

Melbourne big on night life, wildlife

MELBOURNE, from Page 35

cated near Australia's southern tip, a bayside community with a population of 3.2 million. It offers a sophisticated, cosmopolitan vibe without the frenzied pace of a big city. There's great shopping, lush foliage and wonderful opportunities for great dining at all price points.

From the fish and chips at the corner shop to the sit-down fine-dining experience at the deluxe Crown Towers' Number 8 restaurant, the meals weren't just good. They were *ripper*. For authentic Vietnamese fare that's cheap and tasty, there's Little Saigon on Victoria Street. You can't find better Italian than on Toorak and Commercial roads. And for some fantastic Asian fusion, try the high-end Pearl on Church Street.

We even ordered a picnic lunch at the spectacular Montalto Vineyard & Olive Grove (about an hour outside of Melbourne), thinking we'd get a nice boxed meal and a bottle of wine. Wrong. The spread was out of this world, with a selection of cheese, olives, salads, caviar, meats and breads — and bottles of sparkling water and wine (and not the *plonky* kind, either) — all served on a linen tablecloth in a secluded area of the 50-acre vineyard. With the sun beating down on our necks, we couldn't believe our good fortune.

About an hour northwest of Melbourne in Daylesford is the Lake House, a favorite retreat for young Melbournites eager to escape the city for the weekend. Though Daylesford's population is just around 10,000, it quadruples on weekends when folks from the city come to relax. When Heath Ledger was in town filming "Ned Kelly," locals joked that all the town's inhabitants were extras in the movie.

The spa treatments at the Lake House are just the thing to work out the kinks in a traveler's body. But it's the first-rate amenities (heated floor tiles in the bathrooms are a lovely touch on nippy mornings) and the haute cuisine served up by Alla Wolf-Tasker that are truly memorable. She and her husband, Allan — whose original paintings adorn the walls of the property 21 years ago. Today their staff includes daughter Larissa, who joked that she gets "away from it all" by heading to Melbourne.

It would be a shame to travel all the way to Australia without getting the opportunity to coo over a

If you go

GETTING THERE

Air New Zealand flies nonstop from Los Angeles to Melbourne, Australia. Call 800-262-1234 to book a reservation or go to www.airnz.com

STAYING THERE

The Crown Towers (www.crowntowers.com.au) offers a spectacular view of Melbourne's skyline, with suites starting at about \$230 per night. Rooms at the smaller Lyall Hotel (www.thelyall.com) start at \$300.

koala or two. Sure it's a cliché, but why not? We could've gone to the Melbourne Zoo, but we wanted an interactive experience and there's only one place for that: Ballarat Wildlife Park, also just an hour's drive from Melbourne.

Here, a small army of kangaroos and emus intent on getting a snack stuck closely by our sides. Like many visitors, we'd purchased a bag of grains to feed these animals, some of which roamed freely around the park. The shyer animals hop around hoping to be noticed. But the baby kangaroos — joeys — have learned how to use their cuddly cuteness to their advantage. One nudged her nose under my free hand and it worked like a charm. Within seconds, I was feeding her out of the palm of my hand while her buddies eagerly hopped over to collect their share.

"I grew up with a lot of these animals," said tour guide Chris Parker, whose father, Greg, runs the park.

Set on 286 acres of beautiful peppermint gum woodland, Ballarat Wildlife Park is dedicated to the care and appreciation of Australian wildlife in its natural surroundings. Greg Parker has used his expertise to cultivate an array of Australian fauna and developed the park so visitors can see how animals live. We see more than we want to. Watching the koalas feast on eucalyptus leaves is adorable. Seeing Tasmanian devils feed on dead mice . . . not so much.

We headed back toward Melbourne and the beachside community of St. Kilda. Gorgeous both in landscape and population, the neighborhood attracts a hip, young crowd. After a lovely seafood lunch at the Stokehouse, we headed over to Federation Square, which connects Melbourne's cen-



PHOTOS BY DENTON MORRIS

BEAR WITH US: At the Ballarat Wildlife Park, set in a peppermint gum woodland, visitors can watch koalas feast on eucalyptus leaves.

