



RUGGED: Michael Watson, whose Howqua Valley operation offers early settler-style treks through the bush, leads us through the fastest-flowing river in Victoria.

PICTURES / KATE JOHNS AND STEVEN PILCHER

# Mountain ride with pioneer spirit

Riding through Snowy River country feels like a return to early Outback days, says Kate Johns

**T**HE piercing crack of the stock whip cuts through the air like a gunshot. The black baldy cows lift their heads from grazing and turn their attention to the riders before bolting up the escarpment.

Mountain cattleman Graeme Stoney wields his whip overhead and with another almighty crack chases the herd up the hill.

I follow suit, kicking my horse Missy into action. I crouch into my horse's sweaty neck as we leap over shrubs and limbo under tree branches.

I'm three days into a five-day packhorse trip in the heart of Victoria's alpine country in Australia. This is a region made famous by a poem from Australian bush poet Banjo Patterson and the movie *The Man from Snowy River*.

Owner and guide Michael Watson formulated the five-day ride that traces early-settler history while replacing the swag and feral rabbit stew with comfortable beds and gourmet food. The operation is based at the 300ha family property in the Howqua Valley.

From Melbourne it's a 2½-hour drive through the Yarra Valley, where the country is alive with the deep auburn colours of autumn, to the River House where we'll spend our first and last nights of the trip.

In the afternoon Michael pairs us with horses according to riding ability. We ride out from the River House and cross the Howqua, the fastest-flowing river in Victoria.

Veering away from the river we start to climb high and deep within the bush. The kookaburras



THRILLING: The five-day journey lets riders follow cattlemen as they push herds through rivers and return cows and calves to their paddocks.

cackle and squawk as the horses follow livestock paths etched into the earth. After a loping canter up an old road we summit at Kate Cameron's Peak, where the heart-in-your-mouth jump scene in *The Man from Snowy River* was filmed.

The next morning we head deep into the heart of the valley on the Howqua Fish Trail — a popular place for trout fishing — which crosses the river up to 60 times on its meandering route to our destination at Stockyard Creek.

At one point where the river is wide and shallow we kick our horses into a canter upstream. Shoulder to shoulder, the horses plunge and leap within the knee-deep water, resembling a carousel.

For lunch we break in a cleared area between river crossings. We tie the horses to trees, peel off our chaps and lean against fallen logs, soaking up the autumn sun. A mob of screeching cockatoos flies overhead. Michael is quick to point out a regal wedge-tailed eagle perched at the tip of a dead gum tree.

I reflect on the people who have followed the Howqua River down the ages, starting with bare-footed Aborigines who used the river as a major trade and war route across the Great Dividing Range and mined the Howqua greenstone, prized for its use in stone axes and spearheads. Then came European settlers in the 1840s, who drove

## » CHECKLIST



### VICTORIA

#### ■ GETTING THERE

Air New Zealand flies every day to Melbourne.

#### ■ GETTING AROUND

For departure dates and bookings for this riding journey, contact [www.globetrotting.com.au](http://www.globetrotting.com.au), horse-riding travel specialists.

#### ■ FURTHER DETAILS

For more information on Victoria see [visitvictoria.com](http://visitvictoria.com).

The experience of riding alongside a mountain cattleman, whose forefathers pioneered the High Country, is thrilling. One can grasp briefly the life of a cattleman, with its shots of adrenalin from chasing after a runaway beast, pushing the herd across a fast-flowing river or returning cows and calves to their paddocks.

By mid-morning the next day Stockyard Creek has faded into the distance as Michael guides us along the high river track that hugs the mountain edge. The narrow path climbs ever-higher, revealing a view of the shimmering Howqua River.

The track feeds our addiction for fast-paced canters and we weave around trees, jump fallen logs and duck low-slung branches.

Throughout the afternoon we ride past stoic bushfire survivors, black wood wattles, manna gums and twisted ghost gums. It's a stark reminder of the horrific bush fires that have swept through the valley. Graeme, Wendy and Michael speak of the 2006 bushfires in whispers, as if to mention them too loudly may spark their flames again.

The pungent aromas of eucalyptus, peppermint and tea tree follow us until we reach the River House.

The billy's boiling, a handful of kangaroos graze and, as we relax in the twilight, we can share with the legendary Man from Snowy River a sense of a journey over and a job well done.

Kate Johns paid her own way on the trek.