

TRAVEL

Australia's Mornington Peninsula

Mediterranean Lifestyle Down Under

Text & Photographs
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Hot Rocks Massage

The Mornington Peninsula is sensational. Its chic beachfront cafes, golf courses, spas, national parks, beaches, restaurants, and vineyards reminiscent of Tuscany entice all who are intent upon indulging in some of the finer things in life.

The Peninsula, as it is affectionately known by the locals, is an hour's drive south of Melbourne. It separates two bays: Port Phillip on the west and Western Port on the east. To the south a stretch of water called Bass Strait separates it from Tasmania. The next closest land mass to the Peninsula is the Antarctic, some 2,500 kilometers (1,550 miles) away. Despite its proximity to the Antarctic, the Peninsula enjoys a mild Mediterranean climate perfect for producing pinot noir and chardonnay wines. The Peninsula can be driven top to bottom in less than an hour and from coast to coast in 20 minutes. Twenty-five beaches glistening like a necklace encircle the 190 kilometers of coastline so you are sure to find one that is perfect for you. Known internationally for its wineries, the Peninsula is a maritime wine area and is classified as a cool climate region. There are over 200 vineyards, with 60 types of wine, and more than 60 cellar doors. It is the sort of place where you want to stroll rather than stride and you definitely need to linger over an afternoon tea of lavender scones, with homemade strawberry jam and wickedly rich, local cream.

Choices of beaches range from the gentle waves of the Mount Eliza beach where Ava Gardner and Gregory Peck filmed *On the Beach* in 1959 to the more untamed surf beaches of Western Port. If you enjoy fishing you can throw out a line from dozens of vantage points around the coast or join a fishing charter boat. Snapper, Whiting, Flathead, Reef fish and Shark proliferate in the waters and all charters include the essential gear. If you prefer sailing or scuba diving or swimming with the dolphins and seals, these water activities are available too.

The ocean also offers visual attractions: humpback whales making their journey up from the Antarctic waters in the winter months of June to August, the hand-feeding of the giant stingray at Mornington pier, or the dolphins at play which, thanks to the Hastings Dolphin Research Institute are protected. It is the amazing variety of attractions and lifestyle that draws in both tourists and new residents.

You may prefer to spend the day in a soothing thermal pool followed by a relaxing, rhythmic body massage inspired by traditional Aboriginal techniques. Facial treatments based on Aboriginal knowledge of native plants will leave you feeling wholesomely scrubbed and deliciously dozy. This indulgent haven is set among native gum trees amid the naturally heated and healing mineral waters of the Peninsula Hot Springs Spa. If you are a devotee of "hot rock massage" they can do that too. If you prefer a "Dead Sea Mineral Mud massage," these are available at Red Hill Spa and there is even a "Women's only" Spa Retreat at Mizu on Oliver's Hill.

The Peninsula is especially known for its wines. In February there is the International Pinot Noir Celebration. Following that is the festive Mornington Peninsula Harvest to Table Festival which is eleven lazy days of sipping and sampling until the end of Victoria's Labor Day long weekend in March. This is the time when seafood platters, game, local cheeses, raspberries and strawberries and antipasto platters with fresh garden produce abound all over the Peninsula. Headliner events include the Red Hill Long Lunch where chefs from a dozen wineries work and collaborate to tempt your palate. Choose their concoctions from a table set in the woodlands of Ashcombe Maze. Another not-to-be-missed event is the Madhatters Pinot Party at Hickenbotham in Dromana. In their own words this involves the wearing of hats, as well as rabbits, roses, pinot noir and a long

Montalto Winery





Montalto Winery restaurant

entertaining storybook lunch. If you are from the Northern Hemisphere and prefer to holiday during your summer months you are in luck as it is June when the Peninsula's Winter Wine Weekend brings together wines from more than 40 wineries for a massive tastings day on Saturday with special events at numerous wineries for the remainder of the weekend. And if you want to party on, there is the Winter Wine Passport event. All you need is

five stamps in your passport and you are eligible for the \$3,000 wine cellar prize.