Aussie footy gets tough

FOOTBALL, from Page 35

number of athletes who are doctors, lawyers and other professionals.

"The players who are doctors play just as rough as anyone else," said the MCC's Denis Maher. "I'd be worried about breaking my hand and not being able to perform surgery, but these are all very tough guys. They handle it just fine."

Among Aussie footy players, America's amateur Boston Demons team, based in Beantown

(the parent club is the Melbourne Demons), has a reputation as having players who are both tough and smart.

"The Boston Demons call themselves the brainiest team in the world," Maher said with a laugh. "You can't really argue with them. They've had five micro-surgeons and three professors among their players, as well as a coach who was a heart surgeon."

For more information about the Melbourne Cricket Club, go to www.mcc.org.au

tral business district with the Yarra River.

Spanning an entire city block, Federation Square houses the prestigious Ian Potter Center (home to more than 20 art galleries) as well as the five-story Australian Centre for the Moving Image. In the center of the Centre, schoolchildren gath-

ered to see their images projected on a wall-size outdoor screen. As their parents looked around for the video camera capturing their images, the kids squealed in delight.

Before we headed to the airport, we made one last stop at Cafe Darling. This time, we got our coffee order right.

Tasmanian

By LYNN PARRAMORE
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

TASMANIA — Mainland Australia is Down Under, and Tasmania is Waaaaay Down Under. Hold-onto-your-hat-or-it-might-blow-to-Antarctica Down Under.

But the world is warming up to this cool little island. Talk to hip travelers, and you're likely to hear words like "serene" and "undiscovered." Tasmania's fast becoming the toast of trendsetters.

A few reasons why: wacky wildlife, mouth-watering cuisine and the world's cleanest air and water. The heritage is fascinating — more than a third of the state is protected parkland — and the place is widely undervisited.

One of the best ways to explore here is on a walkabout.

Aborigines go on walkabouts when work becomes a drag and it's time to head to the bush — a temporary return to a traditional way of life. That's what the Bay of Fires Walk — which explores a wilderness coastline — is all about.

The four-day trip started with breakfast in Evansdale, where we got backpacks, weatherproof jackets and picnic lunches. Our sunny Tasmanian guides Graeme and Hana gently encouraged us to pack only the bare essentials. When I put on my pack, I got the picture. Out went Robert Hughes' tome on Australian history. In went water bottles.

Gear stowed, we were off for a drive north to Stumpy Bay, passing through lush grape-growing valleys, the village of Scottsdale and the historic tin-mining town of Derby, where we stopped to marvel at a startlingly aquamarine lake.

Nearing Stumpy Bay, Graeme spotted a pair of casually grazing Eastern Grey kangaroos. Now we set out on foot, leaning into a serious headwind for a march around Cod Bay. Getting into our walkabout rhythm, we took our sweet time, picking up seashells, pointing at seabirds and sinking further into the stunning solitude with each step.

This long sweep of pristine beaches and heathlands looks pretty much as it did when Captain Tobias Forneaux spotted aboriginal fires burning when he sailed by in 1773, giving the area its name. All along the Bay of Fires, the diamond-white sand was scattered with boulders splashed with orange lichen.

We trekked seven miles to our first destination, Forester Beach Camp, where Graeme and Hana rustled up plate-sized steaks, washed down by Tasmanian wine. Before zipping ourselves in for the night under the camp's canvas roofs, we gazed at the dazzling southern stars, winking from an unfamiliar sky.

Next morning, the 12-mile march to the Bay of Fires Lodge, the only building in these parts, passed lawns where we spied the tracks of a Tasmanian devil, the famously screeching marsupial. A long beach walk took us to a picnic at Eddystone Point Lighthouse.

As we enjoyed the break, a pair of curious wallabies peered at us from a dune, then melted into the heath. Stoked by tea and shortbread, we hoisted our packs for the final stretch, which took us past aboriginal middens — piles of oyster shells left by thousands of

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