There are campsites for walkers, and for car-based camping. The campsites are not too far apart, so you can have short or long days to suit your pace.

Bookings are essential at each campsite, which is done online before you start.

The track mostly follows the coastline, with spectacular views in both directions. Sometimes the track wanders inland, and you travel along dirt roads through a mixture of farmland and dense forest. But mostly you hug the coastline, going over ridges and through gullies which can be a little steep at times.

There are several sections where the track goes along a beach or rock platform. These sections are often covered by the sea at high tide. In some cases, you can take an alternative route inland. But on occasions, there are no other routes that can be taken. You have to time these sections to avoid high tide, as there may be no escape route if you find yourself caught



on a beach with the tide coming in.



Some parts of the track are pretty steep.

Our first night

The roar of the traffic soon faded as we left the town and were on the track proper. Our first night was at the Elliot Ridge campsite, which we easily made that afternoon. We came upon a sign that said the campsite was 700 metres away, but unfortunately at the top of a reasonably steep hill. It was good to reach the campsite, set up camp and get the stove on for a hot cuppa. There is a common shelter at each Great Ocean Walk campsite, as well as water tanks. If there hasn't been any rain, the tanks may be very low, or even empty. The information centre at Apollo Bay will advise you of water availability at the campsites before you set out.

We were sharing the campsite with a school group and another walker. It was a dark, peaceful night and we slept well. Next morning, we were up as soon as it got light – had breakfast, packed up and we were on our way for day two.

Elliot Ridge to Parker Hill

On our second day, the trail followed a vehicle access track that climbed steadily through dense forest taking us inland at first, before returning to the coast at Blanket Bay. Some of the rivers we would have to cross were unbridged. Fortunately, we had no problems – the river levels were very low and needed no more than a bit of a hop to get across.

After lunch at Blanket Bay, we headed off for Parker Hill campsite, where we would stop for the night. The last section up to the camping area is rather steep. After a 100-metre beach walk the track heads up a long set of steps, that seemed much longer than they probably were. But, at the end of the day, with a still-full pack, we were a weary pair of 50 somethings that finally dropped our packs at camp and took in some magnificent views back along the coast. This is a drive-in camp and there was one vehicle camper and another walker in the camp.



This is the typical scenery you can expect. Not bad, right?

The night was quiet and dark. Until we heard a little rustle here, another there. We realised we had a small furry visitor that kept scurrying around our tent, looking for food. Each night we brought our food bags into the tent with us, but this night we forgot about the rubbish bag. We realised what it was after, so we brought that in as well, and our visitor eventually left.

Parker Hill to Aire River

From Parker Hill, we made our way to Cape Otway. There, we were hoping to get a cuppa at the café we thought was there. However, we found only a small shop and loads of tourists. The café was inside the grounds, which required an entry fee, which would make a cup of tea very expensive.



We bought a cold drink and posed for some Asian tourists who beckoned for us to wave to them so they could take our picture. We then moved on, and after that, we stopped briefly at the Cape Otway cemetery where the graves of the early lightkeepers families and shipwrecked sailors were. It is always sad to see graves of young children in these isolated places. Testimony to the remoteness of the place, where help was just too far away.



The Great Ocean Walk fronts onto the Southern Ocean. Rain is a fact of life.

The day was becoming very warm as we continued on. This part of the trail was cut through the thick coastal scrub. The trail was clear but with scrub around 3 metres tall either side. There was nothing to see except the track in front of you. Sometimes there were birds fluttering about, or a small kangaroo would bound off into a little tunnel in the scrub. But otherwise, these sections involved just walking along.

This day was our hottest day, with temperatures getting into the thirties. Needless to say, we were looking forward to our camp that night at Aire River. When we finally made it to the escarpment lookout above Aire Inlet, we could see the camp and bridge below us. It didn't seem that far but the track had other ideas.

Camping at Aire River

It first went inland away from the river then turned back and went down through more thick scrub and very soft sand. This was hard going despite going downhill. It would have been a very difficult climb if we were going the other way. Finally, we made the bottom but still had a sandy track to the bridge, then across to some more steps up to the walk-in campsite, only to find several school groups and an almost empty water tank. The school group was not a problem, but the near-empty water tank was. This would be our water for the next day's walk.

