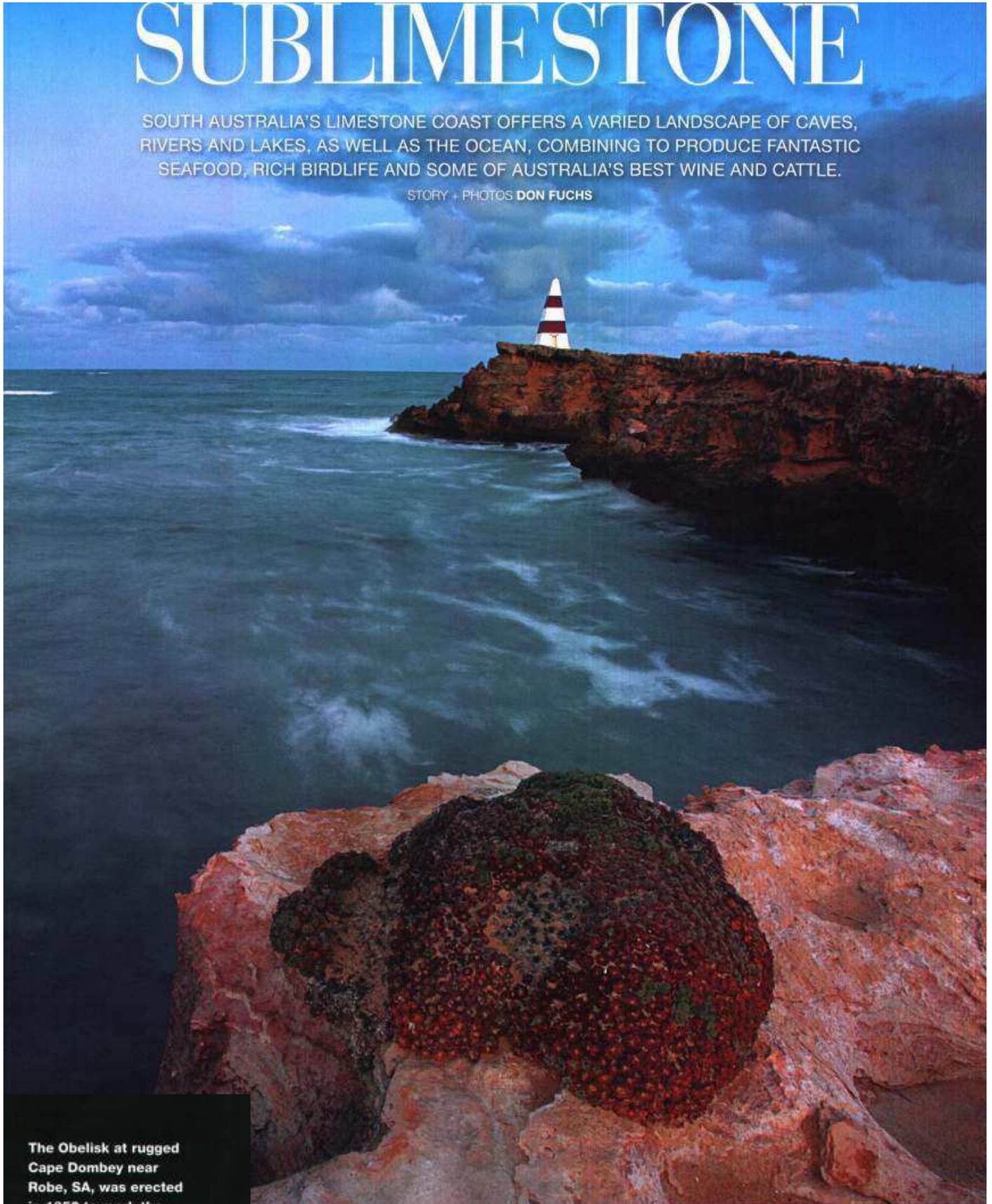




# SUBLIMESTONE

SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S LIMESTONE COAST OFFERS A VARIED LANDSCAPE OF CAVES, RIVERS AND LAKES, AS WELL AS THE OCEAN, COMBINING TO PRODUCE FANTASTIC SEAFOOD, RICH BIRDLIFE AND SOME OF AUSTRALIA'S BEST WINE AND CATTLE.

STORY + PHOTOS **DON FUCHS**



The Obelisk at rugged Cape Dombey near Robe, SA, was erected in 1852 to mark the entrance to Guichen Bay.





