

To the lighthouse: a trip to Cape Nelson



Nautilus: Looking up inside the 131-year-old Cape Nelson lighthouse which is still operational, but also open to the public.

By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]I[/dropcap>t is with a hint of shame that I must admit that despite the Cape Nelson lighthouse being "just down the road" for 131 years, I have never got around to visiting it.

"You are not alone," **Rob Hunt** says by phone, when I confess my failing.

Rob, who together with his wife, Margaret, leases and manages the Cape Nelson lighthouse precinct which includes

unique accommodation, a cafe and the lighthouse itself, says most of their visitors come from well beyond south-west Victoria.

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“We get a lot of international guests, especially from Europe, China...who are looking for something different and something remote,” he says.

If people are prepared to travel tens of thousands of kilometres to see a place that is right on our doorstep, we thought it about time *Bluestone* drove a mere 90km from Warrnambool to just south of Portland and checked out the historic landmark in a spectacular landscape.

In the process, we uncovered the perfect day trip.



Grant Wallace is one of several tour guides who provide an

entertaining insight into the lighthouse, both past and present.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]P[/dropcap]ortland locals **Grant** and **Carmel Wallace**, together with son, **James**, have kindly agreed to act as our guides, which is extremely helpful because Grant is one of several tour guides at the lighthouse, so he really knows his stuff.

We start the day with what should have been an invigorating 3km, circular walk on the way to the lighthouse, **the Sea Cliff Nature Walk**, but there is so much to enjoy on the walk that it is impossible not to stop, look, smell and even taste, if the bush tucker berries happen to be out.

Best of all, the easy walk reaches its halfway point on a rocky outcrop that offers spectacular views across to Cape Bridgewater and makes you re-appreciate – all over again – the wild coastline that so defines where we live.

According to the Portland Tourism Association, this lovely walk was created in 1979 by Portland High School students, parents and teachers as the first bit of what is now the 250km Great South West Walk. It is well sign-posted off the Cape Nelson Road and you can download the Parks Victoria [walking notes here](#).

Of course after a walk, comes lunch.



The imposing lighthouse and refurbished frontage of Isabella's cafe which overlooks the coastal heath.
Image: Cape Nelson Lighthouse.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]T[/dropcap]he Wallaces whisk us off down the road to the lighthouse for lunch at *Isabella's*, the beautifully refurbished bluestone cafe that was originally a stables and still has some bluestone flagstone flooring.

The cafe was the first thing to be revamped when Rob and Margaret took over the complex in 2008. They added a commercial kitchen, reglazed the front and employed former thespian, **Steve Campbell**, to run the place.

Steve, who still has the pliable face of an actor, adds a touch of style from the moment you step in the door, but this is not a stuffy, over-priced cafe. Instead it is cosy, affordable and offers great food including fish and chips (fresh flathead tails) to a gourmet, home-made chicken pie, to lamb kofta. (No wonder it averages [almost five stars on trip](#)

[advisor.](#))

Fed and walked, we make one final, quick detour before the lighthouse to look inside the cottage accommodation.

The side-by-side cottages were originally built for the assistant lighthouse keepers but, over the years, as Rob describes it, were “bastardised” into three units. As part of a painstaking restoration that finished in 2010, walls that had been pulled down were replaced. Fireplaces that had been closed off were reopened.

“We ended up doing a renovation in reverse: not fixing it, but taking it back to what it was,” Rob says.

The Hunts are now restoring the lighthouse keeper’s home for similar, boutique, unique accommodation.



The view from the top – one section of the 360 degree panorama that awaits those who climb to the top of the lighthouse.

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A[/dropcap]nd so, to the lighthouse: the 32-metre tall, whitewashed wonder that has been safely guiding ships to the shore since 1884 and is *still* fully operational.

In this respect, it is a rare treat to be able to spiral your way into a working lighthouse, as most of those open to the public in Victoria have been decommissioned.

Whenever I am near a lighthouse, I always suffer from a mix of slight vertigo, awe and an inexplicable desire to quote passages from *Moby Dick* (if I knew any) and today is no different.

The lighthouse is in stunning condition, as solid as the day it was first built, with freshly painted railings and shining brass air vents and a visually arresting staircase that winds us up, up, up – like climbing the inside of a nautilus shell – until we pop into the light room.

Grant points out the globe that illuminates the world, well, at least our corner of it, and I won't spoil *that* surprise...

He then heaves open an Alice-in-Wonderland-style door and we duck our heads, pass through, and step out.

Gasp.

Wow.

[box]The Cape Nelson Lighthouse precinct tours operate daily at 11am and 2pm, fees apply. Isabella's is open seven days, from 10am-4pm, serving coffee, cake and lunch. Breakfast is also available from 10am on weekends. Licensed. For more information on the Cape Nelson Lighthouse precinct and bookings, [visit the website here](#). [/box]



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