I did not have time to visit all the wineries but managed to speak with John Mitchell, owner of Montalto Vineyard and Olive Grove in Red Hill South. Montalto is regularly listed in epicurean magazines and tourism magazines as the winery not to miss on the Peninsula. In his own words, the kernel of an idea for a vineyard began to develop when

National Golf Club



the Mitchell family lived in the U.K. during the 1980s. Summer holidays were spent in the South of France where John and Wendy Mitchell became smitten with the vineyards rolling down the hills to the Mediterranean. Here in the afternoon they found the generosity of spirit and joie de vivre as infectious as their glass of rose! After returning to Australia the Mitchell's started thinking about planting some vines at their holiday house on the Peninsula. John undertook a short viticultural course and was hooked. After further study they decided to buy a vineyard site to produce their own label. Montalto evolved from a love of nature, growth, people and environment joined with a desire to produce the best possible from the land of which they were now caretakers. Their restaurant is a striking and harmonious building featuring rammed earth walls, timber frames and rough-hewn floor boards to blur the edges and bring the beauty of the outside into the building. Floor to ceiling windows take advantage of the breathtaking rural outlook of vines, olive groves, and sculptures that lead down to picturesque lakes, wetlands and pasture, all with a hint of the ocean as backdrop. A strong community spirit was the genesis of the Montalto annual sculpture award with prize money of \$20,000. Neil Williams the curator sites the sculptures creatively throughout the 50-acre estate to create a picturesque outdoor gallery that embraces all aspects of the vineyard.

I then visited the Morning Star Estate winery in Mount Eliza because it was January and I wanted to see the showcase 70,000 roses in bloom. Recognized as one of the oldest vineyards on the Mornington Peninsula, it was established in 1932 by the Franciscan order and produces chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and pinot noir as well as a cabernet sauvignon. I wonder if Francis Gillet, a Londoner who built the distinctive Victorian mansion in 1867, envisioned gasps of delight from diners at the open-terrace restaurant as a beautiful young bride walks a red carpet to the sunken garden and rose arbor to pledge her vows against the panoramic backdrop of Port Phillip Bay.

In addition to all the fine wines and dining there are

many active pursuits for those wanting to maintain a healthy balance. Each village on the Peninsula has one or more tennis clubs which welcomes visitors, and then, of course, there is golf. As a golfing destination, the Mornington Peninsula is favorably compared to California's Monterey Coast and to Scotland's Fife because of the outstanding quality of its courses and the sheer number of them: 15 clubs with 19 courses. But it is

the superb natural qualities and views from the courses that bring the accolades. Leading golf course designers including Robert Trent Jones, Jr., Ross Perrett, Tony Cashmore, Greg Norman and Tom Doak have all designed golf courses here. Whatever your preference and standard of play, you will find a suitable course here.

If your idea of active pursuits is a good walk you are in luck. With 25,000 hectares of spectacular national parks on the Peninsula there is a leisurely or rigorous walk to suit everybody. There is the 2-kilometer boardwalk at the Boneo Maze and Wetlands that winds through native tea trees to the bird hide and eventually to the large maze. Popular birds on the Peninsula are the colorful rosellas, galahs, kookaburras and cheeky magpies. If you prefer a windswept walk, you must visit the Cape Schanck lighthouse. From here you can walk toward the Gunnamatta Equestrian Center and Trail Rides or head in the opposite direction toward the Coolart

Wetlands. Serious walkers and cyclists will want to include Point Nepean, the southernmost point of the Peninsula, to explore historic tunnels, fortifications and a quarantine station that provides a visual history of early settlement. Tragically, it was here in 1967 that the Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt went swimming. He was 59 when he plunged into the surf. He disappeared from view and was never seen again. You can visit the memorial erected to the prime minister, but bring your bathers, because, in typical Australian irony, it is a public swimming pool.