“**F**OR ME, it is about exploring. I'm an explorer by nature. Swimming through the caves is like reading a good book.” With a swift motion Grant Pearce pulls his diving mask over his face, jumps from a small jetty into the cold water and begins to drift across Piccaninnie Ponds, an unassuming lake in a flat paddock, surrounded by native bushland. Reeds and aquatic plants grow prolifically along the rim of the pond. Below him a large eel forages for food in the sediment. Tiny pieces of algae, whipped up by a stiff south-westerly, drift through the water, spoiling the visibility, which is sometimes up to 30 metres. Clad in a dry suit, Grant is in familiar waters, which is just as well. Not far from the small jetty the silt-covered bottom suddenly drops away into a 110m-deep chasm.

Grant is a cave-diving veteran with 27 years' experience and is one of the few divers who have ventured to the bottom of the dramatic limestone shaft hidden under the placid surface of the pond. “It is a fascinating place,” he says. “From a hydrogeology perspective it is fascinating because you can see the origins of Piccaninnie Ponds from down there. Whenever I go in it gives me a snapshot in time of how the whole place has developed.”

Cave diving is Grant's profession as well as his passion. As a karst hydrologist he advises the South Australian government and is the Australian commissioner for the International Karst Commission, so what hides under this rural landscape is of immense interest to him.

Limestone – a thick layer of ancient marine deposits – forms the foundation of the entire region. Under towns, paddocks and pine forests lies a gigantic aquifer with caves and caverns filled with crystal clear water. Piccaninnie Ponds and nearby Ewens Ponds – both enormous springs – are windows into this subterranean world.

This corner of South Australia, which covers not only coastal areas but as far inland as the Victorian border, is named after this underground phenomenon. Piccaninnie Ponds, in the very south-east corner of South Australia, marks the end of a journey through the Limestone Coast. It has its beginnings in the old river port of Goolwa, on the eastern side of the Fleurieu Peninsula, and ends in Mount Gambier. In Goolwa, however, limestone is not on the radar. It is the Southern Ocean and Australia's mightiest river, the Murray, that demands the attention of travellers. Not far from Goolwa, the Murray breaks through a seemingly endless wall of sand dunes and drains into the ocean.

For those who want to get close to the mouth of the Murray, a short four-wheel-drive trip along a broad beach following the Sir Richard Peninsula leads directly to it. However, it pays to climb into a Cessna and look down on this extraordinary landscape from the skies. After take-off from the Goolwa airfield, a semi-aquatic landscape of epic proportions reveals itself. Because of a massive surf-pounded dune wall, the river comes to a grinding halt, forming huge lakes, a maze of meandering river arms, bird-rich wetlands and numerous islands. It is a landscape that has no equivalent anywhere else in Australia. And it is a landscape that has recently changed.

Sarah Hirsch, owner of Narnu Farm on Hindmarsh Island, remembers: “In 2009 you could almost walk across the Goolwa Channel.” Where the controversial bridge that connects Goolwa with the island spans the channel, the river was “a mere trickle flanked by massive sandbanks”. The river is flowing once again, fed by floods in the interior of New South Wales and south-east Queensland, filling lakes and channels, revitalising swamps and wetlands, and releasing a huge plume of muddy freshwater into the Southern Ocean.

To reach the other side of the river mouth for the trip south, the route detours from Goolwa around Lake Alexandrina, crosses the Murray River via ferry in Wellington and then heads south past Lake Albert to the town of Meningie. Soon after, the Princes Highway enters Coorong National Park. The park is of great significance for the local Ngarrindjeri people and it protects the 140km-long Youngusband Peninsula with a string of saltwater lagoons behind it as well as some dense coastal bushland on the mainland side. It is here that passionate Dutch-born birdwatcher Peter Waanders gets his kicks.

Armed with a bird-watching telescope mounted on a tripod, a digital camera and a smart phone with the *The Michael Morcombe eGuide to the Birds of Australia* app, he roams the coastal scrub in search of rare and interesting birds. The app gives him the call, description and image of every bird in Australia. Deep in coastal forest near Salt Creek he pulls his phone out, activates the app and plays the call of the southern scrub-robin. “This bird is quite rare and is confined to this scrubby bushland,” Peter says. Ringneck parrots fly by while he waits and then the little bird

appears in a tea-tree right in front of him. At nearby Halite Lake, a salt lake, he spots four pairs and one young hooded plover, birds that are threatened nationally. “The Coorong is one of their strongholds in Australia,” he says.

It is also one of the top bird-watching areas. “It is the mix of habitats,” Peter says. “You've got the mallee scrub in close proximity to water, both fresh and salt, and obviously the coast.” The mallee scrub is also home to the malleefowl and a bird-watching expedition into the Coorong with Peter would not be complete without at least a glimpse of this large bird. Starting at a large nesting mound that the birds have built over many years, Peter slowly walks to where the scrub gives way to a natural clearing – and finds them there, foraging for food.

