

# Marvellous Melbourne

Centre Place, home of many small, unusual and quirky restaurants, popular with the lunchtime and after-work crowd.

For a city-style holiday destination – where there's culture, good food and wine, interesting architecture, and even a bit of history – Melbourne must be a strong contender. Expatriate New Zealand journalist Caron Dann takes us on a tour of the city, drawing our attention to a few of the highlights.

WORDS Caron Dann  
IMAGES Jane Ussher



Melbourne's best known street art showplace, Hosier Lane, looking down to Federation Square.

Melburnians still like to refer to their city as “Marvellous Melbourne”, 125 years after visiting British journalist George Augustus Sala coined the phrase, referring to its extravagant buildings and booming economy. In the 1880s, Melbourne was reputedly the richest city in the world, thanks to the 1850s Gold Rush and, with a population of 500,000, it was the biggest, next to London, in the British Empire. Today, the buildings are still there,

many of them lovingly restored, though they are dwarfed by modern skyscrapers and shopping malls. But the marvels of Melbourne now lie not just in its outstanding landmarks; they are also to be found in its cobbled laneways, avant-garde galleries, artists' studios and funky street art, and in its elegant restaurants and cafés.

Jo Wilson and her children, Alex, 16, and Laura, 21, are keen to explore what the city has to offer. Jo owns an antique and vintage shop, *bes62*, specialising in Australian furniture, in the fashionable



1. Jo Wilson and her children, Alex, and Laura
2. The Shanghai Village Restaurant in the Sum Kum Lee Building
3. Maxim's renowned warm egg tarts
4. The Mural Room for fine Italian dining at Grossi Fiorentino
5. Quist's barista Tim O'Hanlon
6. Jo, Alex and Laura enjoy a "hug mug" of hot chocolate at Max Brenner Chocolate Bar, QV Square

The lunchtime crowd at Block Place, gateway to the Block Arcade.

*Another of the great cuisines of Melbourne is Italian – unsurprising when you learn there are about 74,000 Italian-born migrants in Melbourne and several hundred thousand who claim Italian descent.*

inner-eastern suburb of Malvern. Alex is at school in year 10 (year 11 equivalent in New Zealand), while Laura is a science student at the University of Melbourne. Originally from Perth in Western Australia, the family lived in Sydney and Japan before settling in Melbourne 15 years ago. They love travel and Jo has been to New Zealand about 12 times, while Laura and Alex have been twice. Today, though, it's time to be tourists in Melbourne. "I love the variety Melbourne offers, from its architecture to its cuisine," Jo says.

"We live in Richmond, which is just one train stop from the city. I find the city easy to get around and I love the trams." Although it's nearly summer, they take jackets for, as New Zealand band Crowded House wrote in its 1992 song, Melbourne can have "four seasons in one day". Though summer temperatures are often in the mid-30s and can rise to the mid-40s, if a cool change comes through, the temperature may quickly drop 20°. To discover the secrets behind Melbourne's big-city façade, it helps to have

a local show you round. One such expert is Allan Champion, a chef and food writer who conducts half-day Foodies Walking Tours through the CBD. "We have many New Zealanders on the tours. A lot come for short holidays – a long weekend or four-day break. Most stay in the CBD, so a walking tour is perfect," Champion says. Melbourne prides itself on its many cuisines - according to Melburnians, their city has better Greek food than Athens, better Thai food than Bangkok, better Chinese food than Beijing or Hong Kong, and so on. This is largely because of the high proportion of immigrants. There's even a bridge with artwork dedicated to Melbourne's immigrant populations – the restored Sandridge Bridge, built in 1888 over the Yarra River. There's also the Immigration Museum, with exhibitions on the many nationalities who have made Melbourne what it is today. One of the most popular aspects of Champion's tours are the tastings, and he takes the Wilson family to Maxim's, a Hong Kong-style cake shop in Chinatown. Here, they sample a plate of Maxim's renowned warm egg tarts, morsels of short pastry and custard that melt in your mouth. "They really are comfort food," Jo enthuses. The shop's display cases show cakes both familiar and exotic, including the fabulously titled Green Tea Red Bean Cake.

