

CAPITALS, OF COOL!

There are awesome adventures to be had in and around Australia's capital cities, writes
MEGAN HOLBECK

Image: Visit Victoria

Kids playing on the beach at Phillip Island in Victoria

Abseiling with Riverlife in Brisbane



One of the silver linings of 2020's dark COVID-19 cloud is the new-found appreciation for what we have in our own backyards. Whether you've got toddlers or teenagers, are keen on gentle strolls or adrenaline, the outdoors has been both a sanity saver and boredom buster.

Tracks and trails have been heaving, with water and waves way busier than usual. But the initial burst of enthusiasm has waned as "I can't believe we've never done this before!" morphs into, "Not this walk again..."

Which is where this article comes in, detailing destinations for adventures wild and tame, long and short, and from do-it-yourself to guided experiences. The added benefit? Soon we'll be travelling further afield, and you've got a ready-made list of awesome family experiences around the country.

SYDNEY

PITTWATER

Pittwater is a playground of boats, beaches and bush, 40km north of the city. The drive is worth it for the expansive views from West Head alone, without mentioning the walks to see Indigenous rock art and secluded beaches. Keep going to Palm Beach to surf, plonk or play, or climb the steps to the 140-year-old Barrenjoey Lighthouse for fantastic views over Pittwater and the coast. Ferries run to the Basin campsite, as well as to Patonga for visits to the pub and pelicans, or walks onward to Pearl Beach.

Go kayaking
at Pittwater





Megan's children
Pippa and Hatty near
Chowder Bay on the
Bondi to Manly Walk

BONDI TO MANLY WALK

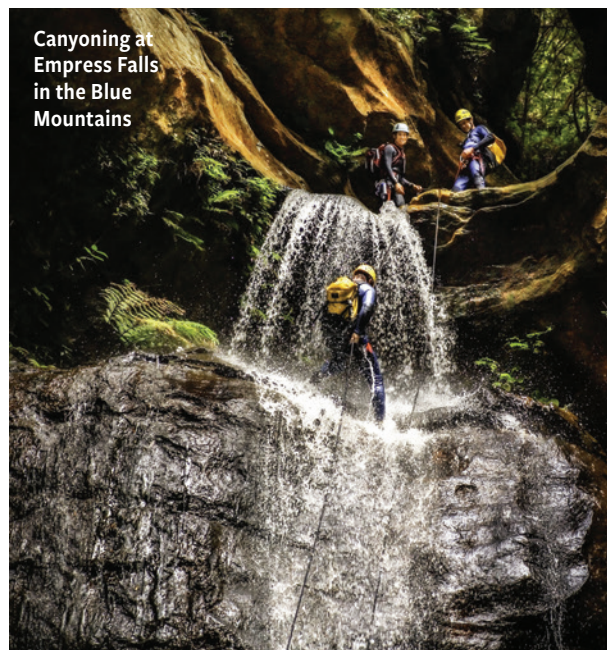
This walk traces the coastline between two of Sydney's most famous beaches. It's 80km long, but don't let the distance put you off: although it can be done as a hard-core two-day affair, it's far more fun to take your time, ticking off sections as you like. Highlights are individual: gorgeous beaches, beautiful bush, historical interludes, and iconic sights. Public transport and convenient cafes make access and planning easy, with ferry rides adding to the fun.

BLUE MOUNTAINS CANYONING

Waterfalls, golden walls of rock and fairy glens of ferns: the canyons of the Blue Mountains are pure magic. They're also more accessible than they sound: kids of any age can dip their toes in the famous Grand Canyon, while more capable kids can walk the entire loop. The beautiful, water-sculpted worlds of Empress and Serendipity Canyons can be explored on full-day tours with High and Wild Adventures, where teenagers (and parents!) can abseil down waterfalls and rock jump into crystal pools.

ROYAL NATIONAL PARK

Australia's oldest national park is accessible by train, ferry and car, and less than 40km from the CBD. Stretching along a stunning coastline, there's something for everyone: from the short but steep Winifred Falls Trail to two-day walks along the famous Coast Track. Or explore the lovely town of Bundeena and its 5km-long Jibbon Loop Track, taking in the well-preserved Aboriginal engravings, sandy beaches and great views.



