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A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

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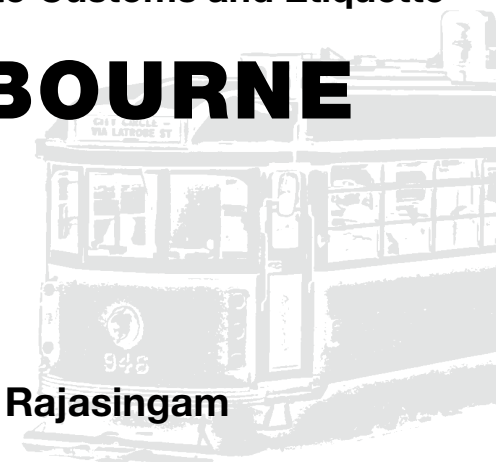


# CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

## MELBOURNE

Ruth Rajasingam



For Review only

**CULTURE SHOCK!**  
A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette  
**MELBOURNE**

**Ruth Rajasingam**

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Culture shock is a state of disorientation that can come over anyone who has been thrust into unknown surroundings, away from one's comfort zone. *CultureShock!* is a series of trusted and reputed guides which has, for decades, been helping expatriates and long-term visitors to cushion the impact of culture shock whenever they move to a new country.

Written by people who have lived in the country and experienced culture shock themselves, these books provide all the information necessary for anyone to cope with these feelings of disorientation more effectively. The guides are written in a style that is easy to read and cover a range of topics that will give readers enough advice, hints and tips to make their lives as normal as possible again.

Each book is structured in the same manner. It begins with the first impressions that visitors will have of that city or country. To understand a culture, one must first understand the people—where they came from, who they are, the values and traditions they live by, as well as their customs and etiquette. This is covered in the first half of the book.

Then on with the practical aspects—how to settle in with the greatest of ease. Authors walk readers through topics such as how to find accommodation, get the utilities and telecommunications up and running, enrol the children in school and keep in the pink of health. But that's not all. Once the essentials are out of the way, venture out and try the food, enjoy more of the culture and travel to other areas. Then be immersed in the language of the country before discovering more about the business side of things.

To round off, snippets of basic information are offered before readers are 'tested' on customs and etiquette of the country. Useful words and phrases, a comprehensive resource guide and list of books for further research are also included for easy reference.

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## For Review only **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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My humble and heartfelt gratitude to my family, friends and acquaintances who have contributed to this book, both directly and indirectly. In writing about Melbourne, I have also relied on literature by Australian authors whose names are listed in the Further Reading list, as well as publicly available information on government websites and newsites. Any errors, omissions and misinterpretations are mine and I apologise for these.

In particular I would like to express my deep gratitude to my husband Ganesh without whose patience and support, I would not have completed the writing, as well as my children, Dinesh and Shirahni.

Soli Deo Gloria.

The famous domed ceiling at the La Trobe Reading Room of the State Library Victoria

Pedestrian bridge over the Yarra River with view of the cityscape in the background



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## PREFACE

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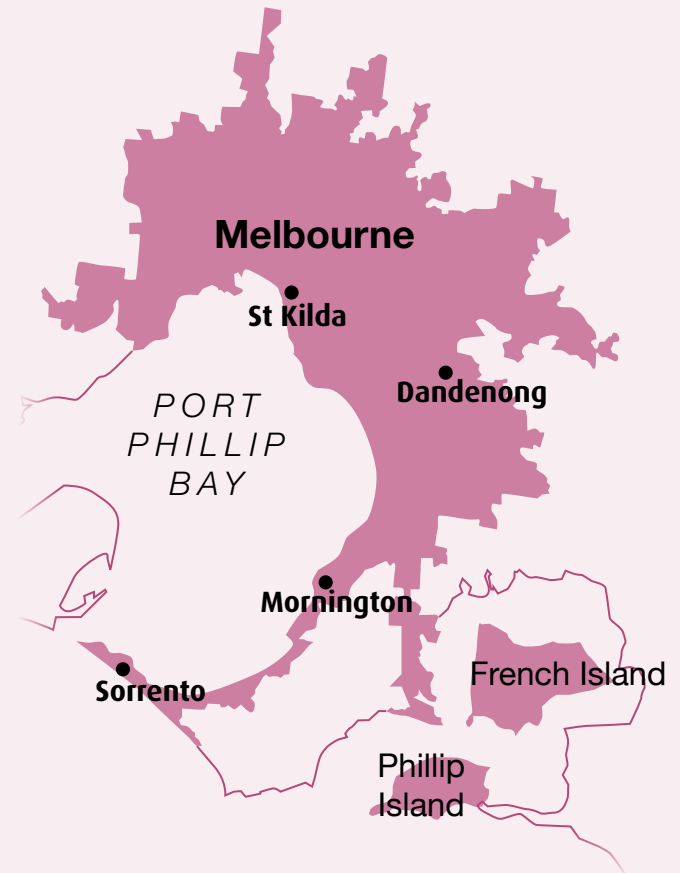


