

City AUSTRALIA

Traveler

10

Cool things about Canberra

By Anthony Dennis

They are the three words no travel writer until very recently, ever thought could sincerely emerge from his or her keyboard. "Canberra is cool". But something strange, momentous even, has taken place in the national capital. After a century of being Australia's least-loved city, and being unfavourably compared to even its New Zealand counterpart, Wellington, Canberra has been making capital out of cool, and winning unexpected new fans. A flurry of fashionable new independent hotels, including Hotel Hotel, QT Canberra, East and Realm and others have opened in recent years as well as a host of new highly rated restaurants and bars, all of which could happily reside in Sydney or Melbourne. Many of them are in or around some of the most outstanding new urban precincts in the country. Suddenly it's not so hard to compile a list, such as this one, of 10 cool things about Canberra.

01 CODE FOR COOL
The Code, a new six-part Australian-made ABC television drama series, has visually redefined Canberra with its sweeping aerial shots of the capital's sleek Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, the National Library, Lake Burley Griffin and Parliament House. "For many years my visual library of Canberra had come from you know that year's visit to Old Parliament House," Shelley Sims, The Code's scriptwriter, told The Canberra Times recently. "I [But] coming back and looking at it again, it blew me away as such a beautiful, sophisticated international city with a bit going on beneath the surface." How long before someone devises The Code tour of Canberra? See ciccanberra.com.au.

02 STAYING POWER
If there has been a single game-changer in the perceptions of Canberra, it has to be the 68-room Hotel Hotel (catchphrase: "a hotel for people people"). Hipster heaven, it's the product of brothers Nectar and Jonathan Elkaypiti and almost 60 artisans, designers and craftsmen and women. Its near comically dark rooms and book-like public spaces will not suit every would-be guest's tastes but, based on its obsessive attention to detail, it makes every other supposedly cool hotel in the country look, well, a bit vacant.



But it's not the only hip hotel in Canberra, a city which is finally carving its own riskier design sense these days. Nearby QT Canberra, the old Lakeside Hotel from the 1970s dismissal days, has a lot of over-the-top fun with the polkas, right down to parking valet cards featuring Sir John Kerr and others. And then there's Peppers Gallery Hotel (formerly the Bismant) located in a rambling complex of former buildings which date back to the days of the original Parliament House when it was used as accommodation for VIPs. See hotel.com.au, qtcnberra.com.au, peppers.com.au.

03 ACTION UP
This is not just Canberra's best piece of urban redevelopment, but one of the finest in the country. You can spend a whole weekend hanging around the New Acton precinct (a location for The Code), eschewing all of the capital's more predictable attractions. Home to the aforementioned Hotel Hotel, it also hosts some of Canberra's best restaurants, bars and cafes as well as an art-house cinema complex. Next door is the beautiful bush campus of the Australian National University (ANU) with the imposing Black Mountain as its

backdrop, as well as the Academy of Sciences (aka Igloo Embassy and Shina Dena), one of Canberra's most amazing and underrated buildings. See new.acton.com.au.

04 HIP HIP HOORAY
Canberra, long the neat freak, a city whose authorities until recent times even banned front-yard fences, has never been one for grunge, unless you count the porn emporiums of Fyshwick. But just a few minutes' walk from the city centre is the hip Lunelale Street, Braddon, where you'll encounter an eclectic mix of boutiques, pop-up stores, cool cafes, bars, bakeries and restaurants, interspersed with car parks. It ain't Surry Hills, but it's a start. Be warned that locating a parking space can be as tricky as finding a federal pollie in Canberra in the depths of winter. See cificanberra.com.au.

05 TAKE A LEAF
One of the capital's lesser known and newest attractions is the National Arboretum. It's not just the 250-hectare site - which has literally emerged from the ashes of Canberra's cataclysmic bushfires

of 2003 - with its 100 fledgling forests to mark 100 years of Canberra that impresses. It's the spectacular, armadillo-like visitors' (or village) centre affording stunning views of the capital. Inside, with a dramatic domed ceiling of massive curved timber beams, it could double as a designer airport terminal. Elsewhere, on the edge of another hill is The Pavilion, a convention space that resembles a single shell plucked from the Sydney Opera House and transplanted in the hills of the bush capital. See nationalarboretum.act.gov.au.

06 BY THE SCRIPT
When Brenda's Mackellar wrote My Country in 1916 she knew that her most immortal words, "Wide brown land" and actual handwriting script would one day be transformed into an arresting sculpture overlooking the capital that wasn't founded until five years after she penned the poem. The sculpture sits atop a hill on the National Arboretum estate. Don't get too close as you need to play yourself a distance from the words in order to recognise them. And in another feature of the arboretum, don't miss the stunning National Bonasi and

