

Australia's Mt Arapiles: a climbers' mecca

CHANI BLUE is spoilt for choice when she visits one of Australia's premier climbing spots

MELBOURNE — When driving through the flat and scenically monotonous Wimmera plains, Mt Arapiles stands tall on the horizon like a noble castle. Arriving there one thing is apparent: people come to this location specifically to climb. The camping site is filled with keen tourists from all over the world and is more than a location, it's a community. Geared up with their Gortex and microfibre fleece, climbers don rope, a belt full of clanging metal, and sheepish smiles, then set off to explore the cliff face for potential climbing challenges or "problems", to speak the lingo.

The reason Mt Arapiles is such a hot spot is that few places in the world offer such a plethora of climbing in the one location. You don't have to trek hours along overgrown goat tracks to access good climbing; it all happens just a stone's throw away from the camp ground and picnic area.

Quality rock, breathtaking views, friendly people, and a relaxed campsite are just a few features of this world-class, premier climbing destination, situated four hours drive northwest of Melbourne.

Sauntering around the orange coloured cliffs, which are reminiscent of Uluru (Ayers Rock), I see potential lines up the rock everywhere, including beautiful cracks, overhangs, and spectacular pinnacles. Ropes and chalk hand-prints give a clue that there are climbers about; when I squint I can just make out the miniature figures as high as 230 metres above us. Bolts can also be spotted high up on the cliff face, but most of the climbs will require that people climb the traditional way, using their own cam devices or friends.

When passing another group of climbers, the conversation repeats itself over

and over again — What have you climbed today? Is it good? When did you arrive? Where are you from? and so on.

A bit of everything
Simon Mentz, an experienced rock climber and co-author of *Arapiles Selected Climbs* and *Grampians Selected Climbs*, knows the area well. Moving to the nearby village of Natimuk 20 years ago from Melbourne, Simon has made this rural town his home base,



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essentially to be closer to this prime climbing spot, which includes the nearby Grampians range, and also to be involved in the active climbing community here.

"Every climbing spot in Australia has its own appeal, every area is unique and has its own beauty, but Mt Arapiles has a bit of everything. It has fantastic easy climbs, very hard climbs and bouldering,

not to mention half-decent weather. There are short and long climbs, and good rock — there aren't many places in the world that have high concentrations of these things in the one area," said Simon.

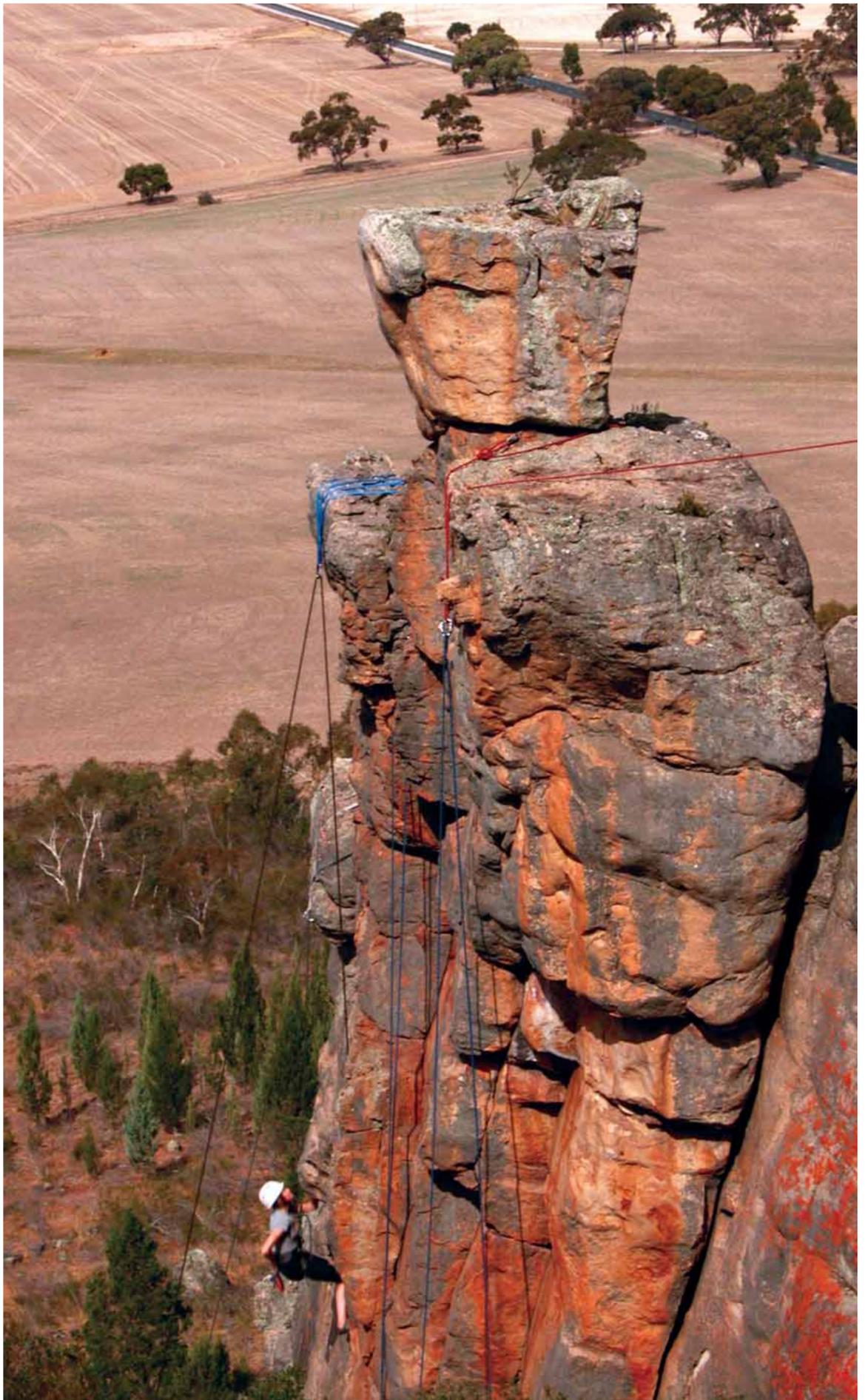
"I've climbed in just about all the main climbing areas in Australia and the routes at Mt Arapiles are very good. It's like God had created it to be climbed. I often think ... how good is it?" he continued.

There are many difficult climbs, but if you are a climbing novice and would prefer to be dragged up the cliff to take in the views, then there are a few climbing guide companies based nearby. If you want to learn the skills to be more self-sufficient, then these guides also give lessons or another option is to tag along with the Victorian Climbing Association and meet new friends.

Good time to visit

The best time to visit Mt Arapiles is in the autumn or spring months, when wild flowers abound and are a spectacular sight. The weather is also at its mildest then, as summer can get amazingly hot and winter is generally wet. Long weekends, especially the Easter break, can get over-crowded at the camp ground, but generally it is a very accommodating place, filled with friendly backpackers and well-facilitated amenities. If climbing isn't your cup of tea, but you don't want to miss the views from the top, then there are also a couple of short but steep walking trails from the campsite that take you up to the summit.

Mt Arapiles has been deemed "the heart and soul of Australian traditional climbing". With well over 2,000 quality-climbing routes and boulders crammed into a relatively small area, you can begin to feel a bit spoilt for choice.



ROCK CLIMBER ABSEILING: Rock Stack at Mt Arapiles in Australia



After successfully climbing to the top, a rock climber abseils off Mt Arapiles



Mt Arapiles has often been referred to as Victoria's Uluru. Here we can see why