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About 900 words

## PARK IT IN MELBOURNE

by

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You might not expect to find a quieter side to Australia's wild, wide-open outdoors. Images come to mind of rugged desert Outback, ranges of thick, coastal, tropical rainforests, or flat, rocky floodplains scattered with billibongs. Not a place for a Sunday picnic, right?

Well, perhaps you should bring along your picnic hamper, too. Along with the rugged wilderness a more soothing out-of-doors respite can be found--all the way Down Under, in Melbourne.

Although it is Australia's second-largest metropolis, Melbourne is nonetheless designed for a genteel, refined outdoor lifestyle. Residents wrinkle their noses at the mention of Sydney, the country's largest city. "Life there is too fast-paced and commercial, with no appreciation for greenery and relaxation," you will hear more than once. (Of course Sydney-siders reply with mention of their own advantages, and back and forth the rivalry goes.)

But life in Melbourne is calming by design. Walk a few minutes in any direction from the center of downtown, or hop on one of the many street trams, and you will discover a well-maintained and pleasant park. After traveling the untamed Outback, shake out the dust in the capital of Victoria, Australia's "Garden State".

You might start your Melbourne visit by crossing the Princes Bridge, which spans the slow-flowing, gentle waters of the Yarra River. The river itself is not overly pretty but the locals have done their best to make its surroundings quite attractive. As you cross, cheer on the constantly training rowing teams, or toss some bread to the geese and ducks near the shore below.

On the right stands the stately Victorian Arts Centre, elegantly topped with a white, sweeping tower which Mr. Eiffel, himself, might have designed. Spreading out on the left side are several interconnected parks. Stroll along any of several paths and look for the large floral clock, the hillside music bowl (check on the concert schedule) and the imposing, somber Shrine of Remembrance, a memorial to Australia's war dead. Or, go down to the riverbank and follow a landscaped walkway along the meandering Yarra for several kilometers (bicycles are available). You can stop at several places along the way for a picnic or "barby" (you know, mate, a barbecue).

Continuing through the parks brings you to Melbourne's prize, the Royal Botanical Gardens. The 88 acres of exotic landscaping are described as being the most beautiful in the southern hemisphere, and as having one of the world's best designs. You be the judge as you walk among the flower gardens and exotic species, especially relaxing after a hard day's shopping just a few minutes away in bustling, central Melbourne. Free tours of the gardens depart from the visitors center at 10 and 11 a.m. daily except Saturdays and Mondays.

A favorite park, because of its distinct, light-hearted personality, is Fitzroy Gardens, just east of the main train station on Flinders Street. Canopied by towering elms and figs, the park includes the residential cottage of Captain James Cook, the celebrated English explorer most responsible for European settlement of the continent. His cozy, little two-story home was shipped stone by stone from England and reassembled on a patch of land where Cook had never set foot.

Amble from the cottage over to the "Fairies' Tree", a tree trunk carved by a local artist featuring a swarm of Tinkerbell's friends buzzing around koalas, kangaroos and other Aussie fauna. Next to the tree is a charming model Tudor village, tidily constructed with knee-high cottages, a church, a pub (naturally) and

a mill (complete with a tiny water wheel). The village was a gift from the citizens of Lambeth, England, in thanks for post-World War II food aid.

Near the center of the park you should not miss the rather bizarre but certainly unique rock fountain, where sculpted dolphins, crabs, octopi and other sea critters climb on rocks amidst water flows and spray. Hang around until dusk and feed the possums as they come down from the trees -- they are much, much cuter than their rat-like North American cousins.

If you want to get a bit farther out of town, just outside the suburban environs of Melbourne lie the Dandenong Ranges. A scenic tour through the winding, wooded hills includes quaint villages, craft shops and tea houses which cater to that most Victorian of habits, the Devonshire tea. Ride the restored train pulled by the steam engine named "Puffing Billy" to get a taste of life in early Australia.

For complete relaxation, enjoy a peaceful walk among Aboriginal-theme wood sculptures in the William Ricketts Sanctuary. There you will find several pathways through virgin forest, with benches placed periodically, perfect for quiet reading or bird-watching.

Nearby is the Healsville Sanctuary, where you can stroll on several acres together with native Australian animals in their natural habitat. If your time is limited this is the perfect place to view the amazing range of Australian fauna in one place. Be sure to arrive early as the park is a favorite with locals and visitors alike.

To help you sort out the choices, the Victorian Tourist Commission publishes a colorful, 40-page guide describing over 30 parks, gardens and reserves in the greater Melbourne area. The brochure, called simply "Melbourne Now: Parks and Gardens", is available at the main tourist office, 230 Collins St. It is an excellent guide to help you "park it" a while in Melbourne.

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