Canyoning at
Empress Falls
in the Blue
Mountains

Image: David Hill-Destination NSW



BridgeClimb
Sydney

SYDNEY HARBOUR

It's not just one of the world's most beautiful harbours – Sydney Harbour is also the city's playground. From iconic structures to hidden beaches, historic sights to urban delights, there's enough to keep your family exploring for months. Start with the grand overview from the Harbour Bridge, with BridgeClimb Sydney offering adrenaline, beauty and history in equal measures for kids aged eight and over. With in situ tents, cafes and campfires, camping on Cockatoo Island is as easy as it gets, with great views over the harbour, as well as giving insights into our convict past. Sydney Harbour Kayaks at Spit Bridge rents boats, allowing watery explorations of the greener side of the harbour for children three and over.



Wattamolla in the
Royal National Park

Image: Destination NSW

MELBOURNE

PHILLIP ISLAND

It's got surf, sand, seals and cliffs, as well as birds galore, all within a couple of hours' drive of Melbourne. The island is bigger than you think: Cape Woolamai is its most southern point, with cliff-top walks showcasing crashing waves, sea stacks and bird life. The west coast is home to The Nobbies, a fabulously named headland with dramatic scenery, a blowhole, and Australia's largest fur seal colony. Wildlife Coast Cruises offers two-hour trips to the offshore Seal Rocks, before you cap off your day by watching hordes of waddling penguins.



Steavenson Falls in the Yarra Valley

YARRA TRAIL

Melbourne's main Yarra Trail stretches 18km from Fairfield in the city's north to Federation Square. Meander along the river on foot or bike, past waterfalls, creeks and parks, stopping at historical buildings and interesting kid-friendly destinations: feed the animals at Collingwood Children's Farm or explore the art, food and history at Abbotsford Convent. Divide the trip into shorter stages and soak it all in, or enjoy as a full-day adventure.

POINT NEPEAN NATIONAL PARK

Perched at the end of the Mornington Peninsula, this national park has it all – views, walks and history. Port Phillip was once one of the most heavily fortified areas in the Southern Hemisphere, with shots fired from here in both World Wars. Kids will love exploring the tunnels and guns of the army fort, as well as the slightly spooky Quarantine Station, which operated from 1852 to 1980. The tracks are perfect for cycling and walking, and the Peninsula Hot Springs are pretty much on the way home...

CATHEDRAL RANGES

This national park of gum trees and jagged rock outcrops is 115km north of Melbourne. There are peaceful strolls along gentle streams or more strenuous hikes up the peaks, as well as several camping options if you want to make a weekend of it. The drive takes you through beautiful forests of tall, straight mountain ash and past Healesville with its great pubs, cafes, vineyards, breweries and distilleries.

DAYLESFORD

Daylesford is a magnet for foodies and couples, but there's plenty for families as well, all within 110km of the city. Kids of any age will love spotting birds, and playgrounds, on a lap of Lake Daylesford, or take a short saunter around Hepburn Mineral Springs Reserve to sample water from five of its famous springs. The Domino Rail Trail from Trentham to Lyonville is a 6km track through lovely bushland suitable for walking or cycling. Leave time to explore the towns at either end: the gorgeous cafes, cute shops and spectacular waterfall of Trentham and old-school magic of Lyonville's Radio Springs Hotel.



Image: Visit Victoria



A family hiking in
Cathedral Ranges
State Park

Image: Northern Victoria



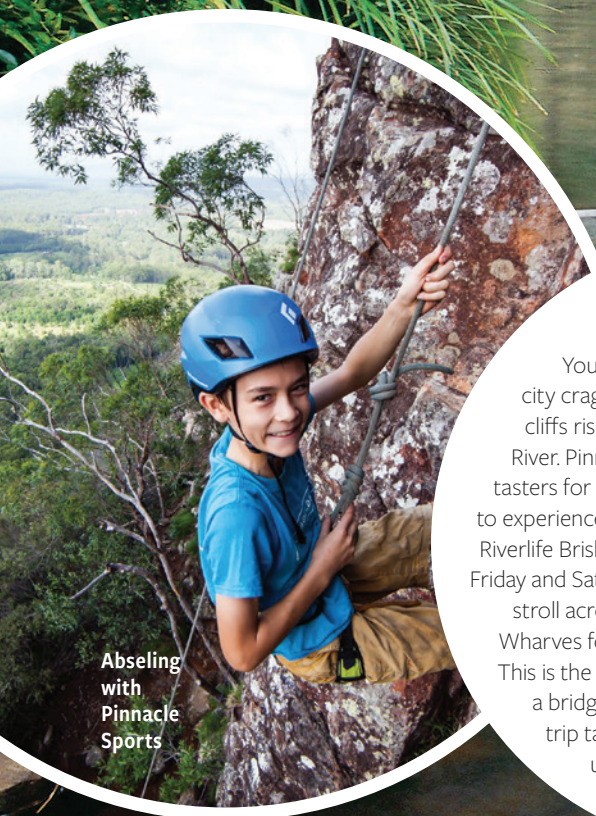
See the penguin parade
at Phillip Island