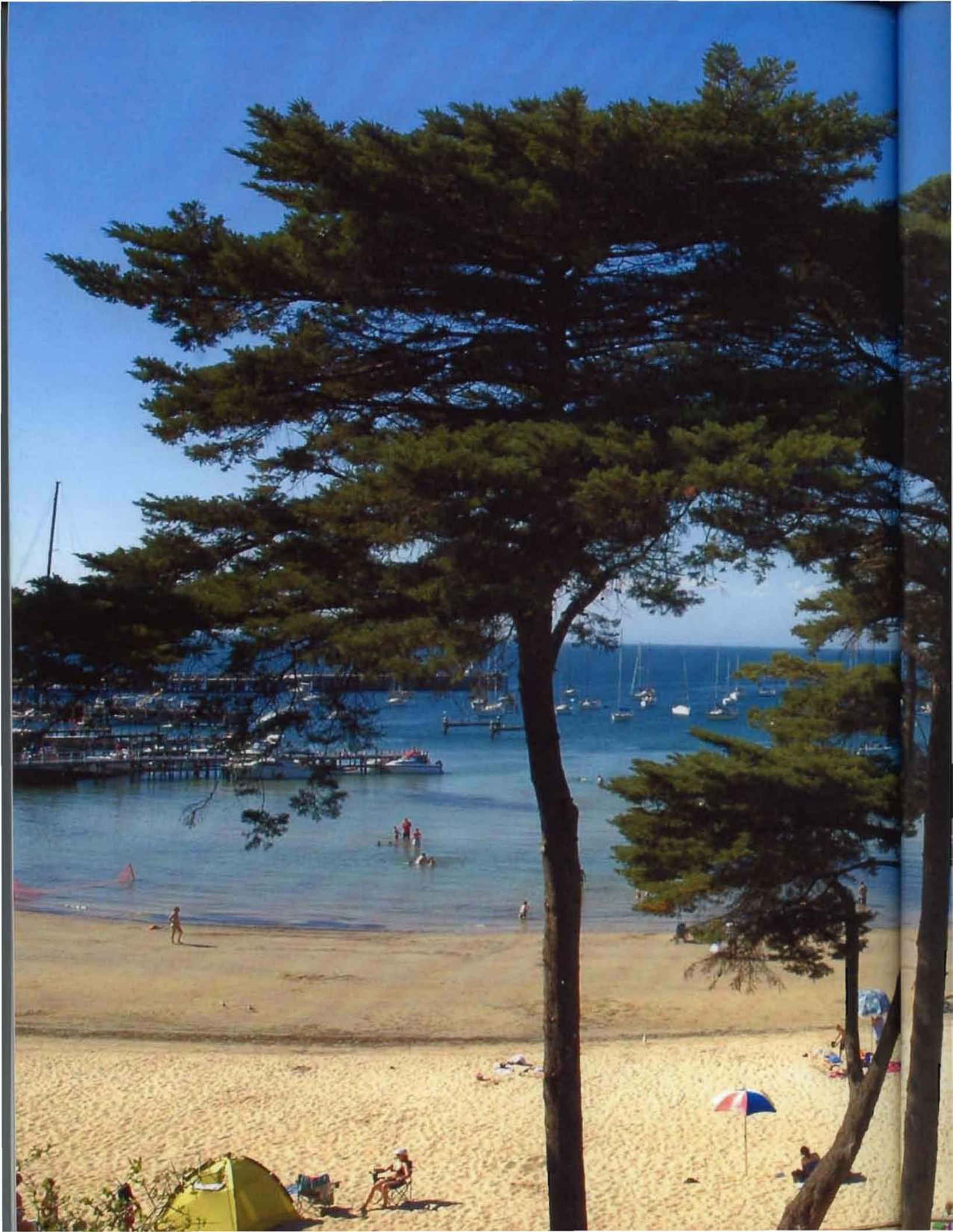
So what do you do after all this outdoor activity? Lunch perhaps? First you choose your village. If you want to lunch with the smart and famous then head to Portsea,