Chinatown Melbourne dates back to the discovery of gold in Victoria in 1851. Chinese immigrants were badly treated by the majority Anglo-Celtic population, so set up their own community centre on what was then the edge of the CBD. Today, Chinatown is enjoyed by everyone and, beside Chinese restaurants such as the acclaimed fine dining establishment, Flower Drum, there are Japanese, Thai, Indian, Korean and Malaysian eateries. Many are housed in 19th-century buildings, such as the Sum Kum Lee Building, constructed in 1888. The three-storey Mannerist-style façade includes traditional Chinese motifs. Today, the Shanghai Village restaurant operates from this building.

Alex, Laura and Jo enjoy the atmosphere at The Cellar Bar at Grossi Florentino, perfect for a quick meal before the theatre, or a drink and a snack of warm bread and olives between shopping expeditions.

Another of the great cuisines of Melbourne is Italian – unsurprising when you learn there are about 74,000 Italian-born migrants in Melbourne and several hundred thousand who claim Italian descent. Campion's tour takes the Wilsons to one of the top Italian restaurants, Grossi Florentino.

The building has been part of the hospitality industry since 1871, when Samuel Wynn (later of Wynn's Coonawarra vineyards fame) ran it as a wine shop and lived upstairs. Jo, Alex and Laura meet current owner Guy Grossi when they get a sneak peak upstairs at the Mural Room, sumptuously restored with chandeliers and polished wood, where you'll pay \$A265 a person for an eight-course tasting menu with wines.

*To discover the secrets behind Melbourne's big-city façade, it helps to have a local show you round.*

There is also the more casual Grill downstairs, but the gem has to be the Cellar Bar, popular with patrons of the nearby theatre district. Jo and Laura enjoy a wine at the bar while Alex devours a plate of plump, warm olives and fresh baked bread. The food comes from the same kitchen as that of the Mural Room and the Grill, yet at a fraction of the price: you can order pasta here for under \$20.

The quality of coffee available all over the city is so good that Melburnians take it for granted, but visitors are still intrigued by the skill of the baristas who often put a signature mark in froth on the top of their creations. Campion takes us to the famous Quist's, where barista Tim O'Hanlon says the secret of the superb coffee is in the non-bitter northern-Italian-style mix. Quist's opened in 1938, when people would



1



2



3



4

1. Haigh's Chocolates in the Block Arcade
2. Karen Gilleade offers a tasting plate at Haigh's
3. An assortment of Haigh's chocolates, including violet cream and truffles
4. A tasting plate of Lindt Delice macarons
5. Jo Wilson delights in a Haigh's chocolate
6. Chocolate pudding with chocolate sauce and chocolate curls at KoKo Black

queue to buy coffee beans, and has been selling ready-made coffees since 1958.

Another food specialty in Melbourne is chocolate, and Campion often starts his tours with a “hug mug” of hot chocolate in the Max Brenner Chocolate Bar at QV Square.

“Chocolate is one of the real trends in Melbourne,” Campion explains. “Others include sourdough bread, gelati and organic food.” He should know. He is the co-author, with Michele Curtis, of the popular annual publications *The Foodies' Diary* and *The Foodies' Guide to Melbourne*.

Jo is fascinated by the way Melbourne has cultivated chocolate businesses. For chocolate lovers, there are Chocoholic walking tours run by Suzie Wharton.

*You could describe Melbourne as the Wellington of Australia, in that it's known as a cultural centre.*

“The chocolate community in Melbourne is a tight-knit one, so anyone who opens a shop that isn't great won't last long,” she says.

Two of Melbourne's best chocolate shops, Haigh's and Koko Black, are located near each other in the city's most glamorous

heritage arcades – the former in the 1890s-built Block Arcade, known for its etched glass roof and extensive mosaic tiled floor; and the latter in the Royal Arcade, built in 1869, where two statues of mythical figures have been striking chimes on the hour since 1892.

At Koko Black, you can watch the chocolatiers at work then tuck in to a chocolate-themed dessert.