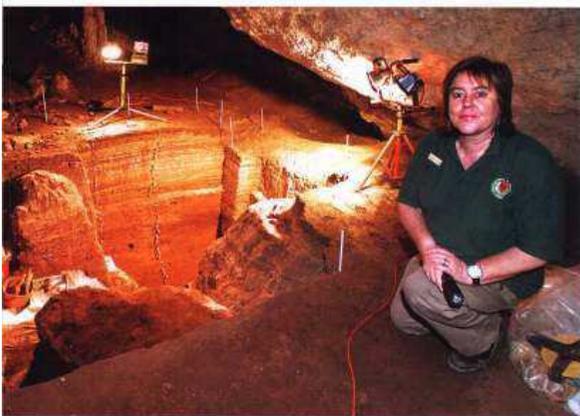
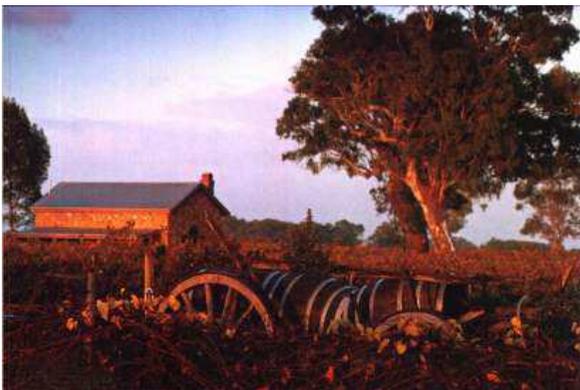
Driving along the Princes Highway south through the Coorong, framed by dense coastal scrub, views occasionally open up over sheltered lagoons. Only a couple of kilometres away, the Southern Ocean hides behind the dune wall of the Youngusband Peninsula. After Goolwa the ocean plays a secondary role, despite its proximity. For those staying at the Aboriginal-owned Coorong Wilderness Lodge the roar of the waves is audible only at night, and then only when the wind comes from the right direction. It is in this part of the Coorong that the first low limestone hills appear along the road.

A monstrous orange sculpture of a crayfish marks the arrival in Kingston SE, where travellers reunite with the Southern Ocean. But road signs lure them away from the coast again, pointing to one of the most exciting geological and archeological features of the area: the Naracoorte Caves.





**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Mount Gambier's Blue Lake, within the crater of an old volcano; Highbank vineyard in the Coonawarra wine region; cave guide Decima McTernan at a dig in Blanche Cave; cave diver Grant Pearce snorkelling in Piccaninnie Ponds.**





**Aboriginal shell midden on the rugged coast near Beachport. LEFT: Birdwatcher Peter Waanders in Coorong National Park.**



Born and bred in Naracoorte, Decima McTernan is a professional cave dweller. She has been working with them for 19 years and is now a senior guide at the World Heritage-listed attraction. Her association with this underground wonder world goes back to childhood, when she roamed many of the caves. "The caves were like a theme park when I was young," Decima says. Blanche Cave was her favourite haunt. The now famous Victoria Fossil Cave hadn't been found at that point. It earned the cave system World Heritage listing in 1994. Extensively studied, it gives an uninterrupted record of the conditions of the past 500,000 years in this part of South Australia. A unique set of circumstances allowed animals to fall into the cave without the chance of escape. Their fossilised bones now provide paleontologists with a wealth of information.

Research is ongoing and new finds still happen, as the latest excavation in Blanche Cave shows. Flinders University scientist Liz Reed was documenting fossil sites in the cave system when she made her important discovery. "She pulled out a core sample and found beautiful sediment layers, and it was full of bones," Decima says. Sitting next to the excavation site, she says with a smile: "It didn't take the scientists long to realise that it was where big mast owls have lived and regurgitated their food."

Back at ground level, the next attractions are just half-an-hour's drive away. Heading south, vineyards begin to stretch to the left and right of the Riddoch Highway. The tiny village of Coonawarra near Penola defines one of South Australia's premier wine-producing regions. And again, geology plays its role. Around Coonawarra, shaped roughly like a cigar, is a 12km-long, two-kilometre wide pocket of terra rossa, red clay soil produced by the weathering of limestone. More than 30 wineries cram





**ABOVE: The Aboriginal-owned Coorong Wilderness Lodge in Coorong National Park. LEFT: Cray fisherman David Dunsford in his shed in Beachport and (bottom) Wagyu beef can be sampled at a tasting room on Mayura Station near Millicent.**

onto this stretch of precious dirt that together with just the right climate produces consistently outstanding wines.