Image: Visit Victoria

BRISBANE

GLASS HOUSE MOUNTAINS

These volcanic peaks rear steeply from the coastal plains just inland from the Sunshine Coast. There are rainforests, waterfalls and dramatic views, as well as cute towns aplenty. If you're after a short stroll, try the 15-minute walk through eucalypt forest, giving fantastic views of Mt Beerwah. The circuit around Tibrogargan is popular with families, allowing you to take in the view from every angle. (Allow two hours.) There's also plenty to do in nearby Maleny: sample brews at the craft brewery, cuddle a camel at QCamel dairy, explore the lovely botanical gardens or cool off at gorgeous Gardners Falls.



Abseiling
with
Pinnacle
Sports

KANGAROO POINT

You can't get a much more accessible city crag than Kangaroo Point, where volcanic cliffs rise 20m from the banks of the Brisbane River. Pinnacle Sports offers three-hour climbing tasters for kids aged eight and over – a fabulous way to experience the thrills of outdoor rock climbing, while Riverlife Brisbane's abseiling experience is offered every Friday and Saturday. If you want to expand the adventure, stroll across the Story Bridge to Howards Smith Wharves for lunch, before tackling the bridge itself. This is the only place in the world you can combine a bridge climb with an abseil: the three-hour trip takes in views and history on the way up, before a 30m abseil into the park below.



A family at Gardners
Falls in the Glass
House Mountains

Image: Tourism and Events Queensland



Children on the boardwalk
at Boondall Wetlands
Environment Centre

LAMINGTON NATIONAL PARK

Lamington National Park is part of a UNESCO World Heritage-listed area, the most extensive area of subtropical rainforest in the world, and under two hours' drive from Brisbane. The greens of Lamington's moss, ferns and creepers are matched only by the diversity of the area's 500 waterfalls. With more than 160km of tracks, there are plenty of walking options. Or visit O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat to feed the colourful parrots, zipline through the trees, or take to the canopy on the Tree Top Walk. Better make a weekend of it!

BRISBANE VALLEY RAIL TRAIL

Winding for 160km through forests, farms and towns between Ipswich and Yarraman, this is the longest rail trail in Australia. Don't let the distance put you off: the well-maintained track is flat, free from cars and broken up into sections for picturesque day trips on foot, bike or horseback. The 8.5km

trail from Fernvale to Lowood is a family favourite, with playgrounds, water and the all-important ice-creams at either end. The entire track can be done in stages – a great goal for older kids – piecing together the area's landscape and history.

BOONDALL WETLANDS

Pack a picnic and head up to the Boondall Wetlands – a massive expanse of mangroves, salt marsh and open forest perched on the edge of Moreton Bay, 15km north of the CBD. The 2km pram-friendly boardwalk is an easy introduction, with a bird hide for wildlife spotting. (Keep your eyes peeled: this area is internationally renowned for its birdlife.) There's also a longer, bike-friendly track leading 4km to Nudgee Beach – where ice-cream is again optional – before you return the same way. The Boondall Wetlands Environment Centre provides information and exploration ideas (including the perennial favourite – maps!), and there's a lovely picnic area.

Ride around Lake Burley Griffin



Image: VisitCanberra

CANBERRA

LAKE BURLEY GRIFFIN

This is as urban as Canberran adventures get! The bike path around Lake Burley Griffin stretches for 30km, ranging from the natural (wetlands, bays and woods) to the monumental, taking in the National Gallery, National Museum, Parliament House and way more. (The ride can also be broken into shorter loops.) Interrupt your cycling with a spin in one of Capital Paddle's classic paddleboats, or take an electric GOBOAT from Kingston Foreshore to explore the lake's islands.

