

BIG NAME CLUB, SMALLER BEDROOMS, GOOD FOOD BUT SKIP THE BREAD PUDDING

The Melbourne Club of Melbourne, Australia

by Lew Toulmin



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

History

The Melbourne Club was founded in 1838, and is the oldest and most prestigious club in the city. It was begun in a pub, just three years after the first explorer rowed up the Yarra River and founded the town. It is well known among the general population as a very powerful institution, and is often mentioned in the press. One third of its members are listed in a recent edition of *Who's Who in Australia*, and its members have included Governors-General, Prime Ministers and Chief Justices of the country and the states, various admirals, generals and members of Parliament, and numerous other government officials. The club is more government oriented than the Australian Club at the other end of the CBD, which is more business oriented, although MC members have included mining magnates, oil executives and some distinguished artists.

The low point in the Club's history was likely in December 1987, when thieves stole two solid gold Melbourne Cups (awarded for the premier horse race in Australia) valued at \$150,000 each, from the Club's dining room. The case was never solved.

The Club has a large, historic clubhouse built in the Victorian Renaissance style, with about 100 feet frontage on Collins Street.

The Club has about 1600 members, and has reciprocal relations with about 98 clubs around Australia and the world. The Club is social, not commercial, and commercial events are not allowed. The Club allows only men as members, although women are allowed and encouraged to visit, with some restrictions.

Location and Parking

The Club is extremely well located just west of the state Parliament, on a tram line and near the free tram that circles the CBD. The Club is on Collins Street, the prime shopping and commercial street in the city, and is across the street from an upscale shopping mall and multi-screen cinema. The Club is in what is called the “Paris” end of town. The Club is next to a fabulous chocolate shop, “Coco Black,” which has lovely dark and milk chocolates and coffee, and a sit-down café area.



The Melbourne CBD is in an easy to understand rectangular grid of about 70 blocks, and the Club is near the eastern end of the grid. The CBD has more intensive 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 a smaller New York.

Secured parking is available at a nearby lot for only \$15 Aus (\$13.50 USD) per day, an enormous discount off the normal price of \$65 Aus (\$60 USD) per day! Unloading can be done in front of the club, if arriving by cab. Street parking is not available.

Ditch the rental car, since public transport is readily available and auto traffic is slow, unless you want a car to visit one of the nearby wine valleys or the famous Mornington Peninsula, south of town, which has over 150 wineries and numerous cheese outlets.

If you are a Nevil Shute fan, his former house SE of town is reportedly available for short term overnight rentals; we tried to organize this but got no reply from the on-again, off-again owners.

Public Rooms and Facilities

The building is four stories high, including its usable basement, and has about 100 feet on Collins Street. It is built of taupe-colored stone. There



is a substantial grassy garden area in the rear, with an enormous plane tree.

The public rooms of the Club are distinguished and imposing, decorated in a traditional style with portraits and landscapes. Public rooms include the largest library in Melbourne club-land (but only about 2500 volumes!), several large meeting rooms (the largest about the size of the Powell room), various sitting and dining rooms, a room with two enormous snooker tables and two leopard skins, and a small business room with a public computer. The small elevator is an updated version of the classic French iron grated elevator. There is no fitness center.

Complimentary wireless computer access is provided in all 16 bedrooms. Breakfast attire is formal, not casual as in most clubs. There is a laundry service but no self-service machines.



A review of the events for July showed only 10 items, including two evening lectures (\$81 USD each, formal attire required), a lunch with the Alexandra (ladies) Club, a bridge session, and a “day of shooting” for \$300 USD, shooting attire required! Initiation and annual dues for the MC are several thousand dollars a year, according to one staff member.

The MC has no public website.

Bedrooms

Our bedroom, number 17, was comfortable, attractive and was refurbished in the last three months. It was taupe colored, but with poor lighting for reading. It had a good queen bed, wide screen TV, small refrigerator, desk, bureau, high ceilings, and rather loud HVAC. There was no safe. The room was about 14 x 14 feet. The en-suite bathroom had a large shower, with no tub. We rated the accommodation as a B+.

Our room cost \$220 Australian dollars (about \$203 USD) per night, plus a 10% service charge. This rate is perhaps 10% lower than nearby downtown hotels. (For instance, the nearby Sofitel was about \$240 USD per night for a similar room, right across the street.) We found this rate to be considerably higher than the Australian Club (which had larger and more attractive bedrooms) but about the same as the Athenaeum Club, just about 100 meters away. There are 16 bedrooms in the MC.

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 slightly below the local restaurant average, with \$14 USD to \$16 for starters, \$29 to \$38 for main courses, and \$14.50 for desserts. The same menu is provided for lunch and for dinner, with the same prices, which seems odd. There is no official room service in the MC, but if the restaurant is almost empty, the chef may agree to supply any item on the menu to your room.

We had an excellent starter of a mushroom and pinenut strudel, (\$18.50 Aus or about \$17 USD); very good Black Angus Porterhouse (\$36.50 Aus); and a poor bread pudding (\$16.50 Aus). The pudding was not sweet at all.

The chef told us that regarding steak, “medium rare” in Australia was about the same as “rare” in the US, with a line of totally uncooked meat in the middle. We therefore ordered the steak as medium and were quite pleased with the pink color all the way through. The accompanying French fries were excellent. A side dish of steamed vegetables was all right but rather bland, at \$7.50 Aus. Altogether, an A except for the poor bread pudding dessert, which pulled the average down to a B.

Service

Most front desk staff were extremely helpful, although one was a “load shedder” – trying to get guests and others to do his work. Your bill is not settled upon departure, but is sent in 1-2 weeks to your address, via postal mail. If this is not satisfactory, accounting staff will promise to scan and email the bill to you, in 1-2 weeks, before charging your credit card.

Although we understood this club as having “limited reciprocity services,” we did not detect that. Staff stated that reciprocal members have access to all services except perhaps club meetings and functions. Services for everyone are considerably reduced on the weekend.

Rules

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

Women are asked not to use the main stairs or any rooms on the ground floor between 10 am and 5 pm, and to not enter the Lawn Reading room or Billiards Room. Lunch for gentlemen is in the Main Dining Room between 12:30 pm and 2 pm Monday through Friday, while ladies may have

luncheon in the Balcony Room or Guest Sitting Room. Dinner in the Main Dining Room is open to men and women.

In summary, the Club is more expensive for smaller bedrooms than the rival Australian Club, but has more “wow” factor if you are meeting a local colleague.

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