

Melbourne inside out

KENDALL HILL THE AUSTRALIAN JULY 30, 2011 12:00AM DESTINATION AUSTRALIA

FROM chocolate boutiques to vintage cycles, the Victorian capital sets the pace.

1. Hungarian high tea: The venerable Windsor Hotel has set the benchmark for high tea in Melbourne since brewing its first pot in 1883.

But for an utterly original experience head to Collingwood, where the vivacious Hanna Frederick serves tea, snacks and sauciness in her "chocolate boudoir". Intimate groups of four to 15 take their places at deeply padded velvet settees and armchairs in a theatrical setting of chandeliers and crimson walls.

Frederick plies you first with champagne and savouries (finger sandwiches, tiny tarts and pogacsá potato scones from her native Hungary) before ducking out the back to bake fresh scones. They arrive hot, fluffy and served with whipped cream, homemade preserves and Ceylon teas blended locally by Madam Flavour.

To follow, you might want to try walnut beigli and the trifle-like somlo cake, before the experience culminates in a selection of elegant, all-natural chocolates handmade by Frederick, a trained chemist. Fillings might include lemongrass, flambéed pineapple or brandied tart-cherry truffles.

Frederick provides the entertainment ("I talk for three people," she admits) and her enthusiasm is infectious. "The secret is that all the food has to be done at the last minute -- there are no microwaves, no reheating," she says. "That's why Hungarian women are such drama queens when they have guests."

More: mamorchocolates.com (<http://mamorchocolates.com>).

2. The first Chinese: Melbourne's Chinatown is one of the Western world's oldest Chinese settlements. It dates from the dawn of the Victorian gold rush in 1851 and the five-level Chinese Museum, renovated last year, presents Chinese-Australian history through permanent exhibits and special shows, video, audio and artefacts.

A basement recreation of 19th-century goldfields chronicles how fortune-hunters arrived from impoverished Canton, and within seven years their numbers had swollen to 40,000. The miners needed entertainment and the comforts of home, so visitors can mock-audition for the parts of "female warrior" or "bearded wise man" in one of the touring opera companies that entertained prospectors during the gold rush, or visit a replica temple to discover their fortune.

A collection of ceremonial dragons includes a Millennium Dragon with a 200kg head and extravagant body, which required 108 men to bring it to life. Upper floors house temporary exhibitions and an intriguing insight into Chinese and Asian immigration through the stories of ordinary and not-so-ordinary Australians, such as SBS newsreader Lee Lin Chin. More: chinesemuseum.com.au (<http://chinesemuseum.com.au>).

3. Water stories: The city's notorious upside-down waterway has been transformed in recent decades by new riverfront developments, bushland regeneration and Melburnians' emerging pride in their humble Yarra.

The recently upgraded 33km Main Yarra Trail begins at Southbank and ends in outer suburban Templestowe, but for most of its length it is remarkably unpopulated. The lower reaches link the greatest hits of the Victorian capital, from waterfront CBD landmarks to the native sanctuary of Birrarung Marr (Melbourne's first major new park in 100 years), Rod Laver Arena and the MCG.



Lyon House museum in Melbourne's Kew is an unusual contemporary art gallery. Source: Supplied

Continue north by bike or on foot and the crowds quickly thin and the bush thickens; once past inner-city Richmond, the feel is more bushland than built environment. The trail traces a path through the city's Aboriginal and European history, from skyscraper views in the city centre to the site of a school for Aboriginal children at Yarra Bend (marked by a humble plaque on the eastern bank of the river).

By the time the Yarra wends its way through the thickly forested river valley at Kew, it feels a world removed from the bustle of the big smoke. More: visitvictoria.com (<http://visitvictoria.com>).

4. Church and state: Before gold-rush riches funded the present Government House, an extravagant Italianate pile in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Victoria's governors lived in a slightly less extravagant Italianate pile in Toorak.

