



# CAMPERDOWN

## COME C 4 YR SELFIE

It's 7 am on a crisp Friday, and I'm at Southern Cross Station – borrowed bike in tow, spirits high and plans vague. I'm meeting two friends for a weekend escape to Camperdown, on the lands of the Djargurd Wurrung people in southwest Victoria.

My friend Prue is an Instagram fanatic and will chronicle our adventures. She also booked our accommodation and is talking up its grandeur. I'm enchanted by her enthusiasm and wonder if such fine lodgings might include a concierge to park my bike. Daryl, who will be hiring an e-bike, just smiles and makes fun of my non-biker like progress down the platform.

The train glides west with the ease of a TikTok transition – smooth, effortless and right on time. Our hotel, The Camperdown Mill, is just a 10-minute walk. Unless you're with us. Add an hour for vintage detours, café stops and a dozen photo opportunities. Prue's got a sixth sense for good lighting and bargain racks.

We start at The Courthouse Camperdown. The local ambassadors beam, offering tips and walking routes. We stroll under the boulevard of elms while Daryl charms locals into snapping our photos and sharing their own gems. There's a quiet pride here, woven into the elm-lined streets and old stone buildings.

The Clocktower commands the skyline, gothic, glorious, 35 metres of history completed in 1897. I've booked us a tour. Inside we spiral up the narrow stairs, sidestep the 15-minute chimes, and meet the caretaker who knows every bolt and bell. At the top, the view rolls out like a painting: crater lakes, volcanic pines, and a town wrapped in time.

We refuel at The Loaf and Lounge – a warm brick bakery where everything's made on-site.

We linger over flaky pastry and perfectly poured coffee, trading crumbs and plans with equal delight. Prue has suggested we drift in and out of some of the local, vintage, recycled and antique shops that the town is getting quite a reputation for. She finds a hat worthy of a runway. Daryl adopts a vest so awful it's iconic. I arm myself with scarves, ready to accessorise whatever local they co-opt into their next video.



Late afternoon, we hike up Mount Leura for golden hour. We run into Dean at the halfway point, a friendly face from earlier, who joins us. Together, we catch the sun dipping low over the crater-studded plains. It's still and stunning, the kind of moments you don't need to photograph, but of course we do anyway.

Dinner is at Farmhouse 153. Rustic, generous, perfect. Locally sourced, lovingly made food is enjoyed before we head back to the Mill with stomachs and souls filled.

On Saturday morning, after breakfast with all the trimmings in town, we set off on the 14km ride to Lake Purrumbete and the Lake Edge Café. I lose my pack and will to continue on the first hill. Daryl circles back, smug again, and offers a trade: his e-bike for my struggling pride. I take it. With a little boost, I'm cruising like I belong.

The licensed café is by the shores of a maar – a volcanic crater that fills with water. The mood for a long lunch is set by the dreamy location, binoculars for birdwatching in the condiments tray and a menu which features a Vietnamese braised beef sourced direct from the owner's farm. We emerge perfectly relaxed, mimicking the approach of the angler who buckets three fish while we soak it all in.

Back in town, our three-storey apartment – a converted 1868 flour mill – offers antique charm, an inviting spa and a vibe that feels both elegant and grounded. I soak in the tub and imagine the mill's past life, dust and labour swapped for wanderlust and weekends.



Prue and Daryl have been busy on their phones, streaming an ABC Backroads episode about the town. The lush green winter landscapes and sound of bagpipes have stirred Prue's Celtic heritage, and she is already checking her calendar (and ours) against dates for the annual Robert Burns Celtic Festival.

Our stroll into town leads to the Hampden Hotel – this classic country pub serves up exactly what we want. Comfort food and plenty of Saturday country conviviality.

Sunday is gentle, we follow a pub local's tip to Excuse Me Katie's, a café built on ethical practices and pink appliances. Their coffee machine, Betty, is a thing of beauty, pumping out an exquisite St. Ali blend. Excuse Me Katie's serves up biodynamic, ethical deliciousness and we collect a picnic hamper for four as a final treat under the graceful elms.

Camperdown you have delivered and the singing barista at Camperdown WellNest convinced us, we'll be back sooner than expected. Me with a larger bag, an e-bike from the start, and tickets to a show at the Theatre Royal.

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