Melbourne has a reputation to maintain. Named the world's most liveable city for seven years in a row since 2011 by the Economist Intelligence Unit, Melbourne is among 140 cities to receive a perfect score for healthcare, education and infrastructure. Other factors considered are a city's stability, culture and environment. While the report's target audience is corporate executives and their families relocating overseas, Melbourne remains a charming city to be experienced whether you are a business traveller, student, tourist or long-term resident.

The usual questions of one new to a city—Where to live? Where to eat? What is the best mode of transportation? What's on this weekend?—are easily answered. Melbourne is a relatively easy city to adapt to and welcomes all types of visitors. Everyday encounters with Melburnians will reveal how cosmopolitan this city is as it is home to people from more than 200 nationalities.

Melbourne has championed multiculturalism successfully over the past years. While there have been recent calls to stem the flow of migration due to the challenges to the city's infrastructure, such as housing and traffic, it remains a civic city, which tries to meet the needs of its local community. Urban historian Graeme Davison has said that "one of the threads through its history has been a quaint sense of civic values; an idea of a shared purpose beyond commerce and getting ahead".

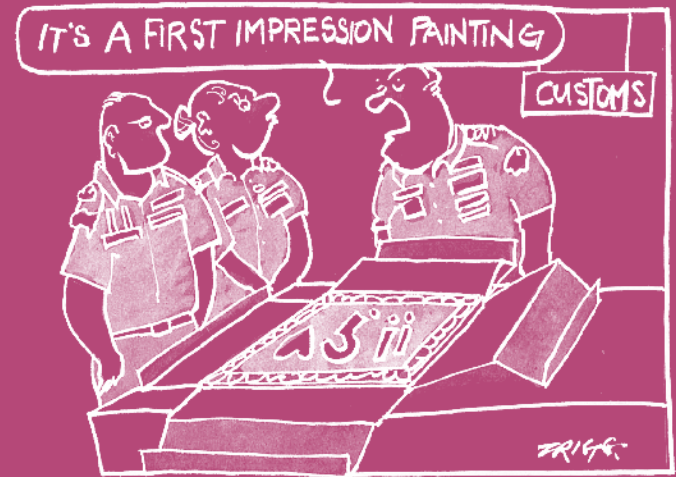
The information and insights I have tried to provide are limited to my stay in this city. However I have sought the views of many who have called Melbourne home for more than a quarter of a century as well as new residents, students and business travellers. These provide different perspectives to the people and life in this city. I hope that it will offer a good background to explore and experience the richness this city has to offer.



For Review only

CHAPTER 1

# FIRST IMPRESSIONS





「This will be a place for a village.」

— John Batman, Australian explorer

First impressions count. Wisdom, however, dictates that impressions invariably change with time. My first impression of Melbourne was in 1989, when I visited the city to decide if I'd like to pursue postgraduate studies here. I remember walking down the Yarra River, visiting Flagstaff gardens and thinking to myself what a tranquil and beautiful city it was. It reminded me of Britain. As things turned out, however, I did not pursue my studies then but several years later.

More recently, as I landed again at the Melbourne International Airport at Tullamarine and made my way through the crowds of passengers, the first thing I noticed was how ethnically diverse the passengers were. I was excited to see people from all over the world. The scene outside the gates was touching as passengers were greeted by friends and family with hugs, kisses and flowers—reminiscent of villagers greeting their loved ones after a long separation. Melbourne is very much the multicultural new world.

While the immigration process was reasonably efficient, the airport lacked the numerous facilities of a modern airport such as Singapore's Changi International Airport. I had some trepidation over customs declaration, having heard of horror stories from other travellers into Australia and the long interrogation sessions I had seen on the cable television programme, *Border Security*. I had been reassured by relatives from Australia that as long as I honestly declared what I was carrying, there will not be any problems. Luckily, I had nothing from the list of prohibited goods—such as fresh fruits, vegetables and some dairy products—and getting through customs was a breeze.

For Review only



The classic view of Princes Bridge with the Melbourne city skyline in the background.