We filled our water bottles with the dwindling supply and set about getting our camp organised. The water tank at the drive-in site had water but it was salty. It was okay for washing though. We usually washed each night, taking turns in the tent with a small collapsible bowl, just sponging ourselves down. We had met up on several occasions with a fellow from Canada, he lent us a small collapsible shower. Even though it was only a small shower, having warm water running over you at the end of a hot day of hiking was rather nice.

That night it rained and fortunately put some water in the empty tank. This was the only time we were concerned about water, all other camps had plenty available.

Air River to Johanna Beach

The next day I really started to struggle on some of the steep climbs. I wasn't feeling well at all and had to stop fairly often to rest. My wife and I have been on a lot of long hikes, and this is the first time I thought I may not make it all the way. I had to stop and have a decent rest. We decided to have something to eat. It had been drizzling all day and was much cooler, so we heated some water and added some packet soup. We had stopped at a spot where the track meets the main highway and bumped into our Canadian friend again. He suggested I have some electrolyte gel that he was carrying. I mixed some with water, and with some

warm soup and a good rest, I started to feel much better.



A relic of the past. Unforgiving coastline this.

After our break, we continued onto Johanna Beach. This is the longest beach walk on the track. The beach is 2km long with no exit points and can include an unbridged river crossing. The river was not flowing so no problems there, but the sand was soft no matter where you walked.

With the sea pounding away to our left we started along the beach. The best way we found was to walk in a previous walker's footprints. This way the sand was more compacted and slightly easier to walk on. We had been meeting up with some of the school groups that day, which were now in front of us, so there were lots of footprints to choose from. However, it was rather difficult to find a set of footprints that matched your own stride, especially when they were scattered all over the beach.

Stopping for the night at the group camp

Finally getting off the beach, we had a short break, then another uphill climb to the campsite. The views once again were spectacular, looking back along the coast and beach we had just come from.

The school kids had beat us to the camp, but there was plenty of room for tents and we were happy to wait as they cooked their dinner in the shelter which was a little small for all of us. This was where the school groups were to leave the walk as there were no group camps after Johanna Beach.

Shortly after dinner, we went to bed as it was a much colder now and a light rain was falling. Something we do like on our walks is being snug in our sleeping bags in our cosy tent. Especially when you can listen to the rain on the tent roof.

Johanna Beach to Ryans Den

The next morning, the school group went back to the main campground and caught a bus back home. We still had 3 days to go.

Once again, the track headed inland, going through a mixture of forest and open farmland. This was the biggest climb on the trail, going up around 300 metres from the beach. It was a steady climb then a descent to Milanesia Beach. The last couple of hundred metres were rather steep and slippery. Lunch here, then the final section to Ryans Den campground through coastal forests and a very steep set of wooden steps.



The track takes you along the coast, through farmland, and into a beautiful forest like this.

At Ryans Den, we met up with another group of walkers who had parked their cars at the access point for Milanesia Beach. They were heading for the Twelve Apostles on a 3-day section of the Great Ocean Walk. Linda and I have always enjoyed the comradery in the shelters and huts we have shared with other walkers. This was no exception, with swapping ideas and experiences and general chatting.

Most of the campsites were quite good with small tent sites separate from each other, some with a small platform. But being last in you had to take what was left.



This camp was not our favourite. We ended up with a tent site that was down a slope, which was a bit muddy and one end looked like someone had used it as a toilet. There are toilets at each campsite so why someone would do this I can't imagine.

Ryans Den to Devils Kitchen

The following day we had more ups and downs, some fairly steep. It was a mixture of coastal scrub and forest.

It was a pity there were no distance markers on the track, as we had to keep referring to our guide book to work out how far along the track we had come. The track is well-marked and easy to follow, but it would have been nice to know where we were.



And another steep bit.

The track took a turn inland and briefly went beside a road. It was here we stopped for a short break and in the distance spotted the Twelve Apostles. The end was not far off now. After returning to the coast we went past the Wreck Beach car park. Here you can divert and go down the 366 steps to the beach. Then walk along the beach and rock shelf past the wrecks of the 'Fiji' and 'Marie Gabrielle', then back up to the track and walk back to the campground.

We were not enthused by this so kept on and finished the day at Devils Kitchen campground. We would check out the beach the next day.

