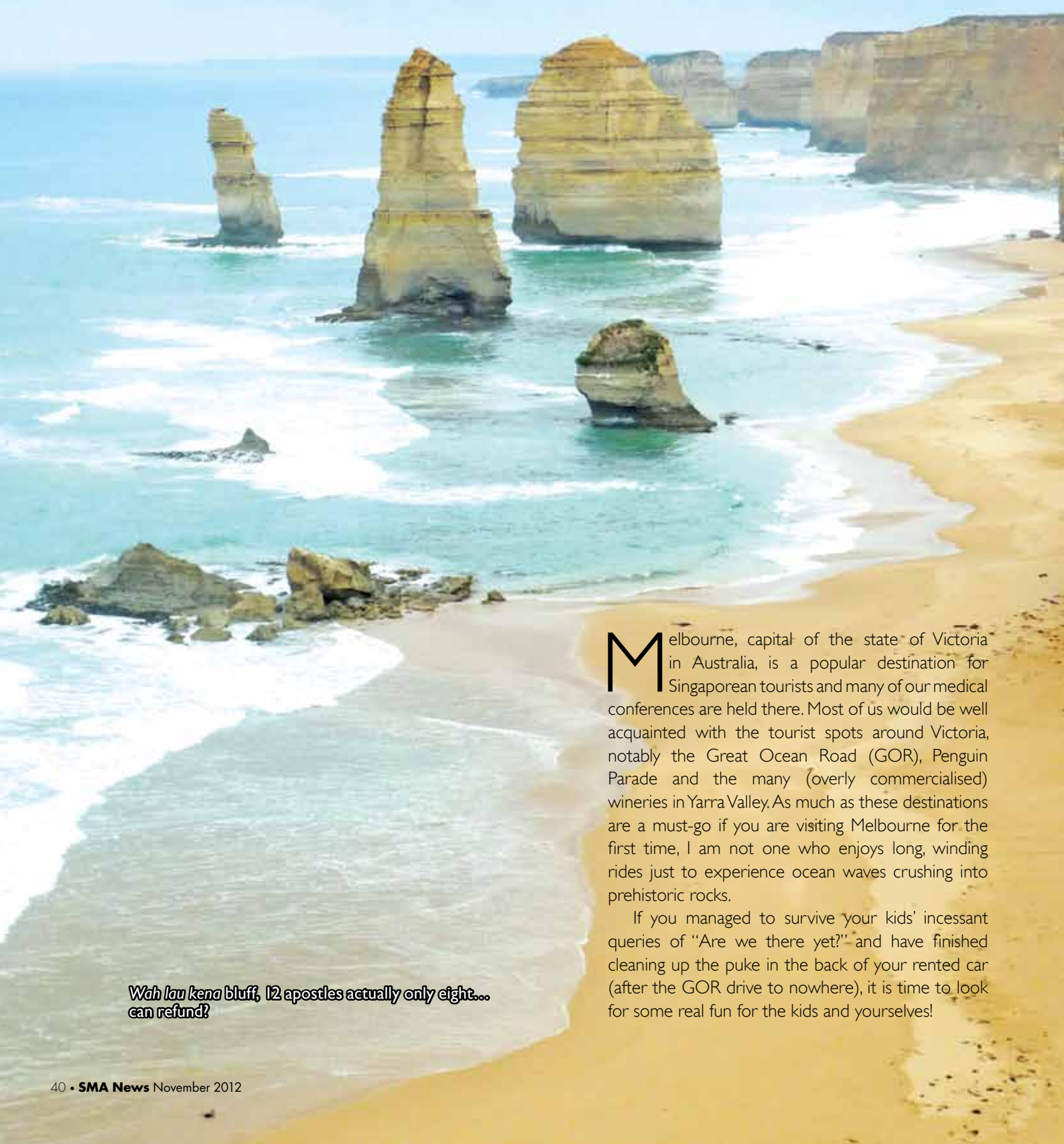


Hoppy Victoria, of Playgrounds and Beers

By Dr Lim Boon Leng, Editorial Board Member



Melbourne, capital of the state of Victoria in Australia, is a popular destination for Singaporean tourists and many of our medical conferences are held there. Most of us would be well acquainted with the tourist spots around Victoria, notably the Great Ocean Road (GOR), Penguin Parade and the many (overly commercialised) wineries in Yarra Valley. As much as these destinations are a must-go if you are visiting Melbourne for the first time, I am not one who enjoys long, winding rides just to experience ocean waves crashing into prehistoric rocks.