You could describe Melbourne as the Wellington of Australia, in that it's known as a cultural centre. Art consultant Bernie Alibrando, who runs Walk-to-Art tours, gives participants a feel for Melbourne's art community by including a visit to an artist's studio. You might, for example, visit the Nicholas Building, named after the man it was built for in 1926, the developer of Aspro, Alfred Nicholas, but which today is full of artists' studios and shops.

Nicholas Jones, 36, whose family has



5



6

lived in Melbourne since the 19th century, has a studio in the building. He uses techniques of cutting, folding, sewing, stacking and tearing to sculpt vintage books into artistic representations of books and reading. A cook book, for example, might have a ladle cut into the cover, strategically revealing parts of sentences and images beneath.

Along Melbourne's streets are a wealth

of small galleries, down narrow lanes that look like dead ends, up rickety stairs behind old doors, in narrow side streets. We visit Utopian Slumps, owned by one of Melbourne's best known and youngest art curators, Melissa Loughnan, 28. Last year, at just 27, Loughnan was voted one of the 100 most influential people in Melbourne by the Age newspaper.

Melbourne is famous for its street art, particularly on Hosier Lane, whose walls are full of paste-ups, spray paintings and stencil graffiti. Some of them are by internationally renowned artists, although a stencilled rat by the world's

Book sculptor Nicholas Jones at his studio, in the Nicholas Building.



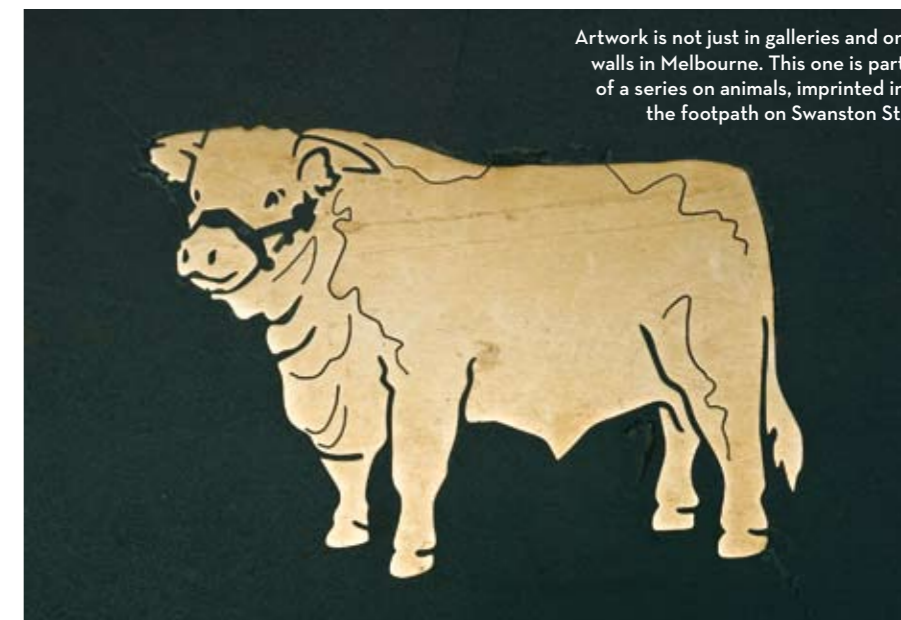
best known street artist, Banksy, was this year inadvertently erased by Melbourne City Council cleaners. Centre Place nearby mixes street art with a parade of tiny restaurants that spill cheerfully into the street and offer enticing aromas of spices.

Like other immigrant groups, New Zealanders, too, have made their mark on Melbourne, including restaurateur and TV personality Iain Hewitson and radio celebrity Derryn Hinch. A New Zealand-Australian recording act of the moment is the R&B singer Stan Walker, who was born in Melbourne but who is of Maori descent (Nga Potiki, Tauranga). Walker, 20, who won Australian Idol in 2009, released his album, *From the Inside Out*, this year. It includes a single, *Unbroken*, filmed on Melbourne's streets featuring its trams, train stations and historic buildings, shops in Flinders Lane and the street art in Hosier Lane.

