

Introducing Victoria

Despite being Australia's smallest mainland state (roughly as big as Great Britain), Victoria sure has a lot to offer. It's a place of great contrasts – of ocean beaches and mountain ranges, deserts and forests, volcanic plains and endless sheep farms. Its people are the most diverse in Australia, with immigrants from all over the world pouring in during the 19th century gold rushes, and again after WWII when Melbourne's Station Pier was the Australian equivalent of New York's Ellis Island.

There are dozens of national, state, coastal and historical parks. The diversity is truly amazing, ranging from the lush cool-temperate rainforest areas of the Errinundra Plateau to the coastal wilderness areas of the nearby Croajingolong; from the mountainous majesty of the Alpine National Park to the desert wilderness areas in the north-west Mallee region. Then there's the spectacular Great Ocean Road coastal drive (past world famous surf beaches); the historic Goldfields region; the mighty Murray River, with its townships that evoke the days of the paddle steamers; and excellent wineries scattered all around the state.

The country towns range from large provincial centres like Bendigo and Ballarat with their rich gold-rush heritage, to tiny one-pub towns where you never know who you'll meet. And, of course, there's marvellous Melbourne, the state capital.

State-Wide Must Sees & Dos

Mornington & Bellarine Peninsulas – Take the ferry across Port Phillip Bay, between the popular seaside resorts of Queenscliff, on the Bellarine Peninsula, and Portsea and Sorrento on the Mornington Peninsula.

Great Ocean Road – Drive one of the world's most spectacular coastal routes, visiting towns such as Lorne and Apollo Bay, then head inland to the lovely Otway Ranges and on to the dramatic coastal rock formations of Port Campbell National Park.

The Grampians – Go rock-climbing and hiking in these mystical mountains in the heart of the Wimmera, famous for their stunning natural beauty, great bushwalks, seasonal wildflowers and Aboriginal cultural centre.

Daylesford & Hepburn Springs – Get pampered and preened in these gorgeous twin towns that are the 'spa centre of Victoria'.

The High Country – Get active in the beautiful High Country, where you can ski, bushwalk, horse trek, mountain bike, fish, hang glide, and go white-water rafting or hot-air ballooning.

Wilson's Promontory – Explore 'The Prom', one of the most popular national parks in all of Australia, with more than 130km of walking tracks, wonderful beaches and abundant native wildlife (some of it very tame).

Introducing Melbourne

Melbourne's residents are fuelled by the best coffee in Australia, yet the city still runs at a slow pace. Trams travel back and forth along the city's grid, and cycling is a common way to travel between suburbs. It's also becoming increasingly fashionable to get about town on a scooter.

The natural geographic feature of the Yarra River meant that the area was prime settling land for Europeans in the 1830s, and the ornate Victorian-era architecture and leafy, established boulevards reflect this history. Cutting-edge, futuristic developments such as Federation Square – the city's new meeting place – and the waterfront development of the Docklands provide a striking contrast. The city centre is bordered by the Yarra to the south, Fitzroy Gardens to the east, Victoria St to the north and Spencer St to the west (although the Docklands has extended the western border). The main streets running east-west in the city's block-shaped grid are Collins and Bourke Sts, crossed by Swanston and Elizabeth Sts. The heart of the city is Bourke St Mall and Chinatown along Little Bourke St.

Character-filled neighbourhoods, such as Fitzroy, St Kilda and Carlton, hum with life and the city produces some of the most innovative art, music, cuisine, fashion, performance, design and ideas in the country. Melburnians love to shop, eat and attend the many festivals the city offers. They are also a sporty bunch who go crazy during the Australian Football League (AFL) finals in September, and the Spring Racing Carnival in November, when the whole country stops to watch the Melbourne Cup.

Melbourne's Weather

Melbourne's climate has an unfortunate reputation: wet, windy, unpredictable and liable to extremes – very hot or very cold and often both on the same day! On the plus side, Melbourne's multitude of parks makes it a beautiful place to witness the changing seasons. It is rarely unbearably chilly – in winter the average temperature ranges between 6°C and 13°C – and temperatures reach above 35°C only a few times each year. Despite its reputation for being wet, Melbourne actually receives only half the average rainfall of Sydney or Brisbane.

Cultural Overview

Melbourne's most defining characteristic is its cultural diversity. Around 40% of the city's population was born outside Australia, with over 130 countries recorded as Melburnians' places of birth. This ethnic mix greatly influences the way people live and play. There's an outlet, celebration and activity for every taste and preference – in one night in Melbourne you could see *butoh* (modern Japanese performance art) and take a salsa lesson before heading to a late-night jazz club.

The city has dozens of excellent galleries and probably the healthiest theatre scene in the country, with beautifully renovated venues such as the Princess and Regent theatres. As Melbourne prides itself on being Australia's most 'highbrow' city, it should come as no surprise that the more traditional musical and dance art forms are well represented – classical music buffs will love the **Melbourne Chorale** and the **Melbourne Symphony Orchestra**. **The Australian Ballet** also calls Melbourne home. To top it all off, Melbourne is widely acknowledged as the country's rock capital, and has long enjoyed a thriving pub-rock scene, from which bands such as AC/DC, Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds and Jet emerged.

Melbourne Chorale: Website: www.melbournechorale.com.au

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra: Website: www.mso.com.au

The Australian Ballet: Website: www.australianballet.com

And, of course, we mustn't forget the city's coffee culture. If good coffee and fabulous cafes are important to you, this is definitely the place to be.

Don't Miss...

