

Cool Canberra

THERE'S PLENTY TO DISCOVER IN AUSTRALIA'S CAPITAL CITY, FROM LUSH GREEN PARKS AND BUSH TO A TREASURE TROVE OF NATIONAL ATTRACTIONS...

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I'm at the edge of suburbia one minute, and in the next, I cross the road and enter the bushland of Mount Majura, on Canberra's fringe. After a three-hour drive from Sydney, my first experience here, appropriately enough, is being helped to see the land through the eyes of its first inhabitants.

My friend Lisa and I meet guide Tyronne Bell of Dharwra Aboriginal Cultural Tours, who is an elder of the Nungawal nation, the original inhabitants of >>

this region. It's a glorious day in the season Bell calls the 'second summer' (the Nungawal recognise six seasons).

Just minutes after leaving the car, Tyronne asks us: "What do you notice about where we are?" We discern it's a flat piece of land, and Bell points out that it's close to a creek. It's a place Tyronne Bell's ancestors chose as a camping spot over millennia. Seconds later, after scanning the ground, he picks up a tool: a quartz flint-stone, sharpened by one of these same ancestors. "In those days, there were no shops. People had to make everything they needed," Tyronne says.

NATURE WALK

In our two-hour stroll up and down gentle slopes, Tyronne draws our attention to things we would otherwise have missed, such as a native beehive in a burnt-out tree, and a speckled lizard sunning itself. He shows us the bush tucker (food) or medicinal properties of some of the plants – one has sticky leaves which can stop a wound from bleeding. The leaves of another plant make a very satisfactory soap when mixed with a bit of water and rubbed between the hands.

Tyrone plucks a leaf from an iris-like plant and whistles through it. "This is the sound a wounded bird makes," Tyrone says. "The ancestors used it to attract snakes, to hunt them." Luckily none hear its call this day. At the highest point on our walk we gaze at the outstretched Limestone Plains, which inspired the choice for siting a national capital, and Tyrone tells us more about the Aboriginal stewardship of these lands.

It's a refreshingly different way to see the 'bush capital'. Twenty minutes later I have a head-spinning change, checking into the eclectic, jigsaw-shaped Hotel Hotel, an expression of sleek, concretised modernism, part of the buzzing, arty NewActon complex near the city's centre.

I arrive just in time for a yoga class (free-to-guests) in the adjacent Nishi building. Later that evening I join my friend to walk across Commonwealth Bridge over Lake Burley Griffin, to have a look at *Enlighten*, a spectacular light-show festival held for Canberra's birthday. Staid public buildings turn into art works, and trapeze artists swing above the heads of the crowd, seemingly cycling through the air.

Unlike most other Australian cities, Canberra is a planned city – US architect Walter Burley-Griffin won an international competition to design it. Because it's a national capital, Canberra has a crowded events calendar, as well as more attractions worth visiting than would be expected in a city with a population of 360,000 people.

MUSEUMS AND MONUMENTS

After breakfast next morning at the fashionably hip café A. Baker, I head off for a cycling tour, led by UK-born Mark Arundell, whose enthusiasm for Canberra matches his enthusiasm for cycling. Mark and his wife Denise took a whole year off to travel



Clockwise from top: The timber entrance to the foyer at Hotel Hotel; the National Carillon; guide Tyrone Bell demonstrates how to create soap from a tree's leaves

around Australia by bike, a trip which inspired them to start their business, Mulga Cycles.

After Mark gives us an overview of the city at the Regatta Point visitor centre, we set off on an easy ride, mostly on cycle paths, along Lake Burley Griffin and around the key Parliamentary Triangle, the centrepiece of the city's design. As we cross the lake, the Captain Cook Memorial Jet sends a plume of water high into

“Staid public buildings turn into art works, and trapeze artists swing above the heads of the crowd...”

the air. "Canberra is a city of museums, monuments and gifts," says Mark. He points out several of each on our way, such as the 50-metre high National Carillon, a gift of the British government, a fine Chinese garden, a gift from the city of Beijing, and the Magna Carta monument, another gift from the British government.

We cruise through the charming rose gardens found on both sides of the old houses of Parliament, and ride uphill to the apex of the city's triangle, where the new Parliament House rises, a bit like a space-ship.

There's a lot to see in this triangle. The most spectacular discovery for me is the National Gallery's sculpture garden. We cross the lake over Kings Avenue Bridge, riding to the former industrial area of >>



Clockwise from top left: Cycling around the Parliamentary Triangle with Mulga Cycles; an aerial performer at the *Enlighten* festival; Chinese artisans built this pavilion at the Beijing Garden; a bonsai tree at the National Arboretum; the Sculpture Garden at the Australian National Gallery; the Prime Minister's office in the Old Parliament House





SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES



Kingston foreshore, where an old power station, now the Canberra Glassworks, forms the centre of an arts precinct. On Sundays a lively makers market, Old Bus Depot Markets, is held here.

After a bite to eat and some excellent coffee, we ride back to our starting point, heads full of ideas of how and where to further explore this jam-packed precinct. I decide to get better acquainted with one such

“ We cross the lake over Kings Avenue Bridge, riding to the former industrial area of Kingston... ”

highlight: the National Portrait Gallery, showing artworks of famous and interesting Australians.

Perhaps the best resourced museum in the whole of Canberra is the Australian War Memorial. I check it out the next morning, lingering in the galleries devoted to the recently refurbished World War I galleries, and also to those which commemorate Australian Aboriginal participation in armed service.