## CITY CENTRE

What awaited me along the drive to the city was unexciting. There was no train or subway to the city centre, unlike in other big cities. While there are plans in the works to develop a train route from the airport to the city centre, the only travel options in the meantime are taxis, Ubers, Skybuses, families or friends. The scenery was flat with industrial buildings and a long stretch of road along the Tullamarine freeway. As I passed the green belt of Parkville, I noticed the changing landscape as the old gave way to the new. On one side was the University of Melbourne but as I drove into the city, I began to notice the outline of skyscrapers.

Architectural gems were aplenty and quaint trams glided through the crowded city of cosy cafés and interesting artworks. There was a laid-back feel to the city: Office workers in workwear shared the city streets with students in casual attire, tourists and mothers with children in tow.

St Paul's Cathedral



For Review only



The iconic Flinders Street Station

At one end of the city was the famous Flinders Street railway station. Built in 1910, it was still the gathering place of all commuters who “meet under the clocks”. The grand red brick and golden yellow stucco building built in an Edwardian baroque style saw thousands of commuters passing through its doors daily. Just behind Flinders Street Station was the South Bank, right by the Yarra River, the main river running through Melbourne. Many crossed the bridge to get to the Melbourne Arts Centre and the National Gallery of Victoria.

Just opposite Flinders Street Station, at Federation Square, was the Melbourne Visitors Centre, a good stop for the first-time visitor to the city. The glass enclave was easy to find and friendly staff took the time to find out what my interests were, arming me with the necessary information and options for things to do such as volunteer-led walking tours.

With Melbourne being Australia's coffee capital, I decided



Pedestrian Bridge at Southgate

to try a coffee. My first stop was the Queen Victoria Market, for coffee and food. The old market, a popular destination for tourists and locals, sold not only fresh produce, meats and seafood, but knick knacks, souvenirs and cooked food. I tasted my first few sips of a flat white (an Australian invention of espresso and milk), and it was truly one of the best coffees I had ever tasted. My appetite was whet by the variety of breakfast options from hot jam doughnuts and croissants to sourdough bread and Turkish borek!

The fresh market boasted European-style deli foods such as cheeses and dried fruits, and also fresh seafood and red meats. It was obvious that the availability of fresh food at affordable prices was a major draw for living in this city. Ready-to-eat food available at the food court ranged from Sri Lankan curries to American-style burgers to Cantonese-Malaysian stir-fries. The variety of foods was testament to the diverse cultures found in Melbourne, which was truly a melting pot.

Once I was ready to explore the city, it was easy getting directions from the friendly locals. I pondered my many

options—walk along the Yarra River, stroll in the Botanic Gardens, join a walking tour of the city, or admire the architecture of old buildings? I decided on the easy option and made my way to the city centre where I hopped on the free tourist tram which took passengers past the major tourist attractions in a circular route.

The city was well planned with wide roads in a grid. Old buildings added to the city's old-world European charm. I saw the hidden laneways and made a mental note to discover them on another day. Japanese eateries, sushi bars, ramen houses, Chinese and Indian restaurants dotted the route. Traffic appeared heavy with trams running down the middle of the road, cars galore and pedestrians everywhere.

### Melbourne's Trams

Trams were introduced to Australia in 1885 when the first tram cars were imported from the United States. These could only accommodate 22 seated and 34 standing passengers. Electric trams were introduced in 1889 and by 1916, the trams carried more than a million passengers. While most Australian cities discontinued the use of trams, Melbourne went against the trend to update and refurbish their existing ones. The W class tram which operates today has become a Melburnian icon.

### ST KILDA

I took a tram to St Kilda, an area famous for its beach and a family-themed amusement park, Luna Park. St Kilda used to be infamous for being a hangout for druggies but has since been gentrified and turned into the perfect place for families to spend a day out at the beach. It seemed chilly for spring but I decided to walk along the beach and made my way towards the pier to look out at the wide expanse of water. It was a peaceful place with birds chirping in the air and ice-cream or a coffee available at the kiosk. Penguins would form a parade at dusk and many locals and tourists would flock to see them. Another thing to experience in

Melbourne was the Sunday market on the beach boasting more than a hundred stalls selling locally-designed creations like jewellery and hats.

Luna Park was instantly recognisable for its iconic white roller coaster that stood out in the skyline. Built in 1912, it was still popular among families with children. Entry was free and you only paid for the rides. After asking around, I was directed to one of the popular European cake shops with a tantalising window display on Acland Street. This was the famous Monarch Cakes, a Polish cake shop which served an authentic cherry slice and chocolate *kugelhoupf*, perfect for my sweet tooth, in a cosy and quaint 1950s setting. I stayed there for a while—there was too much to discover for one day at St Kilda.

