

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

Melbourne's thriving bar scene is one of its biggest attractions. Since the days of early settlement, when teetotal founder John Fawkner set up a public house on the banks of the Yarra, Melbourne has always used the demon drink as a social lubricant. For many years this revolved around pubs, but when liquor licensing laws were liberalised in the late 1980s, bars began to spring up anywhere that rents were cheap and space was atmospheric. Although there's currently much talk about the perils of binge drinking and alcohol-fuelled violence in the city, for the most part Melbournians have a sophisticated, if dedicated, relationship with the bottle.

Many of the first wave of new bars were opened by artists, architects or young hospitality workers and fitted out with creative verve in lieu of spending huge wads of cash. Today that spirit of invention persists, even if the stakes are higher. No one is sure just how many bars the city can sustain, but the scene shows no sign of letting up any time soon.

The liquor licensing laws also made it easy for cafés and restaurants to serve alcohol, an idea common enough throughout Europe, but one that other Australian capitals have only just cottoned on to. This has meant that bars and pubs are often family-friendly and that the boundaries between what constitutes a restaurant, bar or café are gloriously blurred. The place you take your morning short black could quite easily be, come 1am, where you find yourself dancing to Cut Copy. Neighbourhoods such as St Kilda, Prahran, Fitzroy and Collingwood all have their own versions of the city bar, and shopfront fit-outs fan out into the suburbs following the hip kids to Brunswick, Northcote and Yarraville.

Wine bars continue to spring up; these function as upmarket bottle shops where you can buy a bottle to take away or pay a modest corkage and drink at the bar. They often have a daunting range of wines from around the world, and food that won't let the side down.

The bar revolution ironically has done nothing to dim the appeal of the neighbourhood pub, though it has meant that most have had to do some rethinking and some judicious refurbishing. And while Melbournians still profess to love a good old-fashioned boozier, they're often secretly pleased when their local offers a flirty little *anéis* by the glass and keeps a few different vodkas chilled in the fridge.

With many bars concealed up an anonymous flight of stairs or down an alley off a back street, how does a visitor keep up? Melbournians are normally more proud than proprietorial about their favourites, so it's always worth asking a barman or fellow drinker at somewhere you've already discovered. Bar reviews can be found on the website of the [Age](http://www.theage.com.au) (www.theage.com.au) newspaper, while [Three Thousand](http://www.threethousand.com.au) (www.threethousand.com.au) keeps a pretty close eye on the latest places to pop up.

LIVE MUSIC & DJS

Melbourne's thriving band scene loses venues every year as inner-city development gains pace and the residents of new apartment buildings make noise complaints. It's also often more profitable for publicans to open dining rooms than band rooms. Still, there are several pubs that keep the flag flying, showcasing local bands every night of the week. Touring acts play at a handful of venues in the city, St Kilda, Fitzroy, Northcote and Richmond, as well as at city theatres such as the Forum, and the Palais in St Kilda. Gigs are listed in the *Entertainment Guide* (EG) section of the *Age* on Fridays. Pick up free street papers *Beat* and *Inpress* for reviews, interviews and a comprehensive weekly gig guide. They're

available from pubs, cafés and entertainment venues. Also see [Tickets & Reservations](#) (p357) for major booking agencies, or check the individual venues for booking details.

Dance music is altogether a more elusive beast. The city boasts an amazingly diverse and happening scene but it's not always easy to find or keep up with. Most clubs are concentrated in the city, though other inner-city neighbourhoods are not entirely without options. Big parties, especially during the summer months, are also an integral part of the calendar.

Gay clubs can be found in Commercial Rd, Prahran and in Collingwood (p178-9); the scene covers everything from the ultra-commercial (hello Kylie!) to 'queer and alternative'. [Three Thousand](http://www.threethousand.com.au) (www.threethousand.com.au) lists

HEADLINE ACTS

When the rock gods (or more commonly pop, R&B and hip-hop stars) roll into town and are too big for Melbourne's beloved medium-sized venues, such as the Corner Hotel (p153) or the Prince Bandroom (p158), they are likely to play at one of the following venues (book tickets through one of the agencies listed on p357):

Forum Theatre (Map pp52–3; www.marrinertheatres.com.au; 150–152 Flinders St) One of the city's most atmospheric live music venues, it does double duty as a cinema during the Melbourne Film Festival. The Arabic-inspired exterior houses an equally interesting interior, with the southern sky rendered on the domed ceiling.

Hamer Hall (Melbourne Concert Hall; Map pp64–5; www.theartscentre.net.au; Victorian Arts Centre, 100 St Kilda Rd) The concert hall is well known for its excellent acoustics, with a décor inspired by Australia's mineral and gemstone deposits.

Palais Theatre (Map pp88–9; ☎ 9537 2444; Lower Esplanade, St Kilda) Standing gracefully next to Luna Park, the Palais is a St Kilda icon. Not only is it a beautiful old space, but it also stages some pretty special performances. It's pegged for major development, which has St Kilda holding its collective breath.

Rod Laver Arena (Map pp68–9; www.mopt.com.au; Batman Ave) A giant, versatile space used for headline concerts and the Australian Open tennis (p12), with a huge sunroof. Not the most atmospheric of venues, but then it's all about the spectacle. Ditto for the nearby **Hisense Arena** (p67).

Sidney Myer Music Bowl (Map pp84–5; www.theartscentre.net.au; Kings Domain) This beautiful amphitheatre in the park is used for a variety of outdoor events, from the **Tropfest** (www.tropfest.com.au) film festival to Opera in the Bowl to the New Year's Day rave **Summerdayze**.

touring djs and special events, and **In the Mix** (www.inthemix.com.au), a national dance-devoted site, has a comprehensive Melbourne section that caters for those that know what they are looking for.

COMEDY & CABARET

Melbourne prides itself on being the home of Australian comedy and isn't remotely reticent about turning the joke on itself. The annual **International Comedy Festival** (p14) sees the entire city become a sprawling comedy venue. Local comedians join forces with international performers from the festival circuit to take the stage in pubs, clubs, theatres and on city streets.

Melbourne has a few regular comedy venues and nightspots where stand-up comics stand or fall. Weekly gigs are listed in the 'EG' section of the *Age*.

WHEN TO GO OUT

Most bars and pubs stay open until at least midnight or 1am, but it's always worth checking ahead for opening hours if you're planning a late one. Inner-city bars with djs and most clubs will open until 3am on weekend nights, some much, much later (or should we say earlier, as it's often past dawn). Again, it's best to check with the venue beforehand. At the time of writing the government has

introduced trial 'lockout' legislation banning people from entering, or re-entering, bars or clubs after 2am (although venues can stay open past that, hence the term 'lockout'), hoping to curb late-night violence. How this affects the city's nightlife is yet to be seen; many fear it will dampen a vibrant scene and also lead to *increased* violence at the new communal pumpkin hour.

WHAT TO WEAR

What *not* to wear might be more of an apt question. And really, it depends on the destination. Melburnians might affect a casual air, but that doesn't mean that most city bars won't be full of people that have put in some effort, even if it's about graphic hoodies, jeans and trainers. Pubs, especially those in neighbourhood back streets, can be a lot more laid-back, but can also deliver the odd sartorial surprise. Bayside venues can go a variety of ways: flip-flops and shorts, rock and roll, or ultra glam.

SMOKE GETS IN YOUR EYES

Smoking is banned in all bars and pubs, though there will often be a balcony or courtyard provided. In lieu of this, many smokers congregate on the footpath outside.