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Malika's
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PARADISE IN
KOH YAO YAI,
THAILAND**

**KUTCH,
FROM AN
ARTIST'S
LENS**

Now Playing
**HOW MUSIC-LED
TRAVEL IS
HEALING BURNOUT**

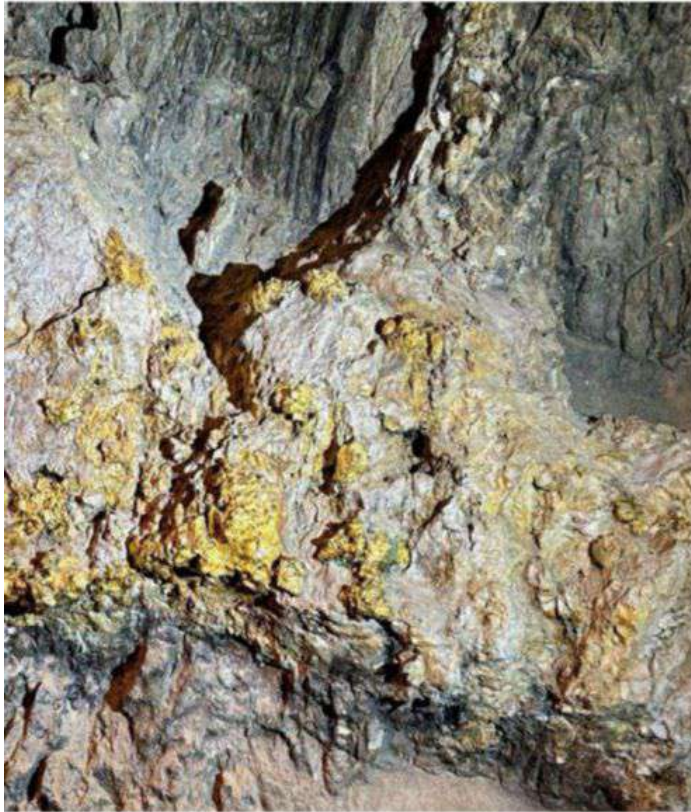
 **MAGZTER**

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Clockwise from here: Gold panning at the river involves swirling gravel in an aluminium pan until faint, shimmering flecks begin to emerge; gold quartz mining demonstration in an underground mine; a rare gold nugget discovered while panning in the river.





STRIKING GOLD LIKE THE 1850s

At Sovereign Hill in Ballarat, a vivid recreation of the Victorian Gold Rush helps **Henna Shah** open a window into Australia's colonial past and the beginnings of Melbourne's economic boom

ARRIVING IN MELBOURNE and setting out for Ballarat on my first day in Australia feels like an unexpected introduction to the Land Down Under. Joining a small group tour on a chilly May morning, our coach whirs past fallen autumn leaves before slowing down on streets lined with century-old homes with Victorian filigree porches. As I inch closer to **Sovereign Hill** (sovereignhill.com.au), a living museum exhibiting life from the Victorian Gold Rush of the 1850s, it almost feels like finding myself in a scene from Netflix's *Redeeming Love*.

Rob, a Ballarat local, volunteering in period garb, and Anna Kyi, historian at the Sovereign Hill Museums Association, greet us at the entrance. As I walk along the main street of the goldfields, a horse-drawn carriage rumbles past, heightening the sense of being transported to another era. "This Main Road has been recreated using Francois Cogné's lithographs of Ballarat East," Anna says.

With a paternal flair to his storytelling, Rob added further context. "To understand the gold rush, you have to begin with the people who came here." He traces the arrival of migrants from Britain and across Europe, mostly driven by famine, land clearances, and unemployment. Among them are also a handful of former convicts, a vestige of Australia's origins as a penal colony. With a wry smile, Rob lifts his sleeve slightly. "Look closely and the black-and-white stripes beneath one's clothing are a telltale sign of a past in prison."

A Moment of Eureka

Stopping by a sluice box along the riverbank, Rob demonstrates the art of **gold panning** (sovereignhill.com.au/events/gold-panning/), swirling gravel in an aluminium pan until faint, shimmering flecks begin to emerge.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: VISIT VICTORIA (2); HENNA SHAH

It looks deceptively simple and I try my hand at it, watching closely for any sign of golden flakes. After sore arms and considerable assistance from Rob, I finally see some glint in the pan. The gold dust I uncover is mine to keep, and I pop it into a small glass vial, turning my Eureka moment into a souvenir.

Arriving at the river early, we slip in ahead of the crowds before making our way to the entrance of a gold mine. A mine train carries us through the shaft, descending over 30 metres underground. Rob's voice echoes through the darkness, revealing the harsh realities of mining life. "The moment you step into a mine, you accept a level of risk," he explains, describing collapsing earth, flooding, long hours, and even the tools themselves as potential hazards.