Soon, the weather would change; even then the winds on the beach seemed cold for spring. After all, this was Melbourne with its unpredictable weather; I had been warned that it was possible to experience four seasons in a day. The best way to dress was to layer what you wore so that the extra layers could be removed as the weather warmed up.

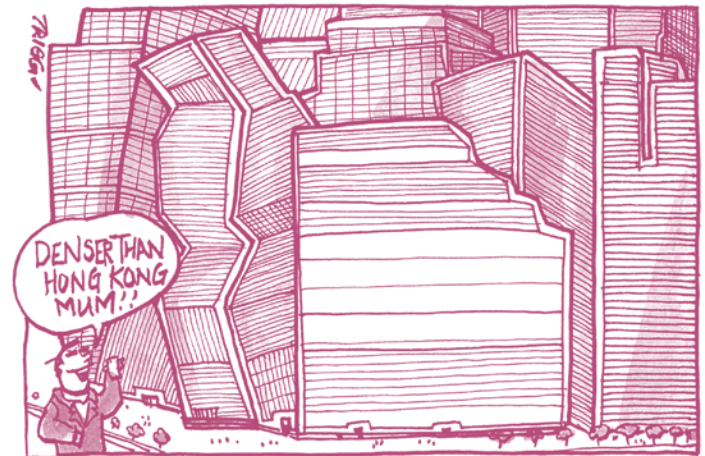


Luna Park and its iconic roller coaster

## TRAFFIC AND DENSITY

As I made my way back home, I found myself stuck in the middle of peak hour traffic. It reminded me of Singapore but somehow worse, because Melbourne was a bigger city and everything was bigger, wider and more spread out. As the world's most liveable city, Melbourne had a burgeoning population. Many chose to drive to work and only slightly more than 10 per cent of the population used public transport. According to a 2017 report by the Grattan Institute, more than 1.3 million people, or 74 per cent of the people in Greater Melbourne, relied solely on cars to get to work.

To address the problem of traffic congestion in the city, the state government started many projects such as the Melbourne Metro Tunnel (set to boost rail patronage by 39,000 people by running three of the busiest lines through a new tunnel); a new toll road for commuters on the West Gate Bridge; and the West Gate Tunnel, a 5-km toll road. Gone were the days when you could enjoy driving the freeways free of traffic. You now had to plan your route in advance and choose a good time to set off to avoid traffic jams.



The increasing density of the city came hand in hand with increasing wealth, population diversity and changing lifestyles. The Centre for Urban Transitions in September 2016 surveyed 2,000 Sydney and Melbourne households in established middle-ring suburbs and found that only 60 per cent of residents wished to live in a detached house and yard, a 30 per cent decrease from the 1990s. This survey postulated that the new generation of Australians have moved on from the Aussie dream of living in a huge detached house and yard to higher-density living. This change may be fuelled by pragmatic considerations such as access to good public transport, jobs and services.

Melbourne's Central Business District (CBD) has been found to be Australia's most densely populated region and is largely made up of international students renting apartments. It has been reported that 77 per cent of the people living in the CBD have both parents born overseas—a changing demographic for the city.

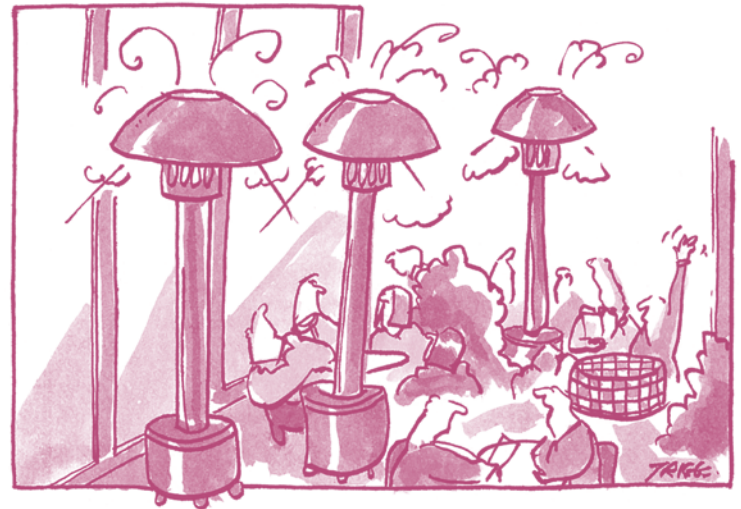
Critics of the building boom in the city may be justified as there have been studies which show that high rise apartment towers built in central Melbourne may be four times the maximum density allowed in other crowded cities such as Hong Kong, New York and Tokyo. Here too, part of the attraction to inner-city high rise living may be access to amenities and work.