CENTENARY TRAIL

This 145km track around the city may not be the first thing you think of for a family adventure, but perhaps it should be. Designed as a three-day cycle or seven-day walk, the Centenary Trail was opened in 2013 to mark 100 years of the capital. The 9km northern section from Hall Village to One Tree Hill is a family-friendly highlight: there are sweeping views of the city and a scramble to the summit, before you answer the call of Hall's ice creameries, cafés and brewery. A shorter, southern option follows the track from Kambah Pool to the lookout over Red Rocks Gorge, returning to the pool for a cooling swim.

TIDBINBILLA NATURE RESERVE

This nature reserve isn't just about the animals – there are also wonderful walks showing off the bushland and views over ridges, valleys and peaks. Gibraltar Peak has a spectacular outlook over the city, as well as the chance to see rock climbers dance up the granite. (The walk takes a few hours – pack a picnic.) The 2km Sanctuary Loop is an easier option, following a boardwalk past sculptures and over wetlands, with pools perfect for platypus spotting, if you're quiet and lucky.

A turtle encounter on Bare Sand Island



Image: Tourism NT-Aude Mayans

Buley Rockhole in Litchfield National Park



Image: Tourism NT-Lucy Ewing

DARWIN

EAST POINT RESERVE

Cliff-top walks, swimming, food trucks and history: it's no wonder this is one of Darwin's most popular family destinations. The 5km loop track around the reserve will entertain everyone from toddlers to grandparents, with great views over the harbour, as well as the chance to explore World War II relics including gun emplacements. Lake Alexander has safe swimming year-round, or have a crack at stand-up paddling: lessons, and board hire can be arranged through Fun Supply. Add in playgrounds, picnic and barbecue areas for a good time (almost) guaranteed.

LITCHFIELD NATIONAL PARK

With stunning waterfalls, natural plunge pools and shady monsoon forests a day trip to Litchfield is worth every minute of the two-hour drive. The Florence Creek walk links two of the park's best swimming holes, Florence Falls and Buley Rockhole, in an easy 90-minute

saunter. Give yourself all day to explore and swim below Florence's falls and in Buley's cascading pools. Another option is Wangi Falls, where twin waterfalls cascade into an enormous pool. There's an in-season kiosk, grassy lawns for picnics, as well as bushwalking and camping options. (Check that the falls are open first.)

DARWIN HARBOUR

A boat trip gives a different perspective on the NT capital. Sea Darwin offers everything from one-hour World War II history tours to evenings spent on remote islands. The Sunset Cruise is a crowd-pleaser: this 90-minute trip includes fish and chips, the chance to visit sandbars, see dolphins and appreciate the artwork of a Darwin sunset. For those with kids aged eight and over, the four-hour trip to the remote Bare Sand Island is straight off the bucket list: watch the sun set before waiting for huge flatback turtles to plod up the beach to lay their eggs. (Fingers crossed!)

TreeClimb in
Adelaide

ADELAIDE

ADELAIDE PARK LANDS

The Adelaide Park Lands are home to TreeClimb, Australia's first inner-city aerial adventure park. With more than 70 obstacles over eight different routes, there's enough to challenge both little kids and parents: from low-level courses allowing ground level coaching, to tree top ziplines. (The outdoor café is a welcome pit stop.) The nearby BMX course has been recently upgraded, and there are sporting fields and playgrounds aplenty.

ADELAIDE DOLPHIN SANCTUARY

Just the name of this marine park should be enough to excite the kids! Only 20 minutes from Adelaide, this area is home to more than 40 wild bottlenose dolphins, with another 300 regularly visiting. Adventure Kayaking SA offers three-hour kayak tours for kids four and over, exploring the shoreline, mangroves and shipwrecks dotting the area, with plenty of dolphin spotting along the way. Add in a visit to nearby St Kilda to refuel at the cafes and restaurants, burn energy at the adventure playground or follow the boardwalk around the mangroves.

MORIALTA CONSERVATION PARK

The rugged ridges, gullies, cliffs and waterfalls of Morialta Conservation Park are only 10km from the city, with walks from 30 minutes to full-on, full-day trips. There's also plenty of wildlife, with a healthy population of koalas (look up!), and the chance to see echidnas and kangaroos, as well as plenty of native birds and sunning lizards. Let your kids loose in the amazing nature playground, or watch the rock climbers take on their more vertical version in the gorge.

