



WALKS, WINE AND HIDDEN SECRETS

TRAVEL & LEISURE

Melbourne and the Yarra Valley is a rewarding destination for lovers of cuisine and culture

MICK SHIPPEN

Melbourne is known as Australia's city of arts, food and culture; and with good reason. It is home to excellent museums, galleries and theatres that attract culture vultures from all over Australia and the Asia-Pacific region eager to open their minds to new visual and aural experiences. With its cosmopolitan population and distinct Greek, Italian and Vietnamese districts, and the renowned Yarra Valley wineries just a short drive from the city, Melbourne also allows visitors to embark on a rich and rewarding culinary journey.

Hidden secrets

One of the joys of spending time in Melbourne is the fact that the city is a breeze to get around. Hopping on and off the iconic trams that offer free travel around a central city loop is a quick and convenient way to gain a snapshot of Melbourne but to discover its heart and a few of its many charms it is best explored on foot.

If you intend to stay in Melbourne for a few days, one of the best decisions you could make is to join a Hidden Secrets walking tour of the city. Owned by Fiona Sweetman, a local business woman with a passion for her home town, visitors have an inspiring selection of specialized tours to choose from - each designed to reveal a less well known face of Melbourne. Fiona and her team of knowledgeable guides infuse the excursions with a mine of information and insight about the city in a delightfully relaxed manner. The Lanes & Arcades Tour is a casual three hour walk through Melbourne's hidden lanes and arcades that reveals some of the best places to eat, drink and shop. With this invaluable eye-opening tour, you'll know exactly where to return to over the coming days to make the most of your trip. The essence of the tour is that it takes you down lanes and alleyways that you would simply walk past without a second glance but present you with a hidden gem, whether it's a bohemian café such as Von Haus on Grosvenor Street, great coffee shops and sandwich bars down colourful Degraves Street, or one of the city's many hard to find but essential dining hotspots like Cumulus Inc on Flinders Lane and Jamie Oliver's worthy Fifteen in the basement of Collins Street. Other options by Hidden Secrets include the Sommelier's City Wine Walk, and Upwardly Melbourne, a walk for those interested in architecture. To discover more visit www.hiddensecretstours.com

Wine tours and the Yarra Valley food trail

As one of Australia's premier wine growing regions, the Yarra Valley boasts more than 80 wineries and is responsible for exporting more than two million litres of Australia's finest wines throughout the world. The beautiful valley has a rich history of wine growing

dating back to the early 1830s when Scottish cattle ranchers moved down from New South Wales and planted vines they had imported from France. Today, the region is well known domestically and internationally for its sparkling wines, including those made by French Champagne houses, Chardonnay, complex Pinot Noirs, and full bodied Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz.

Although the Yarra Valley has its fair share of big player wineries, touring the region also provides the chance for wine lovers to discovery many boutique producers. The smaller wineries, often with as little as 30 acres under vine, are able to exercise tight control



over the product and establish brand integrity. Local day trippers and tourists have the opportunity to sample and purchase some truly exceptional small batch wines.

There are several companies operating specialized wine tours out of Melbourne. One of the most respected is the Australian Wine Tour Company. Employing only wine industry professionals, the company offers a variety of tour options that entertain as well as inform wine lovers. One of the wineries on their itinerary is Yering Farm, an award-winning 30-acre vineyard producing handcrafted Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Merlot and Cabernet Merlot. The small operations is run by Alan Johns who handcrafts around 10,000 cases of New World wines from estate grown fruit to produce Yering Farm's high quality individual wines. Visitors can expect to sample some exceptional vintages at the cellar door, a charming converted hay shed decorated with old farming and winemaking equipment and historical maps.

Another highlight on the Australian Wine Tour Company's schedule is Giant Steps Innocent Bystander Winery. Located in the centre of the town of Healsville, this fantastic winery includes a cellar door, restaurant with wood-fired pizzeria, an artisan bakery producing excellent sourdough breads, and a cheese room and provodere. The winery, which is owned by a jazz lover and named after John Coltrane's first solo album, produces great chardonnay's and pinot noirs under the Giant Steps and Innocent Bystander labels. A visit to this fabulous winery-cum-restaurant is a must for any lover of good food and wine. For further information about wine tours visit www.austwinetour.com.au

WHERE TO STAY

In keeping with historic and cultural roots, the Grand Hotel is the largest and finest building of the state of Victoria's gold rush era. The majestic hotel spans an entire city block, right next to Spencer Street Station and is on the city's circular tram route. Although recently refurbished and branded as an Accor MGallery property, architects and designers have carefully retained the building's unique character. As well as spacious rooms and suites, the Grand Hotel also features a renowned restaurant serving the finest seasonal local produce. Melbourne's quintessential 'hotel of the arts', the Sofitel Melbourne on Collins, is another excellent choice for cultural travelers. It offers luxury and style in the city centre and often features 'stay and see' packages that incorporate major exhibitions, musicals and culinary tours. For further information, visit www.accorhotels.com.au For those looking to make wine the focus of their trip to Victoria, there's the Balgownie Estate Vineyard Resort & Spa located in the heart of Yarra Valley. The resort provides the perfect place to indulge, relax and sample some of Australia's finest wines and regional cuisine and is just an hour's drive from Melbourne. It features its own restaurant, spa, winery and cellar door. Visit www.balgownieestate.com.au

GETTING THERE

Air Asia X has put long haul destinations on the map for budget travelers. Holidaymakers can fly from Bangkok to Kuala Lumpur and then direct to Melbourne with one of the lowest fares available. Although it is a typically no-frills service, large business class type seating is available.

For more information on Melbourne and Victoria, visit www.visitvictoria.com



[1] The Grand, Melbourne, one of the original buildings from the goldrush era [2] A panoramic view of the city as seen from the 265 metre Railto Tower [3] Graffiti is viewed as art in Melbourne and brightens up many alleyways in the city [4] Jamie Oliver's Fifteen in the heart of Melbourne serves excellent food and provides troubled teenagers with the chance to become a top chef [5] Trips around the city in a horse-drawn carriage are popular [6] The local markets are a haven for food lovers.

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CHRISTMAS EVE : DECEMBER 24, 2009
RR&B
• Christmas Eve Dinner

NEW YEAR'S EVE : DECEMBER 31, 2009
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• A la carte 3-course menu @ Baht 3,900++
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HUNTSMAN PUB
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• Festive Dinner Set @ Baht 1,200 net

ATRIUM
• International Buffet Dinner @ Baht 3,900 net. Come 4, pay 2.

HUNTSMAN
• Austin Powers' "Groovy Baby!!!" party @ Baht 1,500 net
• Special set menu @ Baht 1,200 net.

CHRISTMAS DAY : DECEMBER 25, 2009
RR&B
• Western Buffet Brunch @ Baht 2,900++ per adult and @ Baht 1,200++ per child.

NEW YEAR'S DAY : JANUARY 1, 2010
ATRIUM
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• International Buffet Brunch @ Baht 2,500 net. Come 4, pay 2.

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