If you managed to survive your kids' incessant queries of "Are we there yet?" and have finished cleaning up the puke in the back of your rented car (after the GOR drive to nowhere), it is time to look for some real fun for the kids and yourselves!

*Wah lau kena bluff, 12 apostles actually only eight...
can refund?*

Playgrounds around Victoria

You may think that one must be mad to be looking for playgrounds during the holidays, after paying for the airfare and hotel stay. Truth be told, I hate bringing my kids to the playgrounds in Singapore. The weather is hot and humid, the playgrounds are overcrowded, if not used for the drying of laundry, and there are often unsavoury graffiti scribbled all over. Nope, I don't care that "Ah Beng Luvs Ah Lian Forever"!

Melbourne is one of the least dense cities in the world and as a result, the playgrounds around Melbourne and the rest of Victoria are clean and available. The public playgrounds also serve as good pit stops along wherever you are headed towards. Most importantly, they are FREE!

Of the numerous playgrounds we went to, the most impressive one was the award-winning Frankston Regional Waterfront Playground. The playground is fenced, and if you are not one of those anxious parents who have to hawk-eye your kids in the playground, there are seats and tables for you to get some rest after the long drive. There are barbecue facilities and you can ask the locals who are barbecuing for a free sausage if you are thick-skinned enough.

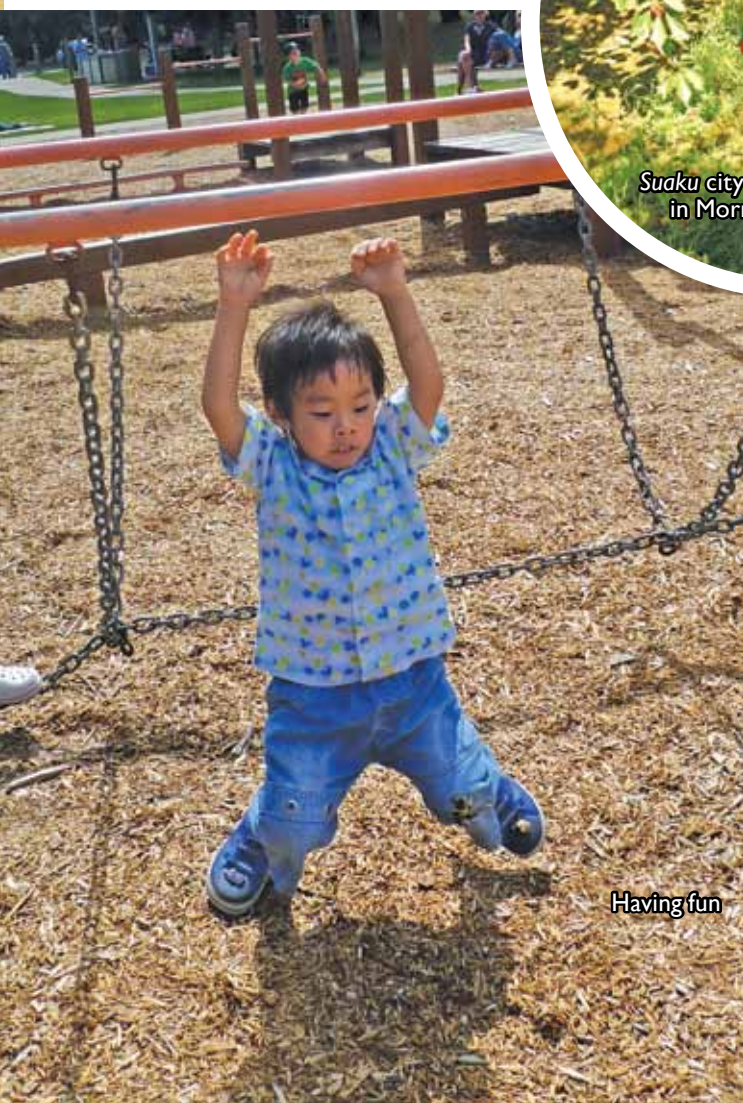
There are two forts built to look like mystical castles (at least to the kids), a pirate ship, swings, a flying fox, monkey bars and a sandpit, which is surrounded



