Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park

Visitor Guide

Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park harbours fascinating tales of a golden past and retains much of its gold-rush character - from the evocative remains of house sites and puddling machines to the gold mines and gullies that yielded fortunes. Between 1851 and 1854 the Castlemaine area was the world’s richest shallow alluvial goldfield and home to tens of thousands of migrant gold seekers. The park is Australia’s first National Heritage Park, declared in October 2002, part of the Box-Ironbark Parks and Reserves network.

The gold rush

Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park lies at the heart of the central Victorian goldfields. The park is a rare place where you can see authentic traces of the great Victorian gold rushes of the 1850s. Sites and relics harbour secrets and tell stories about how life really was on the diggings.

Despite the widespread impact of gold mining, the park contains many significant Aboriginal sites. The park lies within the country of Jaara people.

The discovery of gold in July 1851 lured tens of thousands of migrants. By 1852, the population on the Castlemaine Diggings was 40-60,000.

When the diggers arrived they entered a forest of towering ironbarks, with trunks commonly over a metre in diameter.

The diggers uprooted the country, giving the place the appearance, as one newcomer remarked, of ‘a great cemetery in which all the graves had been opened and emptied of their contents’.

Almost every gully, flat and hill in the park was named in the gold rush. Many of the names offer insights into the ethnic and regional backgrounds of the gold seekers.

Heritage listing

Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park was added to the Victorian Heritage Register in December 2003. It is the largest non-indigenous protected cultural landscape in Australia.

In January 2005 the park was added to the National Heritage List recognising its outstanding heritage value and importance in the course of Australia’s migration history. It is the seventh site to be added to the list.

Things to do and see

Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park is popular for bushwalking, scenic drives, cycling, picnics, exploring the mining relics and gold prospecking.

Picnic facilities are located at Kalimna, Vaughan Springs, Garfield Waterwheel, Spring Gully Junction and Eureka Reef. Vaughan Springs also has toilets and mineral springs.

Camping is available at Vaughan Springs, Warburtons Bridge and Chokem Flat Campground.

The Castlemaine Visitor Information Centre provides an excellent introduction to the history and heritage of the park. Tours of the park can be booked through the centre.

Herons Reef

Be fire ready and stay safe

On days of forecast Code Red Fire Danger this park will be closed for public safety.

If you are already in the park you should leave the night before or early in the morning for your own safety.

Closure signs will be erected and rangers will patrol where possible, however you may not receive a personal warning that the park is closed so check the latest conditions by calling 13 1963 or visit www.parks.vic.gov.au.

For up to date information on fires in Victoria or general fire safety advice call the Victorian Bushfire Information Line on 1800 240 667.
Plants and animals
The Box-Ironbark forest consists of mainly coppice regrowth trees. Nectar-feeding Swift Parrots journey through the park following the eucalypt flowering. They share the forest with secretive Brush-tailed Phascogales, rare Powerful Owls, Swamp Wallabies and common Eastern Grey Kangaroos. After the Golden Wattle blooms, and before the spectacular heaths and grevilleas flower, minuscule native geraniums, lilies and orchids enliven a leisurely stroll.

Great Dividing Trail
The Great Dividing Trail (GDT) stretches along the top of the Great Dividing Range between Bendigo, Ballarat, Daylesford and Bacchus Marsh allowing walkers and tourists the time to savour central Victoria's unique combination of gold rush heritage and its natural beauty. The Goldfields Track section of the GDT passes through the park offering both short and long distance walks running from Porcupine Ridge in the south to Specimen Gully in the north.

Mount Alexander Diggings Trail
Visit 19 heritage sites in and around the park on a journey through one of the most remarkable periods of Australian history. Self guided and guided tours are available through the Castlemaine Visitor Information Centre.

Interesting places
Garfield Wheel - This site contains the stone foundations of one of the world's largest water wheels. The 24-metre diameter water wheel had 220 wrought-iron buckets and revolved once every 55 seconds. It was constructed in 1887.

Pennycost Cemetery is Victoria's most intact and evocative gold rush cemetery containing the marked graves of children and adults, including Chinese migrants who died in the early gold rush period.

Spring Gully Junction Mine is the entry point for one of Victoria's most intact collections of historic quartz mines. The area contains five mines, with well-preserved foundations and mullock heaps.

Vaughan Mineral Springs was formerly a large gold rush township called 'The Junction' and became a favoured alluvial gold and market gardening locality for Chinese miners. Today, it is a good place to sample the mineral water and for a stroll along the Loddon River.

Eureka Reef boasts some of the earliest quartz mining relics in Victoria including a massive exposed quartz reef, foundations of Cornish crushing batteries and a mining village. Aboriginal rock wells are also present. A pleasant 1.8km walk takes you through 140 years of mining history. See the forest through the eyes of the Jaara people, alluvial gold diggers and quartz reef miners. In winter and spring there are many native wildflowers in the Eureka Reef forest.

Specimen Gully - The discovery of gold in this narrow valley started the great gold rush. There is a monument marking the discovery site and the remains of old gold workings pepper the sides of the narrow valley.

Kalimna is a good example of the Box-Ironbark forest, hard and dry in summer, it provides a diverse habitat including 28 types of orchids and two rare species of butterflies – the Eltham Copper butterfly and Satin Azure butterfly. It is a popular spot for locals to walk, located on a prominent ridgeline east of Castlemaine.

Expedition Pass Reservoir sits below the pass named by Major Mitchell when he led his expedition through the hills in 1836. The reservoir was built in 1868 and was fed from the Malmsbury-Bendigo water race - a feat of engineering in its day. No longer used as a water supply it is a popular fishing, canoeing and picnicking spot.

Forest Creek Gold Diggings - Discover how generations of miners won gold from the rich alluvial ground along Forest Creek. Pan for gold in the ancient riverbed that diggers once called “The bank-till free to all”. See one of Victoria’s unique mining gems – a massive Ruston and Hornsby gas engine.

Shicers Gully, in the southwest corner of the park near Guildford, has a fine pure stand of Ironbarks. Their dark rough trunks create a particularly Australian landscape.

Monster Meeting site - It was here on 15 December 1851, on what was called the Forest Creek sufferings, that 15,000 gold diggers attended a protest meeting – The Monster Meeting. This was the first such public protest in Australia. The diggers met to defy the Victorian Government’s unfair Gold License – and in doing so they set a path for democracy in Australia.

Caution: Keep to the tracks to avoid old mine workings such as shafts and tunnels. It can be cold and wet in winter and very hot and dry in summer so be prepared for adverse weather conditions.

How to get there
Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park is about 120km north of Melbourne. Turn off the Calder Highway at Elphinstone and travel 13km through Chewton to Castlemaine. The Park can also be accessed via the Pyrenees and Midland Highways. A regular rail service runs between Melbourne and Bendigo stopping at Castlemaine.

Vehicles, including motor bikes, may only be used on formed open roads. Drivers must be licensed and vehicles registered and roadworthy.

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