Melbourne's easy-going pace is perfect for enjoying its gracious Victorian architecture, its wealth of parks and gardens, and its many cultural highlights. Most of the city's main sights are just a short walk or tram stop apart, with plenty of coffee pick-me-up opportunities along the way. Following is just a tiny taste of what's on offer in marvellous Melbourne.

Get your bearings and enjoy a birds-eye view of new developments such as Docklands from the Melbourne Observation Deck at the **Rialto Towers**.

Rialto Towers: 525 Collins St, City Centre. **Phone:** 03 9629 8222 **Website:** www.rialto.com.au

Take a book, a picnic or a Frisbee; most importantly, take your time at the **Royal Botanic Gardens**, certainly the finest botanic gardens in Australia. During summer, don't miss the divine experience of a **Moonlight Cinema** session.

Royal Botanic Gardens: Birdwood Ave, South Yarra. **Phone:** 03 9252 2300 **Website:** www.rbg.vic.gov.au

Moonlight Cinema: **Website:** www.moonlight.com.au

Find out what makes Australians who they are at the inspiring and architecturally magnificent **Immigration Museum**.

Immigration Museum: 400 Flinders St, City Centre. **Phone:** 03 9927 2700 **Website:** immigration.museum.vic.gov.au

Eat a bratwurst (German sausage) on a Saturday morning while listening to musicians busking outside the deli at the **Queen Victoria Market (QVM)**. The QVM's bustling **night market** (Wednesday evenings, late November to mid-February) is also well worth a visit.

Queen Victoria Market: 513 Elizabeth St, City Centre. **Phone:** 03 9320 5822 **Website:** www.qvm.com.au

Head to the lively seaside suburb of **St Kilda** (think fun, food, cakes and sea breezes). Highlights include **Luna Park**, an old-fashioned amusement park; the **Esplanade Sunday Market** (10am-5pm); and catching a **ferry** (weekends & public holidays) from St Kilda pier across the bay to charming **Williamstown**.

Luna Park: Lower Esplanade. **Phone:** 03 9525 5033 **Website:** www.lunapark.com.au

Ferry service: **Phone:** 03 9682 9555

Eat & Be Merry At...

Melbourne is the city for food lovers. Everywhere you go, there are restaurants, cafés, delicatessens, markets, bistros, brasseries and takeaways. The city's ethnic diversity is reflected in the inexhaustible variety of its cuisines and restaurants. People eat out a lot. The city also has a famously lively night-life scene. You'll find bars and clubs hidden down tiny alleys, at the top of darkened staircases and in most luxury hotels. Here are a few of our favourite places to get you started:

Lovers of Middle Eastern food should follow the spice trail to **Mecca**, which offers Moroccan, Egyptian and Lebanese fare. After a delicious meal on the river-side balcony you'd be forgiven for mistaking the Yarra River for the Nile...

Mecca: mid-level, Southgate, City. **Phone:** 03 9682 2999

Open until 2.30am, **Supper Inn** is a favourite for late-night noodles, claypots or *congee* (Chinese rice porridge). The décor is nothing great, but the quality dishes are excellent value.

Supper Inn: Celestial Ave, Chinatown, City. **Phone:** 03 9663 4759

Eat & Be Merry At... (Con't)

Breakfast, accepted as one of the best in the city, can be ordered all day at **Marios**, a Melbourne institution. Waiting for a table is part of the ritual, so get a coffee and a spot at the window to check out the Fitzroy scene while you wait.

Marios: 303 Brunswick St, Fitzroy. **Phone:** 03 9417 3343

Climb the stairs and enter one of the coolest bars in Melbourne: **Cookie**. With its balconies overlooking Swanston St, gorgeous interior, diverse music collection, great cocktails and 10 beers on tap, this place could win Bar of the Year. It serves great Thai food, too.

Cookie: 252 Swanston St, City Centre. **Phone:** 03 9663 7660

Honkytonks is a typical lost-up-a-laneway, at-the-top-of-a-staircase Melbourne bar/club. Down the back, past the grand piano holding the DJ decks, are views over the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG), one of the world's great sporting venues.

Honkytonks: Duckboard Pl, City Centre. **Phone:** 03 9662 4555

Melbourne Events

Melbourne's love of festivals has earned it the nickname 'Events Capital'. Its festival calendar is overflowing, with city streets and venues turned over to the public to celebrate everything from fashion to anti-fashion, film and food. Following is a small selection; for more, pick up a copy of *Melbourne Events* from the Melbourne Visitor Information Centre in Federation Square.

Australian Open – In January, Melbourne's National Tennis Centre hosts Australia's Grand Slam tennis championship. It attracts the world's top players and provides occasion for adult spectators to paint their faces – in national colours.

Australian Open: **Website:** www.australianopen.com

Antipodes Festival – March sees the city's Greek quarter in Lonsdale St (between Swanston and Russell Sts) celebrate film, music and visual art, finishing with a street festival on the weekend nearest 25 March.

Antipodes Festival: **Website:** www.antipodesfestival.com.au

International Comedy Festival – One of the three largest comedy festivals in the world, this event brings together Australia's finest comedians and some first-rate international performers. It's held at various venues across the city from late March to mid-April.

International Comedy Festival: **Website:** www.comedyfestival.com.au

Melbourne International Film Festival – This celebration of cinema showcases some of the best in international and local film making. It's held over two weeks in July at various cinemas across the city. The programme includes guests, forums and the ever-popular Festival Club for discussions after film screenings.

Melbourne International Film Festival: **Website:** www.melbournefilmfestival.com.au

Royal Melbourne Show – The country comes to town for this large and very popular agricultural fair, held at the showgrounds in Flemington in September. There are dog shows, a rodeo, showjumping, amusement park rides and lots more.

Royal Melbourne Show: **Website:** www.royalshow.com.au