The mystical castles at Frankston Regional Waterfront Playground



Suaku city kid picking cherries in Mornington Peninsula



Having fun

by a decked walkway. The playground also includes a Liberty Swing, which is designed for children with disabilities. The playground is a short walk to the Frankston foreshore if you haven't had enough of beaches and the sea by then. The cheapskate in me was pleasantly surprised as the parking was free when I was there as the machine was spoilt (it looked like it had been spoilt for a long time and I doubt anyone will be repairing it anytime soon).

Strategically, this is a good stop if you are headed towards the many tourist attractions or wineries in Mornington Peninsula.

Another good playground to take a toilet stop at would be the new Yarra Glen Adventure Playground at McKenzie Reserve, en route to Yarra Valley. The main structure here has numerous spiral and curved slides, balance beams, climbing frames and monkey bars. There is also a huge pyramid rope climbing frame with a rope bridge for entry, a big sandpit with a shaded area, a big carousel which you can spin around in, a huge birds' nest swing (which is quite high off the ground), five swings (including one with a harness), family-sized see-saws, humongous dung beetle structures and other sculptures. The children at the playground were friendly and well behaved, and were playing with my children in no time.



Green Olive at Red Hill Vineyard and Olive Grove



Tube slides at Enchanted Maze Garden in Mornington Peninsula

Craft beer and microbreweries

The kids have had their fair share of fun, so it's time to tuck them in and have some of your own. But you don't have a babysitter and you cannot leave the kids alone in the hotel room! How?

Although better known for its wine production, particularly the commercially successful Shiraz, Victoria has an understated but exciting and buzzing craft beer industry. The Australians are brewing everything from your run-of-the-mill ales and lagers to India Pale Ales and Russian Imperial Stouts. What I noticed was that they had a tendency to veer towards a more UK and US style.

Unlike in Singapore, where choices of draught beers are limited, Melbourne is littered with beer gardens carrying a huge variety of local craft beers on tap. As I'm not a big fan of pubs or rowdy crowds, I preferred to get my supplies from Dan Murphy's, the local liquor supermarket and drink in the comfort of the hotel room.



A variety of Australian beers



Tasting goat cheese in Mornington Peninsula – it was so fresh, you could smell the goats



21-day dry-aged black Angus ribeye steak

Steps to enjoy ice cold beer

1. Locate the nearest Dan Murphy's with Google Maps or from the concierge.
2. Leave kids with wife.
3. Run there.
4. Choose from the hundreds of beers at the store (okay, I'm exaggerating)!
5. Run back.
6. Clear the hotel room fridge of all the Fosters or VB.
7. Put beers in!
8. Go for your day trips and your cold beer will be waiting for you when you come back!

You can also choose to go to the microbreweries. There are over 30 independently-owned craft breweries in Victoria. Please remember not to drink and drive!

Hargreaves Hill Brewing Company

I visited a more family-friendly microbrewery, Hargreaves Hill Brewing Company, located at Yarra Glen, after the kids had their fun at the playground. The cellar door and restaurant is located in Yarra Glen's former National Bank building and can be easily missed. The waitress was friendly and helpful, the food was great and the beer was fantastic. I enjoyed the malty Extra Strong Brew, though it may be a little too bitter for newcomers to beer. They also have a good selection of wine (I guess they had to since they were located in Yarra Valley).

Useful websites to check out

1. <http://www.playgroundfinder.com>
2. <http://www.au.timeout.com/melbourne/bars/features/604/victorias-best-breweries> **SMA**



Dr Lim Boon Leng is resigned to the fact that he is a psychiatrist during office hours and aunt agony to friends and relatives during after-hours.