See dolphins up
close at Adelaide
Dolphin SanctuaryMorialta
Conservation
Park

HOBART

Riders in
Maydena
Bike Park

CBD

Nature, history, art and fun: Hobart adventures have it all. The city's skyline is dominated by kunanyi/Mt Wellington and its prominent dolerite columns. There's everything from 2km rambles to full-day hikes on and around the mountain, with amazing views over the city from the top. For an historical interlude, follow the Hobart Rivulet Track as it winds down the hill from the Cascade Brewery past the Cascades Female Factory Historic Site, where women convicts laboured and lived. Ride bikes or the ferry out to MONA (carefully avoiding the more risqué artworks) or take one of Roaring 40s' kayak tours of the city's harbour (seven and older – fish and chips included!)

MT FIELD NATIONAL PARK

Less than 80km from Hobart, Mt Field National Park has it all: accessible, short, beautiful wanders through fairy glens to waterfalls, and longer walks that feel like proper wilderness escapes. If your legs are fresh and the weather favourable, head up to the alpine plateau: the incredible views and pristine tarns are a magic combination. For those who prefer wheels, there's Maydena Bike Park, with trails for everyone from families to the pros.

HUON VALLEY

Although known for its gourmet produce, the real star of the Huon is its river. Less than an hour from Hobart, the gorgeous town of Franklin is right on the water: explore the town and its riverbanks, perhaps fish from the jetty, before taking a tour of boatbuilding tools and timber at the Wooden Boat Centre. Then set sail on the Yukon, a traditional Danish-built ketch, for a 90-minute, calm water cruise along this serene stretch.



Go kayaking
in Hobart with
Roaring 40s



Visit the Cascades
Female Factory
Historic Site



PERTH

COOGEE

It's not every day you can don a pair of goggles and set off from the beach to explore a historic shipwreck. Except in Coogee, 30 minutes south of the city, where you can do exactly that. The historic Omeo was sunk just off the coast in 1905, with underwater artworks and an artificial reef added to the snorkelling trail since. Back on land there's a short Aboriginal heritage track designed to share local Indigenous stories and language, with colourful glass artworks and lovely views from the lookout.

PENGUIN ISLAND

Penguins are just one of the drawcards of this amazing little island, an hour's drive south of

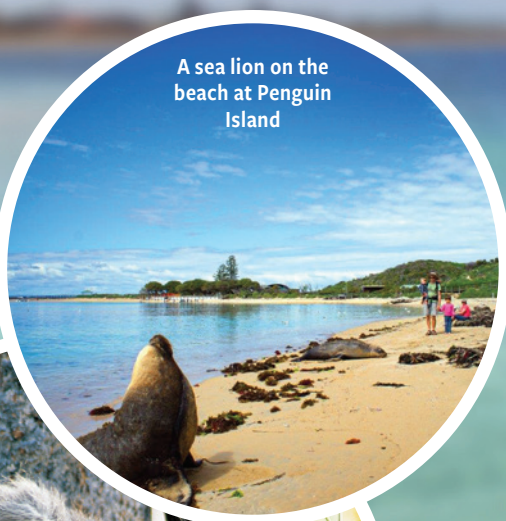
Perth. From Rockingham, it's a five-minute trip on the cute ferry to the island's sheltered waters, beautiful beaches and incredible wildlife. There's a myriad of adventures to choose from – swimming with wild dolphins, sea kayaking and wildlife tours, watching the penguin feeding, swimming, snorkelling and walking the short nature trails. Take a picnic or refuel at Pengo's Café, but be aware that the island is closed in bad weather and winter, when it's penguin breeding season.

YANCHEP NATIONAL PARK

With guaranteed wildlife, as well as walking, caving and tree top adventures, this national park packs it in, and it's less than an hour's

drive north of the city. If it's animals you're after, there's an abundance of kangaroos, as well as a resident population of koalas. There are more than 400 caves in the park, including Perth's only tourist caves, with guided tours exploring their history, formations and chambers. Take one of the park's eight bushwalks (from half hour to multiday rambles), or try the ropes course at Trees Adventure. If one day is not long enough, there is accommodation at the Inn and camp site. 🦘

MORE INFORMATION:
australia.com



A sea lion on the beach at Penguin Island



A koala in Yanchep National Park



Meet the wildlife on Penguin Island