Clockwise from top left: Picnickers on Mount Ainslie; poppies adorn the Australian War Memorial's Roll of Honour; Portrait of Yolgnu leader Mawalan Marika at the National Portrait Gallery

The footage of a re-imagined World War I dogfight, directed by *Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson, is a definite 'must-see'.

CANBERRA'S SECRETS

In deepest suburbia I meet Marg Wade, a passionate denizen of Canberra, and author of the book *Canberra Secrets*, who has recently started sharing her secrets on tailored tours. Our meeting place is a café, The Knox Made in Watson, named after its street and suburb.

Canberra's once-bland suburban shopping centres have been transformed in recent years with the addition of stylish and quirky cafes, restaurants and bars. The café's young owner Daniel Conroy is mad about local produce: hence the "Made" in his café's name.

After lunch, Marg, a powerhouse of Canberra information, whisks me off on a personally curated tour. Our first stop is the summit of Mount Ainslie. On this magnificent day it's easy to see the axes of the city as planned by Burley Griffin. Today is a public holiday for Canberra's anniversary, and families are picnicking here. We descend for a quick drive-by tour of Duntroon Military College, named after the home of the Campbell family who ran sheep on the Limestone

Plains before Canberra was dreamt up. Marg keeps up an entertaining flow of information wherever we go, such as explaining that the Carillon's design is based on three equilateral triangles: it was a brainwave had over a dinner party, inspired by the shape of Toblerone chocolate.

At what people still call 'new' Parliament House (it opened in 1988), Marg remarks that the design rationale of being able to walk on the grass lawns over the Parliament House is that the people would always be above their representatives (although concerns about parliamentary security may mean that this access may be closed).

Putting all political events into perspective, Marg tells me that the rock cutting displayed in the State Circle around Parliament House reveals former sea-beds some 430 million years old. We sidetrack to a Serbian church not far away, to admire beautiful frescoes on its walls and ceilings.

Then we are drawn back to that triangular zone again, visiting the museum attached to the National Archives, and enjoying afternoon tea at a café in Old Parliament House, before checking out the strangely cramped offices of an earlier parliamentary era. >>

Above (clockwise from top right): *Winged Victory*, a World War I sculpture in the Australian War Memorial; Duntroon Military College – which is named after this pioneer's house; the National Arboretum; Parliament House

The Arboretum is Canberra's surprise hit of an outdoor attraction, so much so that the nearby National Botanic Gardens are now somewhat visitor-deprived.

After fierce bushfires in 2003 devastated pine forests on Dairy Farmers Hill close to Canberra, the Australian Capital Territory government held a design competition for an arboretum (or collection of trees) on the site.

The winning Arboretum proposal promised '100 forests and 100 gardens' – a vision still in the making, since the Arboretum only opened in 2013. The National Arboretum is now home to 44,000 trees growing in 94 forests across the 617 acre site. Although most of the trees are still on their way to full growth, there are exceptions: forests of Himalayan cedar and of cork oak were planted over 100 years ago.

The stunning building which forms the Arboretum's Village Centre (which includes a restaurant and café), and the adjacent National Bonsai and Penjing Collection, are popular. There is a children's playground and some delightful walks to take, enlivened by sweeping views and outdoor sculptures.

www.nationalarboretum.act.gov.au



My day ends as it had begun, with a visit to the Australian War Memorial. We are in time to witness the closing ceremony: a rendition of the Last Post on bugle, the presentation of wreaths at the Pool of Remembrance, and an account of a life sacrificed. Today we are told the stories of two lives lost, of brothers who volunteered to fight in World War I. It is a moving ceremony.

The next day, it is time to break out of what I am beginning to think of as the Bermuda Triangle, but not before I see some of the great art collection of the Australian National Gallery, housed in a foreboding concrete bunker of a building. I quickly race through a special exhibition devoted to the treasures of Versailles before lingering over galleries of historic and contemporary Australian and Asian art.

Clockwise from above: Meerkat playtime at the National Zoo; dining with the lions at Jamala Wildlife Lodge; guests staying in a Jungle Bungalow get up-close to a tiger; a shark in a built-in aquarium inside the Jamala Wildlife Lodge; taking a bath in a Jungle Bungalow – which also houses a bear...

“ We are in time to witness the closing ceremony: a rendition of the Last Post on bugle ”

The Australian Museum (near the NewActon precinct) is also worth a visit. The displays cover a wide range: from shocking tales (and paintings) about Aboriginal dispossession; to ‘love tokens’, keepsakes created for convicts; to the somewhat bizarre, such as the preserved heart of famous racehorse, Phar Lap.

There’s only so much gallery hopping I can do before the pull of the sunny blue skies draws me outside. I drive to an attraction relatively new to Canberra, the National Zoo and Aquarium. Privately owned by property developers the Tindale family, the zoo has Australia’s largest collection of big cats.

The zoo is also home to rescued animals, such as Asian sun bears and a European bear. By staying at the zoo’s Jamala Wildlife Lodge, in luxury accommodation strategically placed among the animal enclosures, you can spend your evening watching giraffes, lions, bears – or the marine life in the aquarium – up close, but totally safe. 🇦🇺

USEFUL CONTACTS

Dharwra Aboriginal Cultural Tours: www.thunderstone.net.au
 Mulga Cycles: www.mulgabicycletours.com.au
 Canberra Secrets: www.canberrasecrets.com.au
 Hotel Hotel: www.hotel-hotel.com.au
 Australian War Memorial: www.awm.gov.au
 National Museum of Australia: www.nma.gov.au
 National Zoo & Aquarium: www.nationalzoo.com.au