Said to be the oldest surviving mansion-house in the state, Toorak House is a double-storey beauty adorned with filigree and a Doric colonnade, and crowned by a modest tower. Designed by the distinguished colonial architect Samuel Jackson -- also responsible for St Patrick's Cathedral and the Scots' Church in the city -- the building served as the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force hostel during World War II, but since 1956 has been the house of worship for the city's Scandinavian population.

The Swedish Church has modified the interior to suit its needs -- a handsome chapel now occupies the ground floor -- but it remains a fine example of early colonial initiative. The Swedish Church also hosts a popular Christmas bazaar on the first weekend of December, selling Scandinavian foods, gifts and handicrafts. More: svenskakyrkan.se/melbourne (<http://svenskakyrkan.se/melbourne>).

5. The Abbotsford Convent: Its return to public ownership in 2005 signalled a dramatic shift in the 148-year-old history of the Abbotsford Convent. The closed order of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd has been transformed into a vibrant community hub with an average of 10,000 visitors a week flocking to this gothic complex and formal gardens beside the Yarra River.

The convent is hardly secret but the art activities within its 7ha grounds are less known. Its deconsecrated spaces now house writers and poets, puppeteers and printmakers, restaurants and bars. Among its varied attractions are regular exhibitions at the C3 Contemporary Art Space in the convent basement (note the former garage nearby, a legacy of the 1960s when one of the sisters won a car in a raffle).

There are wheel-throwing classes at the Cone 11 ceramics studio, jewellery and other beautiful objects by Katheryn Leopoldseeder and Phoebe Porter, and Handsome Steve's House of Refreshment (or a bar by any other name). The convent foundation's dynamic calendar of events includes an annual vegan festival, the Pushover music festival, a monthly slow-food farmers' market and a guitar festival. The most impressive reminder of the site's past is the Separation Tree, a magnificent spreading oak planted to mark the birth of the colony of Victoria in 1850. More: abbotsfordconvent.com.au (<http://abbotsfordconvent.com.au>).

6. Lyon Housemuseum: Inspired by the art experience at such historic house museums as the Peggy Guggenheim in Venice and Sir John Soane's Museum in London, architect Corbett Lyon and his computer scientist wife Yueji realised a dream last year when they opened their own remarkable house museum in suburban Kew.

The Lyon Housemuseum unfolds beneath a black zinc polygon bookended by oversized cubes. As contemporary art galleries go, it makes quite a statement, so much so that the building was exhibited at the 2010 World Architecture Festival in Barcelona. Inside, visitors can explore Lyon's important collection of modern artworks as well as his flair for architecture.

Dominating the music room, Andrew Brook's animated neon installation against a zebra-striped wall is typical of the gallery's visually arresting pieces. Howard Arkley's Fabricated Rooms unfolds over adjoining walls in the dining room.

Among the dozens of artists featured are Patricia Piccinini, Anne Zahalka and Callum Morton, in video, paintings, sculpture and installations.

The house opens on average four days a month for collection tours (strictly by appointment) and occasionally for public talks on art and architecture, or musical performances. More: lyonhousemuseum.com.au (<http://lyonhousemuseum.com.au>).

7. Vintage cycle tours: Melbourne's new, blue Bike Share scheme is mushrooming across the city but there's a drawback: it's BYO helmet. For a much cooler and better-equipped cycle adventure, try The Humble Vintage. At its two locations in the city (Trunk Diner) and Fitzroy (Rose Street Artist Market), bikers can saddle up on reconditioned Repcos, Malvern Stars and Speedwells.

Founder Matt Hurst's aim is to give visitors an alternative to renting "clunky, ugly" hire-scheme bikes. "It's almost like borrowing a bike from a friend, or a bike you would ride at home," he says. Riders are given quarterly updated maps that chart cultural, fashion and gastronomic trails through the city's hipper postcodes. All bikes come with helmets and locks, and periods of hire range from a day (\$30) to a week (much cheaper for extra days). More: **thehumblevintage.com** (<http://thehumblevintage.com>).

Next week in our secret seven series: Adelaide.

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