Anna, who also accompanied us underground, goes on to distinguish between different types of miners. "Some work independently in small parties of three to four men, sharing the costs, labour and rewards equally, while others are employed by companies with access to



Former convicts are a vestige of Australia's origins as a penal colony, and often work at the gold minefield.

more advanced equipment." It all comes down to being in the right place at the right time. Mining historian Peter McCarthy estimates that independent miners at Durham Hole, where Sovereign Hill's visitor carpark stands today, could have yielded about 12,240 ounces of gold between 1853 and 1856. At £4 (Rs 513) per ounce, this equated to roughly £50,000 (Rs 64,00,000 approx) at the time.

Back above ground, we gather to watch molten gold being poured into a mould. As it solidifies into a bullion bar, the blinding brilliance of 24-karat gold puts into perspective its undeniable allure.

Behind the Scenes

Walking into a miner's settlement camp brings the daily life of the families into focus. A woman soothes a baby just outside one of the homes, where entire families live together within a tiny cottage. Each home is anchored by a small fireplace that is also used for cooking, along with a few other limited amenities.

"These are the homes of European miners," Rob points toward the next settlement as he continues. "Up ahead is the **Chinese Protectorate Camp** (sovereignhill.com.au/events/chinese-protectorate-camp). Anna adds, "Chinese

A costumed volunteer prepares for a musket firing demonstration. Right: The writer at a gold mine entrance, just before the mine train ride.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: VISIT VICTORIA; HENNA SHAH; VISIT VICTORIA



(From top): Horse drawn carriage rides at Sovereign Hill transport you to a different time period; One can experience an old-school 1850s style wooden bowling alley here as well.



immigrants are required to pay a £10 (Rs 1,200 approx) poll tax upon arrival in Victoria, and strict limits are placed on how many can travel on each vessel." A colonial brainchild, these camps are intended to supervise and segregate Chinese miners. While framed as a measure to reduce conflict, it is clearly an early sign of racism.

Moving ahead, class distinctions also become evident in the choice of a beverage. For working-class miners, coffee is an affordable everyday drink, while the elite prefer tea. As we stop in front of a coffee tent, Anna explains, "Until 1854, the sale of alcohol, or grog, was prohibited on the diggings. These coffee tents often

operate as fronts for sly grog sellers, who discreetly serve it in coffee cups to help avoid scrutiny."

Despite leaving behind rigid social structures in England, the Devonshire tea custom travelled with the upper-class elite to the goldfields of Victoria. At **New York Bakery** (sovereignhill.com.au/visit/where-to-eat/), a re-imagined vintage-style tea room, waitresses in aprons and bonnets serve tea in floral cups along with freshly baked scones, offering a counterview to the hardships outside.

Glimpses of Leisure

Life on the diggings is not without its lighter moments. Inside a confectionery, I

GETTING THERE

Air India (airindia.com) operates direct flights to Melbourne from Mumbai and Delhi. Singapore Airlines (singaporeairlines.com) offers flights with a layover at Changi airport.

TOURS

Explore Australia Tours (exploreaustraliatours.com.au/) offers guided small group tours from Melbourne. **Your Exclusive Tours** (yourexclusivetours.com.au/) is a great option for those seeking a private tour with a hotel pick up and drop.

WHERE TO STAY

Choose **Sovereign Hill Hotel** (sovereignhill.com.au/hotel/), for an immersive Gold Rush-era stay, with cosy, vintage-style rooms. Doubles starting from ₹10,000.

Melbourne Marriott Hotel Docklands (marriott.com) offers a contemporary city base, featuring sleek rooms and a rooftop infinity pool. Doubles from approximately ₹16,000.

watch raspberry lollies being made from scratch before tasting them warm. At a long wooden bowling alley with wooden pins, the uneven surface makes each throw unpredictable, a far cry from the sleek, polished lanes of today.

"Between 1851 and 1916, the Ballarat goldfields are estimated to have produced 10 million ounces of gold," says Anna. With this wealth came a growing desire for good-to-haves beyond the bare essentials. Many later immigrants find opportunity not in mining, but in trades such as grocery, candle-making, clothing and jewellery.

As my visit draws to a close, Rob guides me back towards the main road. "Look there," he says, drawing my attention to a troop of British soldiers in red uniforms marching into view. Stationed to maintain order on the goldfields, two of the soldiers take position at the **Victoria Theatre** (sovereignhill.com.au/events/trooper-musket-firing/) gallery. As we all look up in anticipation, there is a sharp clicking of their muskets, followed by deafening shots that mark my time in a bygone era to a dramatic close.

The journey back to Melbourne feels like a gradual return to reality. As the sun dips lower, the filigree porches begin to blur from the coach window. The Melbourne skyline sharpens into focus, a fine testament to the Victorian Gold Rush, whose wealth built many of the buildings that continue to define the city today. ☺