

KanBERRA: the rough guide

I.

Don't believe what you hear about Canberra being a dump where everything closes at 5pm — that's a slur spread by the jealous burghers of genteelly declining Adelaide and the malice-mongers of the pinstriped Melbourne establishment. Here are 101 ways to entertain yourself in Australia's national capital.

- 1. Form a syndicate, rent a car, drive to Sydney, it's only 3 hrs away.*
- 2. Form a syndicate, rent a car, drive to the coast, it's only 2 hrs away. Dip toe in ocean, squeal at antarctic temperature, eat double serving of fish and chips, return to Canberra.*
- 3. Form a syndicate, rent a car, drive to Army academy at Duntroon, it's only 10 min away. Perfect a funny walk on the parade ground until a real-life sergeant major shouts at you.*
- 4. Climb Canberra's 3 highest peaks in 2 hrs (not suitable for over 80s).*
- 5. Liberate Macca's flag from local family restaurant. Form two syndicates: Tagi tribe create diversion for parliament house security guards (not suitable for participants wearing arabic clothing — protective services officers are so out of shape they shoot rather than give chase), Pagong tribe run liberated Macca's flag up the giant flag pole.*
- 6. Visit giant poker machine barn at Dickson tradies club, play spot-the-Federal-Treasurer.*
- 7. Jelly-crystal the Bruce Hall fountain ...*
- 8. (to be cont.)*

II.

Canberra's charms are subtle rather than in-your-face, and it is below critical mass as a metropolis, around 350–400k population. When I say “subtle” I mean that it grows on you. The city was planned and built from scratch in the 1920s, and populated through economic inducements and subsidies by people from elsewhere and everywhere. That fact alone tells us that its history contains many big stories about planning, construction, personalities, power, money, and politics. Unlike the ancient Romans, who built new cities all over their world according to a formula on a grid pattern (they had never heard of curves), Canberra's founders used a highly idiosyncratic design of curves inside curves and naive feng shui.

The history of the district is also interesting. Canberran city and suburban society has evolved to a stable quasi steady state now, but it is largely unaware that in doing so it displaced an older, complex and layered society and culture that flourished in the district in the nineteenth century, remnants of which are a never-ending source of delight to me to find in my ramblings around the old villages and ghost-towns of the area.

The nineteenth century society in turn displaced a much, much older culture, evidence of which is not hard to find if you know how, and where, to look.

The city is patched and threaded and collared with forest and hills and bushland and the country to the south and west is huge and wild and mountainous and snowy in winter, so Canberra is

a great place for nature and wildlife, if you like that sort of thing, kangaroos and wombats and parrots and wildflowers. Or it WAS a great place for nature, until the whole of nature (and quite a slice of the outer suburbs) — the entire, vast, rugged wilderness — burned down in a firestorm. To the east is farmland, more wilderness (the amount and scale of wilderness in Oz is simply too tiring to think about!), a forested escarpment, then a curly sapphire coast to which the public servants exit en masse in January. The countryside to the north and north-west is all vineyards and wineries and olive-groves. Now THAT'S more like it!