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by Fiona Harper

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Travel writer Fiona Harper checked into the nation's capital for a weekend – here are her tips for getting the most out of a weekend getaway to Canberra.

The first thing you should know about Canberra is that you'll need transport to get around. If you've the legs for it you could use a bicycle as the city has an extensive network of cycle lanes and paths with few gut-busting hills.

Early morning

Arriving at Canberra's slick and sparkly Airport can be either crazy chaotic or a breeze. The absence of weekday commuters mean that on weekends the airport is generally a breeze to pass through. Pick up an Avis hire car equipped with a GPS to navigate the extensive freeway system and head straight for Mt Ainslie Lookout.

Canberra's well-organized layout is immediately evident with Capital Hill's Parliament House and the National War Memorial's orderly lines dissected by Lake Burley Griffin. The city is situated in a basin surrounded by mountains with Black Mountain easily identified thanks to the rather large Telstra Tower on its summit.

Get your bearings on the southern shore of Lake Burley Griffin on an electrically powered Segway. They look a little ungainly, and admittedly feel a little unstable at first. But, with a few minutes instruction and some hands on tips by a guide they're a lot of fun and easy to manoeuvre. Take a guided tour around Parliamentary Triangle stopping for photo opportunities at national icons like Old Parliament House, the National Art Gallery and the National Library.

Noon

Lunchtime and the choices are endless. Suburban Braddon is bursting at the seams with foodie and shopping opportunities. Try Lonsdale Street for cool cafes and bakeries along with some retail therapy at ever changing eclectic pop up stores.

Mid afternoon

Canberra is blessed with national parks and stunning gardens. 45 mins drive from the CBD, Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve has over 20 sign-posted walking trails from short 15 min strolls to all day. The all new National Arboretum is worth checking out for its fascinating Bonsai specimens as well as the striking 'wide brown land' sculpture on the hill.



If you're craving a sugar hit or an over the top indulgence head to Patissez café where their freak shakes have put this Canberra café on the social media Wall of Fame. Think milkshakes overflowing with creamy sweet sauces topped with pretzels and chocolate brownies. But be prepared to wait up to four hours for a table, though take-aways are much quicker. If you can't be bothered waiting try Frugi Dessert Laboratory instead, where self-proclaimed ice-cream alchemist John Marshall weaves his magic.

Check into Peppers Gallery Hotel in NewActon precinct where an historic building has been converted into a cool art-themed boutique hotel on the north side of Lake Burley Griffin. The parking arrangement is weird and not terribly convenient but the upside is the security it offers. Peppers Gallery backs onto Kendall Laneway with funky restaurants, cafes, bars and galleries.

Evening

Traditional Italian trattoria Bicicletta is our pick for fabulous Italian style seafood served fresh and plentiful as only the Italians know how. Chill out afterwards with drinks on the deck bordering the lane where live music keeps the atmosphere upbeat and buzzing. Friday Funk showcases local jazz and/or funk trios while DJ's spin their tune on Sunday Sipper afternoons.

Early morning

Meet the Balloon Aloft crew at art deco-era Hyatt Hotel for a sensational flight over Canberra. Drift over famous city landmarks if the conditions are right. Or, if the weather is being a little recalcitrant you may find yourself drifting over suburbs, dodging low mist and sending urban dogs into a barking frenzy before landing in a horse paddock some distance out of town. Whatever eventuates, it's a fun morning offering a fascinating perspective of the city.

Mid-morning

Take a guided tour with an athlete in training like cross country ski Olympic hopeful Alasdair Tutt at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS). He'll take you through the history of the AIS and its athlete's successes while on a personal tour of AIS training facilities. Bring your gym gear and/or swimmers as there's a swimming pool and gym where the public are welcome to work out.

Noon

Swing by the café at the Australian National Botanic Gardens for lunch before exploring 35 hectares and over 6,300 species of native flora. Highlights are the Red Centre Garden, Tropical Glasshouse and Rainforest Gully. If you've time, park yourself beneath a towering gum on the Eucalypt Lawn and enjoy the aromas seeping from Australia's most famous trees. The birdlife is extraordinary. If you've no plans for the evening enjoy the Sunset Cinema in the gardens during November & December.

Afternoon

set in the middle of the zoo, their elevated balconies abutting an enclosure with its resident giraffe Hummer. His impressive presence has been replicated in mosaics on the wall of the walk-in shower. It's quite a thrill being able to gaze upon him endlessly, though I do feel moments of melancholy at his curtailed freedom. The owners are committed conservationists and contribute to programs like the Free the Bears Foundation as well as managing an active breeding program to assist endangered species.



Evening

After an afternoon tour of the zoo's critters a five course African-influenced degustation dinner is served within The Cave inside the Aquarium. It's a jovial affair as guests share stories about their accommodation and 'their animal'. White lions and a pair of hyenas provide entertainment with the glass-walled dining area looking into their enclosures. Fall asleep to the sound of lions roaring while keeping one eye open on Hummer as he quietly patrols beyond the glass railed balcony.

Morning

After breakfast take a behind the scenes tour within the zoo to check out the next phase of the zoo's expansion. Endangered white rhinos are the stars, but there's also zebras and giraffe's to be seen up close too. After bidding Hummer adieu, I'm invited to linger within the zoo. But, regrettably this weekend is over and Canberra Airport beckons.

For more information see, Visit Canberra.

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