

Across the Ditch »

Sublime in the suburbs

Peter Feeney relaxes in the fringes of Australia's food and culture capital and laps up the suburban lifestyle

Melbourne has long been a favourite of mine. It's where I studied, living in a run-down terraced house in Parkville just a few minutes' walk from Melbourne Uni. Naughton's Hotel (still standing) lies at the halfway mark and on more than the odd afternoon I'd wash up there, bashing the buttons of space invaders and knocking back Guinness, poured from the tap — an unheard-of innovation back in New Zealand. So for nostalgia's sake, if nothing else, I'm always grateful to seize any excuse to grab a few days in Marvellous Melbourne.

At first glance all the Victorian Tourist Board clichés appear true: gold-rush era architecture, stylish cafes and restaurants; shopping, galleries, shows. But for me it's the quirky corners of culture here that beguile, such as the remaining bohemian grunginess at the southern end of Chapel St, Prahran, with tattoo parlours, loudly clanging trams and tiny cafes, where straight off the plane I caught up with friend and manager James, before strolling just round the corner to his own slice of paradise — a leafy, quiet street and the groovy apartment he calls home.

Normally, my Melbourne visits take in a pilgrimage to old haunts such as Pellegrini's on Bourke St — a cafe always packed with a diverse bunch of regulars and still satisfyingly frozen in 1960s Italian immigrant chic, menu, and (almost) prices. And next door is another local institution, The Paperback Bookstore, always worth a browse. But this time I embarked on a bold foray into Melbourne's inner east and northern suburbs — Kew and Northcote — where, as I found, Melbournians are almost as spoiled for charm and choice as they are in the city centre.

My first stop was at my friend David's place in Kew, followed by another night at his partner Alikki's in Northcote, only 13 minutes' drive apart by Google but up to an hour in the reality of rush hour. Both David and Alikki's homes were but a stroll from a main drag, both coincidentally called High St, with a local village and transport hub. If you can tolerate the scorching heat (and this is only early summer) it's lovely to stroll, as I did, up Derby St to High St in Kew, past the local community centre. Leo's deli and supermarket provide breath-taking evidence — in the form of fine wines, cheeses and cold cuts — of the civilising Greek and Italian immigrant influence on Australian food and manners.

Walking in the other direction takes you to Victoria Park Oval, where David and I sojourned



Melbourne's myriad shops and lanes are a shopper's paradise — it's retail therapy and a foodies' delight all wrapped up in one package. Picture / Supplied



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after dinner for a bout of frisbee. Parks and reserves are in evidence everywhere; it's not referred to as the Garden City for nothing.

But next morning heading out of Kew and crossing the Yarra, the four-lane highway narrows to two as it hits the infamous Chandler Bridge bottleneck — rated the second-worst traffic choke point in Melbourne.

It's one example of how growing Melbourne, long held up as a paragon of planning, can drop the ball. Much cited by locals also is the recent superseding of the 2030 plan which would have observed a proper growth boundary with improved land use within.

Melbourne is home to the foodie's bible, the *Cheap Eats* guide — and if ever in doubt, eat out. Dinner that night was a local eatery on High St, Northcote — a kind of Ponsonby meets Dominion Rd. At Palomino's we drank a wine of "Barbara" varietal I'd never heard of which David, quick on the draw with his iPhone, confirmed as the third most common grape in Italy. We ate delicious kingfish, chicken and

chorizo risotto, beetroot salad and whitebait — I was roundly mocked for having thought it an exclusive New Zealand delicacy.

Over dinner, David told me about Jack Charles, indigenous elder, master potter, ex-con and award-winning actor, whose time spent homeless, addicted and surviving by burglary around Kew is told in the documentary *Bastardy*, and also in Charles' one-man show, now doing the rounds of the festivals. Then it was a quick drive down the road to catch a glimpse of an Art Deco gem, the lovingly refurbished Palace Westgarth cinema. At home, we quaffed down my duty-free New Zealand pinot noir, which garnered rave reviews from my Australian companions, accustomed as they were no doubt to leathery old Ozzie shiraz.

Next morning, it was out the door and off to Dubai: after two relaxing days and nights in the fringes of Australia's food and culture capital. I wouldn't have changed a thing.

● Peter Feeney flew to Melbourne as a guest of Emirates Airlines.

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