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THE BUSH CAPITAL'S NEW BEAT

With bountiful tracts of unspoilt landscape, Canberra is known as Australia's Bush Capital. But a new cultural edge is emerging, thanks to the city's hip artisans and foodies.

STORY Sue White PHOTOGRAPHY Lauren Bamford



Just minutes from the centre of Canberra, behind the Australian War Memorial (www.awm.gov.au), peak hour starts early. On the bush track leading to the peak of Mount Ainslie (www.visitcanberra.com.au), there are friendly nods between passers-by. "Walking here is so popular it's actually a bit cult-like," says journalist and long-time local Ginger Gorman.

She's right. Most Canberrans have a Mount Ainslie story. Politicians walk it. Mums hike it with their babies nestled in carriers. Some regulars have even been known to stroll up in costume. Whatever the demographic – or dress code – what most Mount Ainslie hikers remember are not the myriad corners leading to yet another set of steps, but the regular sightings of kangaroos, possums and Australian birdlife here. And of course, the perspective from the summit.

"It's so peaceful, the only thing you hear is muggies. Then there's that incredible view down Anzac Parade," says Gorman of the sweeping vista across Lake Burley Griffin (www.nationalcapital.gov.au) to both Parliament Houses (www.aph.gov.au). Also visible are institutions such

C Kangaroos are among the local wildlife roaming Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

D Lonsdale Street is lined with trendy eateries.

E Commonwealth Place commands a clear view of Mount Ainslie.

as the National Gallery of Australia (www.ngo.gov.au) and High Court of Australia (www.hcourt.gov.au).

While the view from Mount Ainslie rarely fails to impress, Canberra itself has long had a hard time convincing the broader public of its merits.

But over the past few years, the city's fan base has expanded exponentially. Make no mistake, Canberra's Bush Capital status is still intact, but it now coexists alongside a lively cafe scene and creative artisans – and visitors and reviewers are taking notice.

For many, the shift to a hipper Canberra is best represented by two precincts, New Acton and Braddon.

THE BRADDON BOOM

Just a handful of years ago, Lonsdale Street in Braddon was home to more car yards than kale salads. Then came Lonsdale Street Roasters (www.lonsdalestreetroasters.com), where ☺





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PLEASURES ON THE PERIPHERY

TIM KIRK, owner of Clonakilla winery (www.clonakilla.com.au), a 30-minute drive from Canberra, shares his favourite places to relax outside the city.

TREE'S COMPANY

I love the National Arboretum Canberra (www.nationalarboretum.act.gov.au). It has wonderful views and is a celebration of the fact that the city seeks to be in harmony with the landscape it's built on. It's home to more than 44,000 trees from around the world. They are still young, but you can imagine what the area will look like in 20 years.

HERITAGE STAY

There are some great bed-and-breakfasts in nearby Yass, like The Globe Inn (www.theglobeinn.com.au). It's an old building from around 1847. There are big claw-foot baths; you can imagine you're staying in a salubrious space a century ago.

RURAL DINING

Murrumbateman and Yass have country charm and are within easy reach of Canberra. I like Clementine Restaurant (www.clementinerestaurant.com.au) in Yass. Its house-baked bread is delicious and the menu changes regularly. I always look out for the duck agnolotti: beautiful pillows of handmade pasta with marjoram, parmesan and orange caramel.

dishes are prepared with quality ingredients and minimal fuss - think beef brisket and pork shoulder. Here, macrame plant holders dangle above tables that are usually full.

Next, savvy developers - in particular Nik Bulum, who is often credited with the reinvention of Braddon - tapped into the pop-up trend taking hold of Australian culture. Vegan bakers, stylish types and artists all took short-term leases in Lonsdale Street shopfronts and started a roaring trade.

Visitors commented, reviewers across the globe took note and long-time locals such as Anthea Cahill, founder of tea retailer Real Chai (www.realchai.com.au), felt the city tilt. "Suddenly, there were heaps of young people here. They all came out of hiding and everything came to life," says Cahill, whose products are stocked in trendy food havens including The Cupping Room (www.thecuppingroom.com.au) on University Avenue and Penny University (www.pennyuniversitycafe.com) in Kingston.

As planned, redevelopment took over the thriving site, but the experiment changed Braddon irrevocably and a number of those original businesses found permanent premises nearby. One is Sweet Bones Company (www.sweetbonescompany.com), a vegan bakery where cake pops and an eggless egg-salad sandwich made with tofu somehow make sense. Others shifted to new spaces at The Hamlet (16 Lonsdale Street), another semi-permanent village for foodies and local craftsmen who have given Braddon its newfound cred.

A new fashion scene has also emerged, through local womenswear labels such as Pink Ink (www.pinkink.com.au), as well

E Lonsdale Street Roasters was one of the first cool cafes on the scene.

G Nature and art are intertwined in New Acton.

H Sweet Bones' eggless-egg-salad sandwich is a delicious way to start the morning.

I Pink Ink offers locally designed womenswear.

J The meticulously landscaped National Arboretum Canberra has a surreal beauty.

as multi-brand boutique Rebel Muse (www.rebelmuse.com.au).

It's a marked difference from the scene just a few years ago. "Fashion didn't sell. People were shopping from malls," says Rachel Evagelou from Handmade Canberra (www.handmadecanberra.com.au), which runs markets selling handcrafted jewellery, clothing and homeware by local artisans. "Now, fashion is one of our bestsellers. People want their own sense of style and identity."