With the rise in demand for housing, Melbourne's boundaries have extended and housing prices in suburbs up to 100 km from the city centre have increased. Many have predicted and hoped that the market will correct itself (which is slowly occurring) but for a newcomer to Melbourne intending to buy or rent property, the best advice is to come prepared with your own finances. There are restrictions to obtaining loans without a history of work in Melbourne.

## TRANSFORMING A CITY

The city centre in Melbourne today is alive at night. Its laneways are bustling with bars, restaurants and street artists. Cyclists, pedestrians and trams contribute to this vibrant scene. This is in sharp contrast to the city in 1989, which was quiet and dead past office hours. Much of Melbourne's rejuvenation was due to careful urban planning. In 1993, Dutch architect Jan Gehl, a visiting professor with the University of Melbourne, after spending countless hours walking the streets and imagining what could be done to bring life to them, worked with the City of Melbourne and recommended creating spaces for outdoor dining, much like European cities such as Paris and Rome. This idea has born fruit and today the city buzzes with outdoor cafés, decorated laneways and pedestrians swarming the streets.

The previous state governments, too, have contributed to this change. Housing projects in the CBD have increased by the thousands since the 1990s, catapulting the city's transformation. Licensing laws were changed, thanks to



recommendations of the Nieuwenhuysen Report on liquor licensing in 1986, allowing people to order a drink without first ordering a whole meal. The reforms were intended to create an urbane, liberalised culture of drinking in the city. To break the hotels' monopoly over the sale and service of liquor, small bars could now be set up and a separate small bar liquor licence was created.

Big building projects such as the construction of Crown Casino and high rise apartment buildings in the city, and increased small retail spaces in the city for businesses have contributed significantly to the city's urban renewal process. Changes to the education policy and residency requirements have led to the building of new housing in the city and this has led in turn to the increase in number of people flocking to live in Melbourne both on short- and long-term bases.

These developments have been met with mixed reactions. There are those who lament the rude changes to the city as more people and construction sites appear, while there are those who are happy that the economy has turned around thanks to more jobs being created to meet the demands of this influx of people. In particular, the hospitality and education sectors have benefitted. Many more tourists are flocking to enjoy what the city has to offer; restaurants, museums, laneways and attractions are always filled with tourists.

Meyers Place, located off Bourke Street, was a popular watering hole for twenty years until it closed its doors in June 2017. It was a good example of a dramatic transformation from a dilapidated warehouse to the city's oldest laneway bar. Opened in 1994, Meyers Place was widely credited as the first laneway bar in Melbourne, had received a number of awards and was inducted into the Eat Drink Design Awards Hall of Fame in 2014, as a model for small bar and laneway culture.

## HOMELESSNESS AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

To see so many homeless people on the streets in the world's most liveable city is sad. Homeless people in Melbourne, like so many modern cities, drive home the point that there are those less fortunate who have fallen through the cracks. The state government has spent an estimated A\$194 million a year to address this problem, but it still persists.

The longer life spans of parents (leading to a deferred passing of property to children); foreign investment and speculation in the property market; the rising cost of living which has not kept abreast with wage growth, have all contributed to the housing problem. There is a need for the government to step in and facilitate the construction of more housing for the lower end of the market, a demographic unable to afford the traditionally affordable Melbourne suburbs. The issue is exacerbated by multiple factors including mental illness, family conflict and drug addiction.

According to an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 15 February 2017, affordable housing remains a big issue in Melbourne today. I have witnessed this in my neighbourhood. The influx of migrants with new wealth has led to soaring house prices and resentment, especially young people who are trying to buy their first home. The median home price in 2011 was about A\$600,000; in six years it almost doubled to A\$900,000.

Homelessness is not only a problem in the city but in the suburbs. The statistics, if to be believed, are a cause for worry. Private rentals are expensive, shared accommodation is often full, cheap motels are only a short-term fix and the waiting list for public housing is only getting longer. According to an ABC report, the Salvation Army's Sunshine office in western Melbourne sees a queue of up to 40 people daily for food vouchers and accommodation.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Ruth Rajasingam** is a lawyer by training and taught law for the last ten years. Born in Singapore, she first lived in Melbourne in 1998 for a few years and more recently, since 2017 with her family. She enjoys the multicultural lifestyle in Melbourne with its varied cuisine, walks in the parks, and the vibrant sports and arts scenes the city has to offer.

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