The Coonawarra is cabernet-sauvignon country at its best. Other varieties include shiraz, petit verdot, pinot noir, malbec and merlot as well as sauvignon blanc, chardonnay and riesling. "The one that gets the most accolades at the moment is our shiraz," Nick Zema says. He and his brother Matt manage the small winery Zema Estate, which was established by Nick's parents in 1982. Together with well-respected winemaker Greg Clayfield, they produce rich, handcrafted wines typical of the region.

Nick explains why geology has a profound influence on the success of wine-growing in the region: "Under four or five inches of very rich soil is limestone. The limestone is important because of its very good drainage. There is no water-logging. Something that gets a bit overlooked is how important the water and the quality of the water is." Nick is as passionate about the lifestyle of the region as he is about his wines. "It is a fantastic place to grow up and live," he says. "We are an hour away from the best seafood in Australia, especially the best crayfish. Agriculturally, it is also very good as well, with great beef and lamb."

While Coonawarra gave the wine region its name, it is Penola that forms the cultural hub. Blessed with history, culture, exceptional food and wine, and an amazing community spirit, it is a place to linger. But the coast with its attractions also beckons, not least because of the seafood. There is, however, one stop on the way.

Not far from Millicent, just past the extensive pine plantations of Mount Burr Forest, is Mayura Station. Green hills dotted with black cattle and the white turbines of Canunda Wind Farm form



Local surfers enjoy a Southern Ocean dip at Goolwa Beach.

a stark landscape. Five-thousand head of black Wagyu populate the rolling paddocks of the 2630-hectare property. "Most Wagyu sold in Australia is crossbred Wagyu – Wagyu crossbred with Brahman, Angus or Holstein," station owner Scott de Bruin says. "What we do here is 100 percent Wagyu."

Scott is passionate about producing the best quality cattle he possibly can. "It becomes addictive, so fully encompassing," he says. "I'm so focused on learning about the genetics, the history. In the end you produce a lovely meat product." To convince the public of the quality, taste and benefits of his Wagyu beef, Scott has established a cellar-door style tasting room, where visitors – by appointment – can sample what Mayura Station produces thanks to chef Kirby Shearing.

From some of the higher hills on Mayura Station you can see over Lake Bonney SE to the densely vegetated but narrow strip of Canunda National Park. Behind it lays the Southern Ocean, only about 10km away from where the Wagyu cattle peacefully graze.

Canunda National Park is part of the original Limestone Coast that stretches from the historic town of Robe, by far the most scenic and popular town along this strip, to Beachport and further to Port MacDonnell. Jagged limestone cliffs, dangerous reefs, battered rocky headlands and long, deserted beaches form a visual wonderland of relatively untouched coastal wilderness. This part of the coast is also an ideal habitat for crayfish.

From Kingston SE to Robe and from Beachport to Port MacDonnell, crayfisherman harvest the tasty bounty. One of them is Beachport resident David Dunsford. Sitting in his well-organised shed fixing craypots, the gently spoken fisherman says: "Fishing is my life, that's the reality of it. My recreation has become my life of fishing." When he speaks of the Southern Ocean, his workplace, it is with great respect and admiration. "The thing with the coastline here is it is so raw, it

is so ferocious, that if you happen to make a mistake you are in trouble," he says. "Thirty knots will be just a run-of-the-mill day. If the ocean decides you are not going fishing, you are not going fishing." He is mindful of the need to protect crayfish stocks and to fish sustainably. He believes the industry has a bright future "as long as you've got good quota policies in place and time restrictions on your fishing".

In Port MacDonnell, the Southern Ocean shows its teeth. A large cold front is coming through, with fierce gales and horizontal rain. The streets of the small town are deserted and it is time to seek refuge inland. On the way to Mount Gambier it pays to visit Dingley Dell in nearby Allendale, once the home of poet Adam Lindsay Gordon.

Here the flat limestone rock is visible along the road. To see more limestone in and around Mount Gambier visit Cave Gardens or Umpherstone sinkhole, or take the award-winning Blue Lake Aquifer Tour. The exceptionally clear lake formed in the vent of a recent volcano from water that has infiltrated the underlying limestone. It's a fitting end to a journey that's defined by this sedimentary rock and brought to life by the landscapes created from it.

## LIMESTONE COAST

Most roads are sealed, apart from some in Coorong National Park. For the trip along the Sir Richard Peninsula to the mouth of the Murray River a four-wheel-drive is essential. The 750–800 kilometres is best covered in five to seven days. For further information, including many excellent and varied accommodation options, go to [www.southaustralia.com](http://www.southaustralia.com) and [www.thelimestonecoast.com](http://www.thelimestonecoast.com).