

City slickers ache to explore the rooftop of Australia

By CAROLYN FORD

THE Bogong High Plains in eastern Victoria are the daisy-studded rooftop of Australia — Banjo Paterson country — and city dwellers are virtually queuing up to see them from the back of a horse.

From the tiny township of Cobungra, Fritz and Jill Halbwid run about 15 treks every year in the summer months and are booked solid. On each trek they guide up to a dozen riders, who learn the hard way about saddle sores and screaming muscles.

Fritz, small and wiry, with a dry sense of humour, came to Australia 15 years ago as a ski instructor from Austria and fell in love with the rolling plateau country.

On a recent five-day trek across the plains it was easy to see the appeal. This is some of the most beautiful and different alpine country in the world.

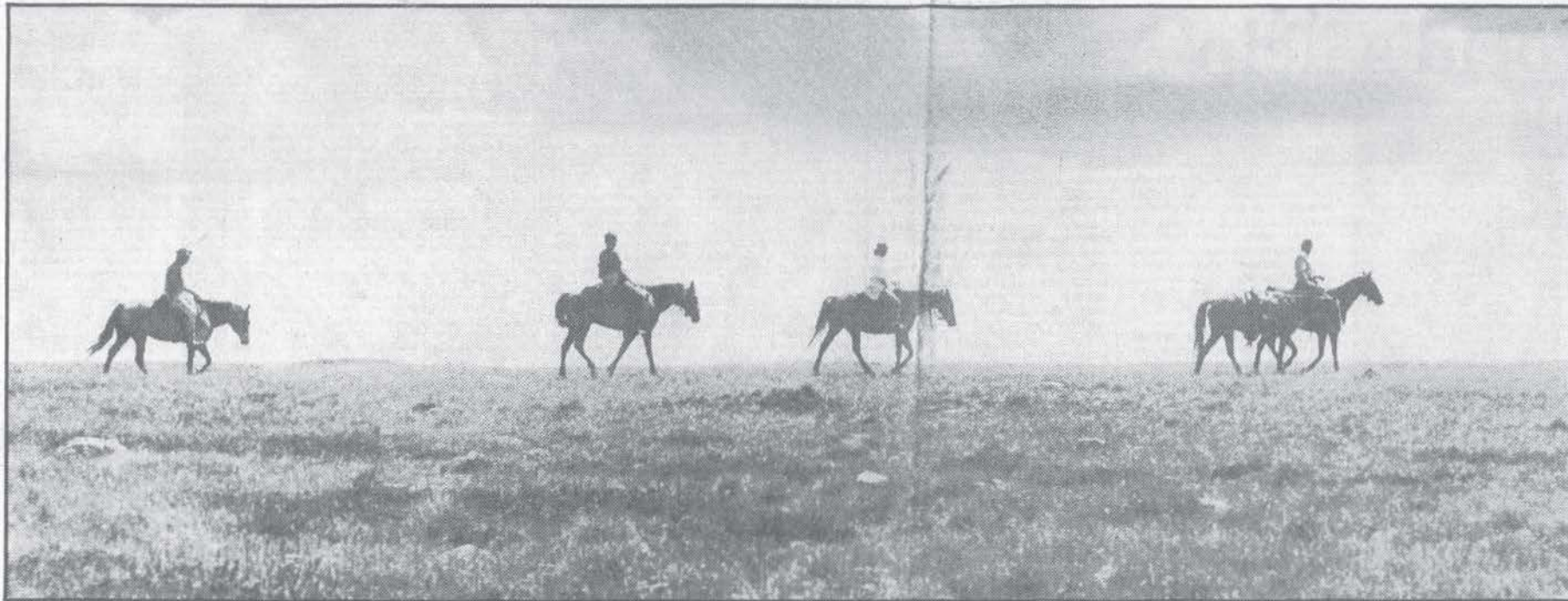
On the trek across the 81,000ha Bogong National Park, riders traverse grandiose mountain peaks, lush valleys and Wyoming-style grassed plains. There are 300 varieties of wild flowers, dingoes on the high ridges, brumbies bolting for the thick scrub. Clouds of cockatoos and galahs rise screeching from the snow gums.

At one time it is possible to see eight of Victoria's highest peaks around the horizon — Mt Buffalo, Mt Buller, Mt Hotham, Mt Beauty, Mt McKay, Mt Feathertop, Mt Bogong and Mt Loch — rising from the haze-filled valleys.

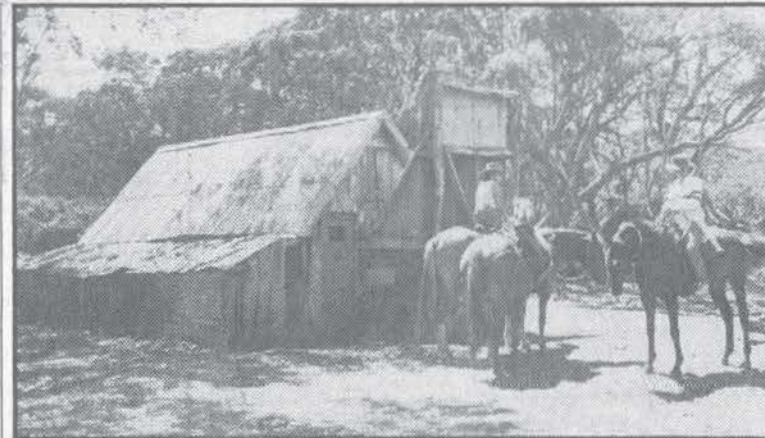
Dotted throughout the park are 30 historic huts, built by the pioneer cattlemen when they drove their herds up for the summer grazing. Several are more than 100 years old and are classified by the National Trust.

The finest and most authentic example seen on the trek was Wallace's Hut, built in 1889. The solid timber construction with a shingle roof had a handcrafted fireside chair and mantelpiece, both crafted from surrounding snow gums by the Wallace Brothers.

A scrawled entry in the hut's log book summed it all up: "It sure heats watching television."



Horse trekkers ride across the magnificent wildflower-studded Bogong High Plains in Victoria ... Banjo Paterson country — Picture: ANDREW DE LA RUE



Wallace's drovers' hut, one of the oldest on the plains, is classified by the National Trust