



BIG TOWN, BIG CLUB, BIG DOME, BIG ROOM

The Australian Club of Melbourne, Australia

by Lew Toulmin

We stayed at the Australian Club (AC) in Melbourne, Australia for six nights in July 2013, and compiled a full report.

History

The Australian Club was founded in 1878, apparently because the older clubs seven blocks further east were beyond a street which tended to flood, and the businessmen and gents in the western part could not be without a club for even a few hours! In fact, as the Club history acknowledges, it is not really clear why the Club was founded, since there is no statement of intent or purpose – unlike most other Australian clubs. This is in keeping with the Club’s low profile, which it has maintained since its founding, and which contrasts with the sometimes “unwelcome” media attention paid to the rival and much more famous Melbourne Club. The official history does note one more theory on why the Club was founded – one of the committee members wanted a club closer to the apartment of his mistress!

Despite having only 100 paid up members, the Club began building its massive structure almost immediately in 1878, and the large, unmarked and imposing structure remains the oldest, purpose-built, in-continuous-use club building in Australia.



The Club retains its focus on business membership, since it is in the heart of the business district. The Club allows only men as members, although women are allowed and encouraged to visit, with some restrictions.

The Club has about 1600 members, and has reciprocal relations with about 60 clubs around Australia and the world.

Location and Parking

The Club is well located in the heart of the business district, on a tram line, near a stop on the free Tourist Bus line, near the Immigration Museum, and only a block from the prime shopping on Collins and Little Collins streets.

The Melbourne CBD is in an easy to understand rectangular grid of about 70 blocks, and the Club is in the western third of the grid. The CBD has more public transport, in the form of numerous trams and buses and a subway, than any city we have observed in traveling to 140 countries! The city overall is about five million, and has been consistently rated as one of the most livable cities in the world. It is very arts, food and wine-oriented, and is sort of a combination of San Francisco and New York.

Parking is available at a nearby lot for a hefty \$27 per day. Unloading can be done in front of the club if arriving by cab. Street parking is limited to just 2-3 spaces on a side street. Ditch the rental car, since public transport is readily available, auto traffic is slow, and you must master the infamous “hook turn” in order to turn right on any tram line street. In this unique maneuver, you turn right from left (wrong) lane, on the wrong light, while dodging the on-coming trams, which weigh as much as 30 angry rhinos!



Public Rooms and Facilities

The building is seven stories high including its usable basement, and is about 120 feet wide and 110 feet deep. Thus the overall square footage is enormous. It is built in dark stone in classical style. There are no gardens.

The public rooms of the Club are attractive and imposing, decorated in an updated Victorian style, and filled with original art, including considerable modern and

Australian art. The most notable room is a massive lunch room on the main floor, with about twice as many square feet as the Powell Room at the CC, and with a working fireplace and a

large dome that allows in sunlight. This dome is so large – about 20 feet across -- that it could grace the tops of many city halls.



Other public rooms include two libraries, several large meeting rooms, a bar, a mixed-sex informal lounge and drinking area, a room with three enormous snooker tables, a large breakfast/lunch room, massive central staircase, and a business center with six computers. There is also a small snack room with breakfast fixings and sandwich-making facilities (for a fee) There is no fitness center. Complimentary wireless computer access is provided in all 19 bedrooms. A side entrance allows members and guests who are casually dressed to enter and leave the Club easily and discreetly during business hours, although the front entrance can be used “if casually dressed guests do not linger in the lobby.” Breakfast attire is casual. There is a laundry service but no self-service machines.

The business center is located next door in a separate building, with entry through the wall on the third floor. The Club owns the entire building next door, and leases out the floors to private firms. The business center floor is available to Club members for short or long term rental for their businesses. Oddly, the entire building, which should be a cash cow for the Club, is described as “not really a money maker.”

The bannister on the five story staircase in the center of the Club totals about 300 feet long. In 1994 a tipsy Irish guest attempted to slide down the bannister, but slipped and fell two stories down the oval well. He landed on a table beside a massive soup tureen, waived off the offers of assistance and water, and demanded a whiskey. He then walked off, quite unhurt. Hmmm... Has anyone tried out the bannister at the Cosmos Club?

Bedrooms

Our bedroom, number 305, was comfortable, very attractive, light and recently refurbished. It had a good king bed, wide screen TV, small refrigerator, desk, bureau, high ceilings, and good, quiet HVAC. There was no safe. The room was about 22 x 14 feet – quite large. The en-suite



bathroom had a large shower, with no tub. The décor was in light grey and off white, with all the furniture being attractive except one odd, large and ugly sitting chair. We rated the accommodation as an A-.

Our room cost about \$154 USD per night plus a 5% service charge. This rate is perhaps 20-80% lower than nearby downtown hotels. (For instance, the nearby Sofitel was about \$240 per night for a similar room.) We deemed this rate better for a long term stay than the more expensive Melbourne Club and Athenaeum Club, each about \$205 USD per night. There are 19 bedrooms in the Australian Club.

Food

Restaurant prices in Australia generally run 50 to 150% higher than in the US, reflecting the minimum wage for temporary workers of \$25 USD/hour (!). Prices in the Club are a bit lower than the general local average, with the Club charging \$13 to \$30 USD for most starter courses, \$27 to \$38 for main courses, and \$14 to \$16 for desserts. The same menu is provided for lunch and for dinner, with the same prices, which seems odd. The room service menu is extremely limited and not very attractive. On our only use of the room service menu, the burger was completely uncooked in the middle and tasted of a very strange Indian spice which had not been mentioned on the menu.

We were therefore quite nervous about having lunch in the dining room, but were pleasantly surprised to find that the beesteya (a North African version of a samosa) was quite good, as was the Atlantic salmon timbale and apple and sultana tarte tatin with ice cream.

We were told, too late, that dishes can be ordered via room service off the main dining menu, “if the kitchen is not too busy.”



A full cooked breakfast is expensive, at \$20 USD, and a continental breakfast is not much less, at \$15. However, a pantry room on the third floor has cereal, milk, yogurt, bread, butter, jams, coffee, and sandwich fixings, all for a price, but cheap enough that a decent continental breakfast can be had for perhaps \$7. Full dining room service is available on weekends for breakfast, but not for lunch and dinner.

Service

Front desk staff were very helpful and amusing, as was the dining staff.

Although the Cosmos website has this club as having “limited reciprocity services,” we did not detect that. The Club does offer complimentary shoe shines overnight, a very nice service.

At each club we stay at we always enquire about club events during our stay. At this Club we were rewarded with the news that the Harvard Glee Club would perform at two lunches during our stay. The lunches were private, but the performance was right next to the mixed restaurant, so we secured a strategic table beside an open door, and were treated to a free world class performance.

Rules

Business attire (jacket and collared shirt, with tie) is required in most parts of the Club. Jeans, T-shirts, etc. are never allowed.

Women are not allowed for lunch in the main ground floor dining room or in the Members Bar until after 5 pm. There are alternate, mixed-sex dining and drinking facilities.

In summary, the Club has super architecture, good service, large and attractive bedrooms at a very good price, is well worth a visit, and is probably the best bet for a long term stay in Melbourne.

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