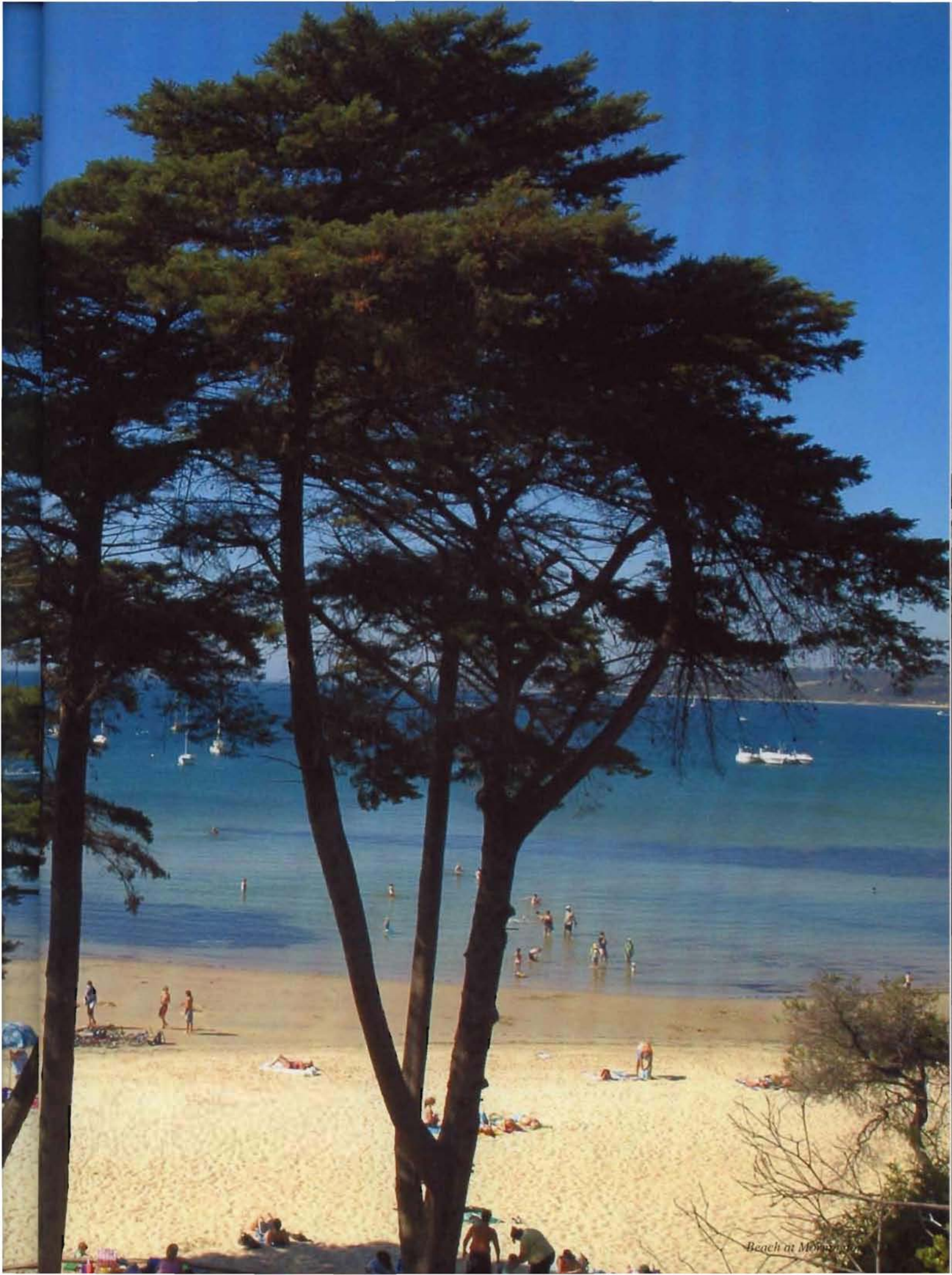


Koala on the Peninsula



Rosella chat





Beach at Moneys Bay



Morning Star Estate Winery



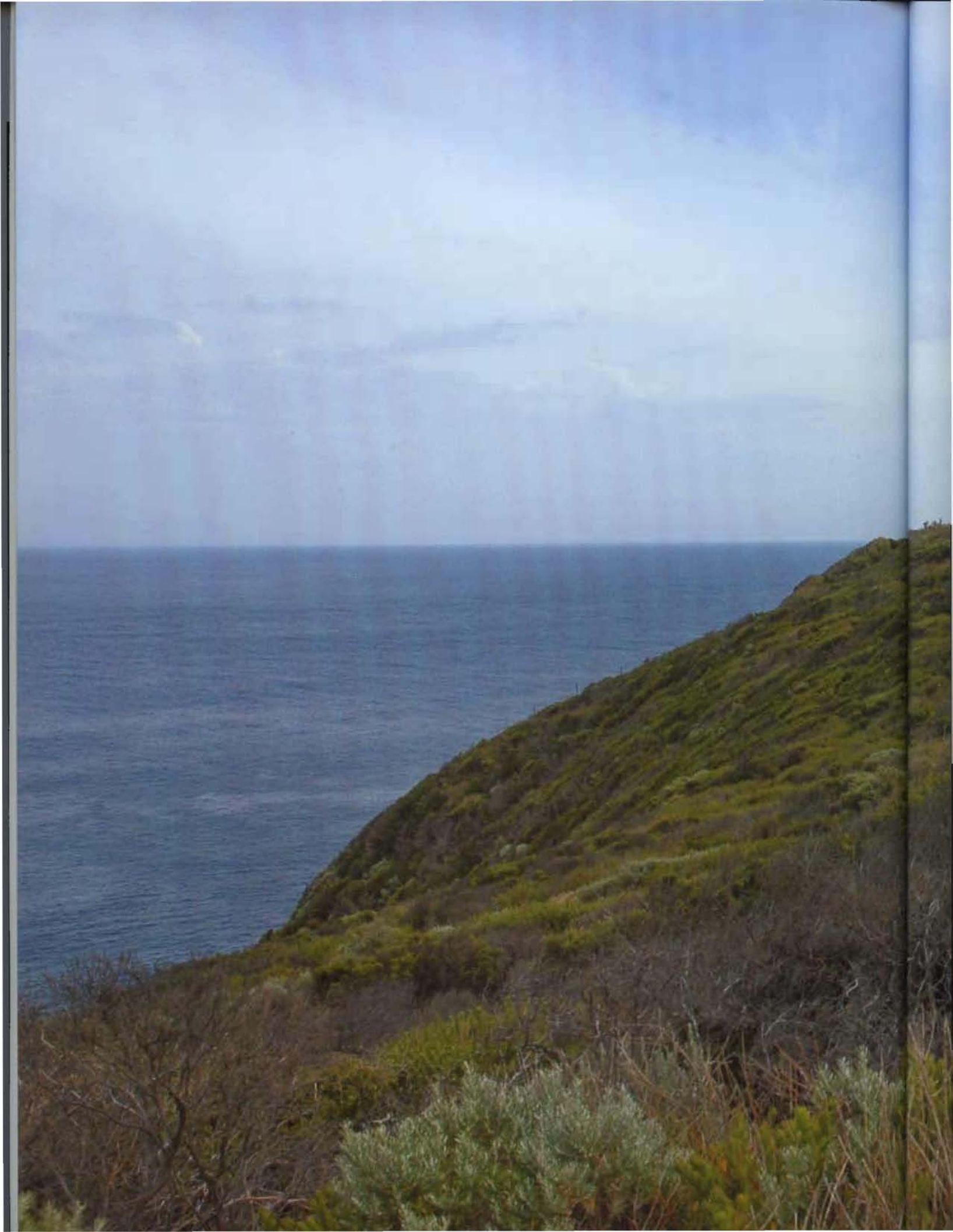
the holiday playground of Australia's rich and powerful establishment. The Portsea Hotel is the place if you are on your way home from walking Point Nepean but if you want something more elegant the Peppers Delgany will feel like you are dining in a castle. Just ten minutes north of Portsea is my personal favorite, Sorrento. Set around a half-moon bay below a main street of beautiful old 19th century limestone shop fronts and cafes you can enjoy freshly caught fish from the pier restaurant or walk up the hill to dine el fresco from a choice of cafes all offering choice local produce. It is here at Sorrento that you can swim with the dolphins or sail on the car ferry to Queenscliff just across the heads on the opposite side of Port Phillip Bay. If your idea of a perfect lunch is at a winery you may want to try the seared kangaroo with chili infused beetroot and horseradish at Max's at Red Hill or perhaps a mushroom cappuccino at Jill's of Moorooduc Estate, or the chorizo paella filled calamari at Paringa Estate.