The last night on the walk

This was our last night on the walk, and the campsite had great views of the coast. We ate our last main meal then relaxed at our tent. This time we had our own small platform to put our gear on. Not all the tent sites had these. It was very convenient, as the main shelter was about 40 meters away and we would have had to carry our cooking gear there and back if we wanted the use of a table.

It gets very dark, very quickly in the bush where there is no artificial lighting. We each carry a head torch, but mine came on in the pack on our second day and flattened the batteries. It did work for a short while but gave up after only a short while. When I put in the extra batteries, it still wouldn't work. I then discovered a crack that went right through the body, so we were left with only one torch for most of the trip.

Devils Kitchen to Princetown

After breakfast, we packed up and went down to Wreck Beach where the sidetrack was not far along the trail, or so we were told by the other walkers. We left our packs behind at the camp and only took our cameras. We should have taken the packs and left them at the entrance to the beach, as the double back was a bit of a chore.

There is little to see of the wrecks as times and tide have all but removed any traces of the ships. The only thing we could see were their anchors and what appeared to be the anchor winch. One of the anchors has been stood on its end as a memorial to the wrecks.

From here we headed off on our last leg back to our car and caravan. The trail started to



flatten out and slowly descended down to sea level.



A typical 3-walled shelter that you will find at campsites along the track.

Looking back on the walk

The walk was an enjoyable one. With great views of the coast and a variation of forest, coastal scrub, beaches and some farmland. Some of the climbs were a bit steep, so a reasonable amount of fitness is required if you are walking end to end unsupported. Being able to carry sufficient water is also necessary, as there is no water between the campsites. And so it was that 7 days after we started, we finally topped a small ridge and there was the Gellibrand River and the campground where we left our car. We took a couple of selfies then descended to the river's edge, where it was a short walk to the campground. We took off our packs off for the last time, and we finished The Great Ocean Walk.

Where is it?

The Great Ocean Walk follows the same stretch of coast as the Great Ocean Road. But don't worry – you won't be walking close to the road.

The hike begins in Apollo Bay before passing through the Great Otway National Park and making its way towards the Twelve Apostles National Park and finishing between Princetown and Port Campbell at Gibson Steps.

The trailhead in Apollo Bay is roughly 198km (3 hours) south-west of Melbourne and 123km (2 hours) from Geelong. Kevin and Linda travelled from Adelaide, which is 739km from the track.

Distance

100km from Apollo Bay to Gibson Steps

What direction can I walk the track?

The track is completed east to west.

How do I get to and from the start/end of the track?

• Car

For groups of two or more, the most common way to access the track is to drive and do a car shuffle. You will drive two cars to the end, leave one behind, and drive the other to the start. Secure parking is available in both Apollo Bay and Princetown. Kevin and Linda left their car securely in Princetown for around \$20 for the duration of the hike.



• Public Transport

Apollo Bay is accessible by train and bus (via Geelong) from Melbourne. You take a train from Southern Cross Station to Geelong. Then the Warrnambool bus westbound through to Apollo Bay. Coming back you can board the eastbound bus in Princetown or Port Campbell. There are three services between Geelong and Apollo Bay on weekdays, and one between Port Campbell/Princetown and Geelong.

Go to [Public Transport Victoria](#) for more information.

• Shuttle

There are a number of private shuttles that will take you and your gear to the trailhead and from the end of the track. Go to the [Raw Travel website](#) for more information.

Do I need to book to hike the Great Ocean Walk?

You do need to book your campsites. Book via the [Parks Victoria website](#).

Do I need to walk the track over 8 days?

No, there are many shorter options available. Parks Victoria provide a [great resource with a list of the best shorter hikes](#).

Where can I camp?

There are 7 designated camping spots along the Great Ocean Walk. Parks Victoria has put together this nifty table to show you what to expect at each campground:



The Parks Victoria campsite list.

Supplies

It's important to be relatively self-sufficient when hiking the Great Ocean Walk as there are few amenities along the way. Here are the few places to buy food and drinks.

• Apollo Bay

Supermarkets, health food shop, cafes, restaurants, pubs



Cape Otway

Small kiosk with cold drinks and snacks, café serves hot meals and coffee but requires you to pay an entry fee

• Princetown

General store, café, pub

Have you walked the Great Ocean Walk or driven the Great Ocean Road? Share your favourite bits in the comments below.

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