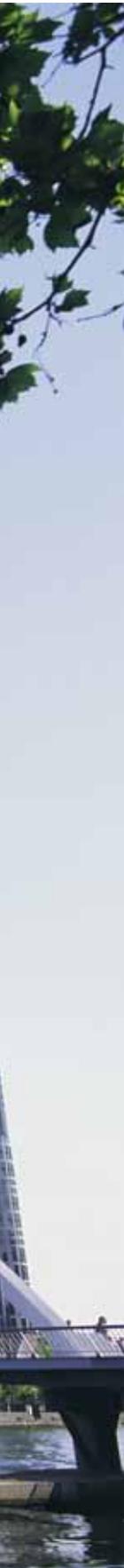


SOUTHERN SOJOURN

Riverside walks? Check. Masterchef-quality dining? Check. Charming downtown area? Check. Cosmopolitan vibe? Check. Friendly people? Check. That's Melbourne.

By Charukesi Ramadurai



Melbourne today seems to effortlessly tick all the right boxes. However, it wasn't always this way. Founded nearly a century after Sydney, Melbourne thrived on the Victorian gold rush of the 1850s and '60s. When the gold fever abated by the early 1890s, the city stopped being 'Marvellous Melbourne' and found itself back in the shadows of Sydney's gleaming beauty. From there to being consistently voted among the "world's most livable cities" is a testament to the power of the underdog. Recollect the iconic sixties' advertising campaign of Avis car rentals – "We're No. 2, so we try harder" – that is what Melbourne did too.

And what it lacked in spectacular landmarks that have graced a million postcards out of Sydney – the man-made Opera House and the natural Great Barrier Reef – it has made up for with a buzzing food, arts, and culture scene. The magnificent Great Ocean Drive; that temple to sport, the Melbourne

red and muted yellow Edwardian structure from the early 1900s and the latter also a dull red, with tall spires; both of them are in stark contrast to the sharp lines and angles of Federation Square. I remember reading that the Federation Square building has 16 restaurants and pubs and several cultural spaces including the Ian Potter gallery and Australian Center for Moving Images. So it is no surprise that all of Melbourne heads there to hang out whenever possible.

I am waiting for my guide for the 'Lanes and Arcades' tour organised by a local walking tours company. The walk begins from the Square, and takes me through narrow alleys filled with shops and cafés sprawling on to the road. Most cafés are crowded with people chatting over coffee and cupcakes: Happy couples, young men and women in business suits, mothers with their babies on strollers parked close to them and, of course, dozens of tourists with their cameras. The tour itself is superb, offering glimpses into the history of the city and leading me through some of the

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Cricket Ground, or the G, as Melburnians call it; places like Melbourne Aquarium for family entertainment, and so on.

For me, Melbourne's charm lies entirely in its easygoing European feel: Cobble-stoned lanes, alfresco cafés, and large green spaces in the middle of the city. Friends tell me that the "inner city" – the Central Business District – is the best place to begin my exploration of Melbourne. So one morning, I find myself at the open space in front of Federation Square, which sits between two old and elegant buildings: The Flinders Street train station and St. Paul's Cathedral. The former is a brick

Russian Matryoshka dolls in a shop window display



City Circle Flinders St Station





There are many themed restaurants and cafés like the Tramcar Restaurant

truly hidden secrets that I would never have found on my own. I wander among tiny shops selling everything from dozens of flavours of locally produced honey and beautiful handmade stationery, to varieties of coloured buttons and witchcraft paraphernalia. Most of these little shops are managed by the owners themselves, all friendly and chatty. And did I mention the chocolates and cupcakes? I haven't seen so much of these being consumed without

just new customers but also a wife “neat in dress and not extravagant or absurd” through a newspaper advertisement.

His seemed to have been the kind of bookstore I love; people were encouraged to walk in, browse and even read there. The more I hear about Cole, the more I find myself liking him (so much so that I already think of him as good old Ed). Apart from stocking a

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a thought to those pesky things called calories anywhere other than in Vienna.

Sean, my guide for this walk, shares with us so much trivia about Melbourne that it gets difficult to follow him after a while. It is obvious that he really loves his city and expects all visitors to. When we walk through the arcade now known as Howey's Place, he narrates the delightful life story of Edward William Cole. This eccentric entrepreneur started a small book business in 1865 and in eight years, grew it enough to open a large store near Little Collins Street. Cole was a pioneer in marketing and found himself not

Raspberry and blanched almond centred pink macaroons.



Melbourne Cricket Ground





People walking at Federation Square, Melbourne

huge collection of books, he himself authored many for children, called *Funny Picture Books* and *Instructor to Delight the Children and Make Home Happier*.

My absolute favourite in this walk, though, is the old GPO (General Post Office), with its high ceilings and large atrium dating back to 1859. After a major fire accident in

place? So the once-dirty and unsafe side alleys are now famous for their graffiti and the city now attracts artists like Banksy and Fafi.

In the end, I can see where Sean's joy and pride in his city come from. Melbourne is truly one of the world's most livable cities. **u**

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2001, it was converted into a shopping mall for swanky brands, with more cafés in the cheerful atrium area. Sean tells us that Melbournians truly treasure this as a heritage spot and that road distances to and from the city are still measured from here.

Melbourne is a maze of hidden laneways, opulent bars, exclusive restaurants and unusual boutiques. Another unique aspect of Melbourne's inner city circle is how its once unsightly graffiti has been curbed and turned into attractive street art. Really, how many cities do you know of have state-managed graffiti monitoring and mentoring systems in

Melbourne has state-managed graffiti monitoring and mentoring system



For more information on the Lanes and Arcades Tour, visit www.hiddensecretstours.com