

Marvellous Melbourne

Contributed by Alistair Sutton
Wednesday, 22 April 2009

Melbourne beckons. A city with the world's third largest Greek population, after Athens and Thessaloniki.

Melbourne beckons. A city with the world's third largest Greek population, after Athens and Thessaloniki.

Staring at the pretty boys parading Commercial Road, I sit in one of the sidewalk cafes, wearing black, pretending to be local. I order another latte to ward off the chill morning air, which to a Brisbane boy belies the clear blue sky and sunshine. But this is Melbourne, where they say you get four seasons in a day. A day? You can get that in four hours.

I gravitate to inner city Lonsdale Street with its Greek cafes, restaurants and cake shops. The coffee is as strong and dark and no doubt as tasty as the waiter who serves me, with his moody eyes, long lashes and rough stubble. Melbourne is a city of contrasts and just a short walk away I find myself in the central business district, with its marble faced deco-styled buildings interspersed with glass and metal towers, symbols of past prosperity and a hopeful future.

I amble up Bourke Street Mall, eyeing another one of those soulful-eyed guys and almost get knocked over by a tram, which goes right through the place without apparent demarcation. The locals just step around them. Alongside department stores and multi-level centres, laneways intersperse the boulevards and are packed with funky speciality shops and cafes. Similar laneways back home would boast lines of wheelie bins, but these are vibrant and busy. Little Bourke Street is Chinatown, as distinct from its environs as you could possibly imagine.

I get cruised in Fitzroy Gardens, where the paths are laid out in the pattern of the Union Jack. This park features the cottage where Captain Cook grew up (it was brought over brick by brick from England for some reason). You have to pay to go in, so I don't. It's tiny. Wandering past the impressive Parliament and Treasury buildings I catch a tram back over the Yarra to Southgate and Crown Casino. More shops and eateries. The casino's gambling section is supposedly the size of three football fields. Thankfully, I am not an epileptic as there are way too many flashing lights and sirens. I manage a drink in one of the bars, just to be sociable.

Next door is the National Gallery, chock full of art, impressing even a philistine like me. Down by the river I watch young men practise their rowing, unbelievably in Speedos. I snuggle into my duffle jacket and walk on. I spend a languid afternoon in the Botanic Gardens, where a bend in the Yarra was diverted to make the series of ornamental lakes. Here you can truly appreciate the season turning into autumn. Golden leaves fall, crunching underfoot on the gravel paths; the sun is eclipsed by exotic trees planted by our Victorian forebears.

I head up to Chapel Street and its clothes shops, imagining a younger me trying on the tight-fitting fashions. The place is packed. Around the corner is ritzy Toorak Road, but I head back to Commercial Road; after all it's Friday night and the clubs beckon. Tomorrow I'll check out St Kilda with its retro clothing and more of those European cake shops. You'll never go hungry, thirsty or without a potential date in this town. I might even meet one of those Greek waiters, off duty but still willing to be of service…