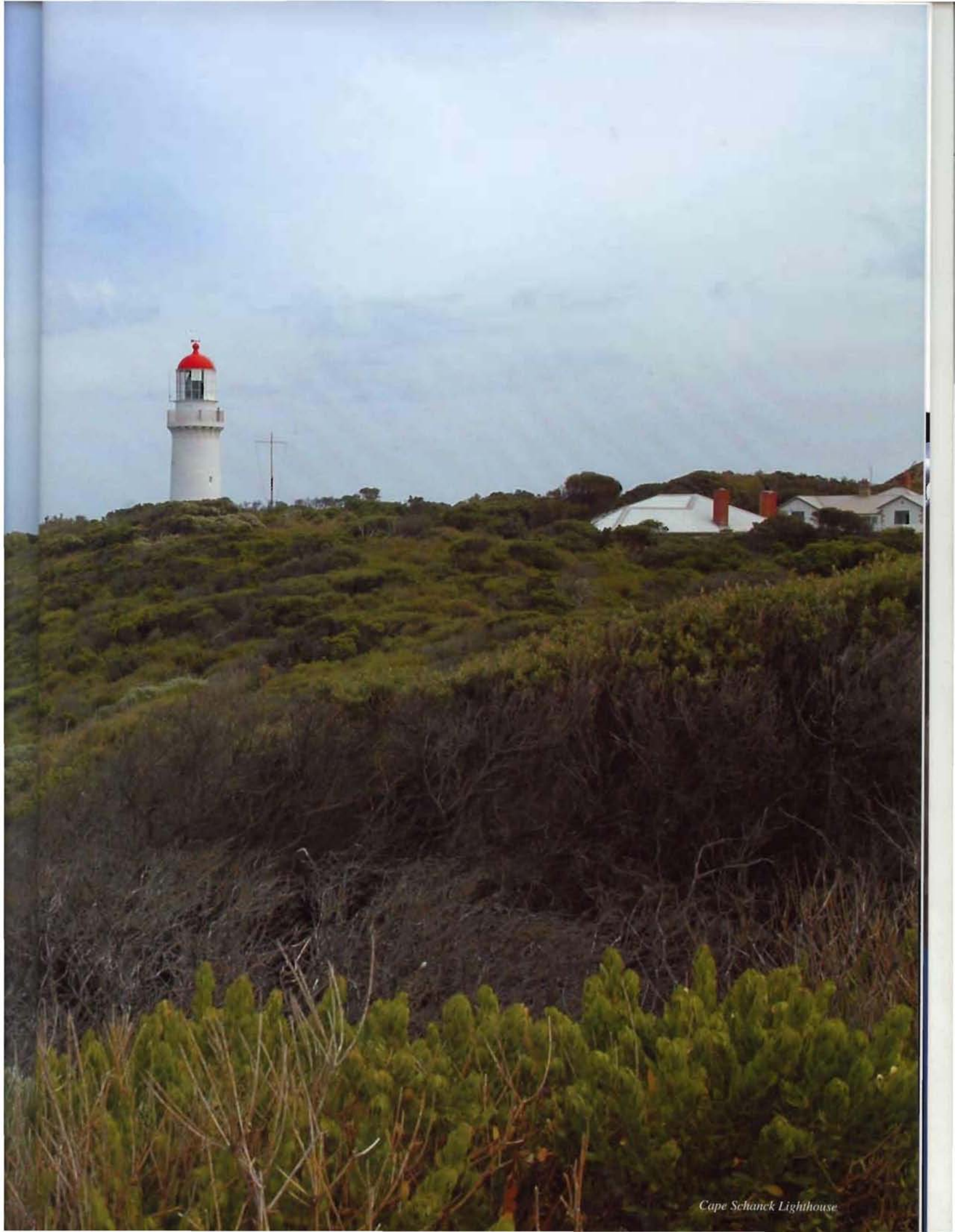
If you have an appetite for art you will be well served on