Evagelou's next project, The Local Larder (www.thelocallarder.com.au), opens early next year and will showcase the region's best food, wine and design under one roof. For Evagelou, the timing is right. "Canberrans have stopped feeling the need to mimic Sydney or Melbourne. We've become confident in our own style," she says.

NEW ACTON AND BEYOND

If it's the vibe of Lonsdale Street that has changed Braddon - a short drive or cycle away, New Acton's calling card may be its architectural flow. Here, a clever





AT SLYFOX COFFEE IN THE SUBURBS, LOCALS HANG OUT AROUND AN UPCYCLED COFFEE MACHINE SET UP BY THE SIDE OF A CYCLE PATH.

mix of contemporary materials and props has been used to create a visually pleasing lifestyle hub with environmentally conscious undertones. And community events take place among eateries that focus on local, seasonal ingredients.

Canberran favourites include Mocan & Green GROUT (www.mocanandgreengrout.com) – visit with friends, dinner is tapas style. And try the acclaimed Yabby Jaffle (toasted gruyere sandwich) at Monster Kitchen and Bar (www.monsterkitchen.com.au) inside the visually captivating Hotel Hotel (www.hotel-hotel.com.au).

Even in the suburbs, fresh ideas are brewing. In the Inner North suburb of O'Connor, Sly Fox Coffee (www.slyfoxcoffee.com) draws walkers and cyclists making the daily commute. Here, locals hang out around milk crates, a communal table and an upcycled coffee machine set up on the side of a cycle path between David Street and MacArthur Avenue.

"I came up with the idea when I rode against the

K Sip coffee on milk crates at the makershift Slyfox Coffee.

L Handsomely pretty sells beautiful homeware.

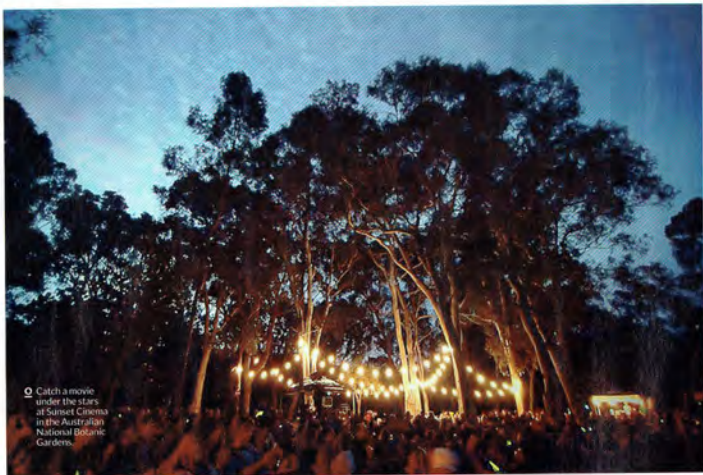
M An arresting design is one reason to check in to the boutique Hotel Hotel.

N Yabby Jaffle: a must-try at Monster Kitchen and Bar.

cycle traffic one morning. I realised there were hundreds of people riding to work and they could use a coffee stop," says founder Patrick Dillon. "Now, everyone knows one another. We have only one table – that really helps, as people sit together and talk."

WILD AT HEART

If this all sounds very urban, don't be deceived. Canberra hasn't changed so drastically that there is not plenty of outdoors to explore. While most visitors stick to the bridge-to-bridge walk – or Segway ride – around Lake Burley Griffin, those who detour less than an hour out of town ☺



📍 Catch a movie under the stars at Sunset Cinema in the Australian National Botanic Gardens.

find serene bushland filled with more Aussie icons than people.

The contrast between nature and city life is among the reasons Sydney expat Andrew Smith moved to Canberra with his family a year ago. "I ride to work, my wife goes to cultural events and we all bushwalk," says Smith. "I was at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve (www.tidbinbilla.nct.gov.au) recently with my four-year-old and we sat in front of a dam, by ourselves, watching the platypus play."

Smith has yet to explore the nearby Corin Forest (www.corin.com.au) where, on the Southern Hemisphere's longest bobsled, the 1.2km bush-based Alpine Slide, riders are often observed by the local kangaroo population.

Perhaps what's most interesting in a city that's finally finding its niche is the way culture is being integrated into the bush setting. In summer, the Australian National Botanic Gardens (www.anbg.gov.au) hosts Sunset Cinema (www.sunsetcinema.com.au; November 11 to December 17). Attendees hike a steep hill to get to the outdoor screen but, once there, beanbags and wine are on hand. ■



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Fast Facts

CURRENCY
Australian Dollar
US\$1 = A\$1.30

VISA
Requirements vary. Visit
www.border.gov.au for details.

BEST TIME TO VISIT
Singapore Airlines flies 4 times weekly non-stop from Singapore to Canberra, as part of the new Singapore-Canberra-Wellington Capital Express route.

HOW TO GET THERE
Spring (September to November) is the optimal period for outdoor activities. Wattle, cherry blossoms and tulips are in bloom, and Australia's biggest flower festival, Floriade (www.floriadeaustralia.com), takes place. There's also an impressive show of colour in autumn (March to May).

MORE INFORMATION
www.visitcanberra.com.au