It's clear that Melbourne is a city of contrasts – the old with the new, the western with the eastern, the traditional with the alternative – and a meeting place of cultural riches from around the world. Scratch the surface of this metropolis of four million people, and you're bound to find something intriguing, fascinating or amazing. In a word, marvellous; or make that two words – Marvellous Melbourne.

*Caron Eastgate Dann is an expatriate New Zealander, born in Dunedin and raised in Christchurch, Palmerston North and Auckland. She is now based in Melbourne, where she is a journalist, author and lecturer.*

Artwork is not just in galleries and on walls in Melbourne. This one is part of a series on animals, imprinted in the footpath on Swanston St.



## PLACES OF INTEREST IN MELBOURNE

### WALKING TOURS

**Chocoholic:** Fridays and Saturdays, 1.5-2 hours, \$35pp (per person). [www.chocoholictours.com.au](http://www.chocoholictours.com.au)  
[suzie@chocoholictours.com.au](mailto:suzie@chocoholictours.com.au)

**Foodies:** Saturdays 10am-1.30pm, \$115pp; private tours at other times, \$999 for 10 people, plus \$99 for each extra person. [www.campionandcurtis.com](http://www.campionandcurtis.com)  
[enquiries@melbournefoodtours.com](mailto:enquiries@melbournefoodtours.com)

**Mysterious Melbourne:** Monday-Friday 10:30am, 2.5 hours, \$75.00pp. Many stories lie in the lanes of Melbourne. Hear the tales of ghosts, villains, and explorers. [www.walkingmelbournetours.com.au](http://www.walkingmelbournetours.com.au)  
[bookings@arcadetours.com.au](mailto:bookings@arcadetours.com.au)

**Shopaholics:** Monday-Saturday 10am-2pm \$115pp including lunch. Enjoy the arcades and lanes tour visiting the stores of over 30 retailers including local Melbourne designers. [www.hiddensecretstours.com](http://www.hiddensecretstours.com)  
[tours@hiddensecretstours.com](mailto:tours@hiddensecretstours.com)

**Walk-to-Art:** Wednesdays and Saturdays, 2-6pm, \$108pp; Fridays 2-4.30pm, \$78pp. [www.walktoart.com.au](http://www.walktoart.com.au)  
[info@walktoart.com.au](mailto:info@walktoart.com.au)

### SUSTENANCE

**Grossi Florentino:** 80 Bourke St. Cellar Bar open all day, no bookings required. [www.grossiflorentino.com](http://www.grossiflorentino.com)

**Haigh's Chocolates:** The Block Arcade, 282 Collins St. [www.haighs.com.au](http://www.haighs.com.au)

**Koko Black:** Royal Arcade, 335 Bourke St. [www.kokoblack.com](http://www.kokoblack.com)

**Lindt:** 271 Collins St. [www.lindt.com/au](http://www.lindt.com/au)

**Max Brenner Chocolate Bar:** QV Square, Shop 25, 210 Lonsdale St. [www.maxbrenner.com.au](http://www.maxbrenner.com.au)

**Maxim's Cakes:** 173 Little Bourke St. Open seven days, 7.30am-10.30pm.

**Quist's Coffee:** 166 Little Collins St, open Monday-Friday 9am-5pm. [www.quistscoffee.com.au](http://www.quistscoffee.com.au)

### ART

**Nicholas Building:** 37 Swanston St. Studios by appointment only, but there are unique boutiques as you enter through the Cathedral Arcade and Retrostar Vintage Clothing on the first floor.

**Utopian Slumps:** 33 Guildford Lane. [www.utopian-slumps.com](http://www.utopian-slumps.com)



1. Street art on Hosier Lane
2. Jo and Laura admire Hosier Lane's colourful street art
3. Vikki McInnes at the art gallery she co-owns, in Crossley St
4. Melissa Loughnan, near her Utopian Slumps gallery in Guildford Lane

Artist Irene Hanenbergh at her studio in the Nicholas Building.