the Peninsula. The beautiful landscape and eclectic lifestyle has attracted many accomplished artists who have made the Peninsula both their home and their gallery. Possibly the most famous is the McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park while the Tuscan-inspired Manyung Gallery at Mount Eliza shows around 200 works in ever-changing exhibitions. The Peninsula is particularly fortunate to be the home of internationally-known artist John Anderson. It is here on his five-acre property overlooking the sea at Cape Schanck that he walks to his separate studio each day. Here he creates his sensual and almost gothic canvasses, his love of chiaroscuro self-evident. In his own words Anderson explains, "I like to make paintings that show the puzzle of existence. Something that when people look at it they say, yes I have felt that." I felt privileged when he invited me to his studio and came away entranced and a little over-whelmed by his lush, vivacious canvasses. I am not sure I will ever be able to afford a John Anderson painting but it is definitely high on my wish list.

Peninsula Hot Springs Spa







Cape Schanck Lighthouse



Local Market

Flinders



In addition to serious art there are arts and crafts to be enjoyed at wonderful places such as the glass gallery of Eileen Gordon where you can watch the glassblowers at work, and the Tyabb Packing House where you can browse for hours through Australia's largest collection of antiques and collectibles. For shopping, head to Mount Eliza's sophisticated boutiques where you will be able to try on top Australian labels, or trawl the busier Main Street Mornington which offers everything from home wares to fashion items.

Finally, few things are more enjoyable than strolling around a local market and at any of the community markets on the Peninsula you can browse through more than a hundred stalls before deciding whether you want to take home a jar of superb jam or pickle, cheeses, coffees, chocolates, homemade cakes, teas, or fresh fruit and vegetables. You will also want to visit one of the abundant orchards and berry farms where boutique producers create fantastic olive oils, cheeses and jams. You can take a bucket and pick your own raspberries, cherries or

strawberries or just sit and enjoy Devonshire tea with strawberries fresh from the orchard. Other farm gates on the Peninsula include organic vegetables, fresh duck eggs, hydroponics tomatoes, nectarines, pears, organic trout and salmon and fresh native flowers.

So how long should you spend at the Mornington Peninsula? A serious wine buff could easily devote a week to visiting cellar doors. Golfers should allow at least a week to play several of the courses. Those who want to indulge would need a week to drift between the spas and a dozen or so of the winery restaurants and cafes. Outdoor types can walk 20 kilometers on just one bay walk and there are still the water sports, fishing, scuba diving, and horseback rides to consider. So, how long should you stay? You decide; but be prepared that it may not be long enough. **A**

Peninsula Country Road

