There is a lot more to the nation’s capital than art and politics. Once you’ve done the cultural circuit, there are many pleasant surprises awaiting in the sprawling suburbs – from the cafes of Braddon and Manuka to the hip NewActon precinct.

Australia’s purpose-built national capital sprawls over what was once a grassy plain, in a natural hill-bound amphitheatre. Well-known for its extensive galleries and museums, imposing government buildings and well-planned streets, it also has a less formal and infinitely hipper side with new restaurants, cafes, bars and hotels springing up in its inner suburbs. Those who take the time to explore are suitably rewarded.

**07:00**

An early morning walk or, for the fitter, a gentle run up and along the saddle of Red Hill is an ideal way to start the day. It is also the best way to get an overview of Canberra. From Red Hill lookout, face north across the plain and note the land axis, nominally connecting Parliament House and the Australian War Memorial across Lake Burley Griffin at the foot of Mount Ainslie, that ties this city together. The chances are that hot-air balloons will be ascending over the silvery skin of the lake. Saunter along the ridge amid the kangaroos and the yellow box and red gums – but keep a wary eye out for snakes. It’s called the Bush Capital for a reason.

**09:00**

Canberra takes weekend al fresco breakfast and coffee seriously. Manuka village in the inner south of the lake, that is, perhaps the most established shopping and entertainment district in century-old Canberra and spoils for choice when it comes to cafe dining. But it pays to follow the crowds to My Cafe (mycafemanuka.com.au) and Caph’s (caphscanberra.com) in Franklin Street – or wander through the arcade and into the small courtyard known as The Lawns, set around a series of plane trees that arrived with the city, and look for a table at Ona Coffee, the best coffee in Manuka (onacoffee.com.au).
10:30
Weather permitting (even Canberra’s icy winters are known for their glorious blue sky and sunny days), take a culture crawl along the lake foreshore between some of the major cultural institutions, beginning at the National Gallery of Australia (Parkes Place, Parkes, nga.gov.au). Wander among the Rodins and sculptures in the sculpture garden or visit the permanent exhibitions inside the newly renovated gallery. From there, cross the footbridge to the forecourt of Australia (Parkes Place, Parkes, nga.gov.au) and Reconciliation Place. Walk through Reconciliation Place and stop at the National Library of Australia (nla.gov.au). The library, critical to the capital’s function as the national memory, has kept a copy of every published Australian work since the Copyright Act 1912. But the collection extends beyond books. Visit the small but eclectic permanent exhibition in the library’s Treasures Gallery. It includes Captain Cook’s Endeavour journal, Patrick White’s glasses, a cheque sent by Charles Dickens to his sons in Australia, the original manuscript of Waltzing Matilda and William Blair’s list of Bounty mutineers.

13:00
Lonsdale Street north of Elura Street in inner-north Braddon is widely regarded as the coolest, most happening strip in a city that has been renowned for an absence of the type of urban density and liveliness that make, well, a city. Hosting some of the best new bistros and cafes in town, it offers more high-quality options for a lazy lunch than anywhere else in Canberra. Try The Elk & Pex (elkandpex.com.au), Eightylys (八十里 meetme.me) and Autolys (autolys.com.au), Italian & Sons (italianandsons.com.au) and Debauch (Debauch) for your lunch. Cross the street to visit the small but well-formatted bar at Kingston’s new perfect bar at Hotel Realm (18 National Circuit, Barton, hotelrealm.com.au) – the latter two open on a Friday evening. North of the lake, Edgar’s Inn (1 Edgar Street, edgarsinn.com.au) in Ainslie is laid-back while Tilley’s Devine Café (Tuggeranong Parkway, Tilley’s, tilleys.com.au) is renowned for its 80-year-old cork-oak plantation. It is an almost otherworldly place, of sculptured natural beauty, meditative calm and tranquillity.

15:00
The bushfires of 2003 remain seared into the collective consciousness of Canberra residents. The National Arboretum (Tuggeranong Parkway, nationalarboretum.act.gov.au) stands overlooking the city as a symbol of hope and regeneration after the fires that destroyed about 500 homes and killed four people. It also fulfils one of the elements of the original city plan by American landscape architect Walter Burley Griffin, so much of whose elaborate blueprint for Canberra was ignored or discarded by those who built it. Griffin wanted a place where plants and trees could be grown for conservation, research and recreation. Spread over 250ha in the Greenhills Forest, the arboretum was designed around a regenerating Himalayan cedar forest (much of it burnt in 2003) and an 80-year-old cork-oak plantation. It is an almost otherworldly place, of sculptured natural beauty, meditative calm and tranquillity.

17:00
Many of Canberra’s gems are hidden in suburban shopping centres. That includes some of the best bars for cocktail hour in the south. Try Gryphons At Griffith Shops (56 Barker Street, Griffith, gryphons.com.au), Manuka’s Public (Pinder’s Way & Franklin Street, publicbar.com.au), the small but perfectly formed bar at Kingston’s new East Hotel (69 Canberra Avenue, easthotel.com.au) or the outdoor lounge at Hotel Realm (18 National Circuit, Barton, hotelrealm.com.au) – the latter two open on a Friday evening. North of the lake, Edgar’s Inn (1 Edgar Street, edgarsinn.com.au) in Ainslie is laid-back while Tilley’s Devine Café (Tuggeranong Parkway, Tilley’s, tilleys.com.au) is renowned for its diverse clientele and cozy booths.

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19:30

Testimony, again, to the hidden-gem principle is Sage Dining Rooms (02 6249 6050, sagerestaurant.net.au). Nestled in Braddon’s Gorman House Arts Centre, this thoroughly ambitious venture of brothers Peter and Michael Harrington has redefined attention to detail, provenance and quality of produce and service in top-end Canberra dining. Sage currently sources some of its herbs and vegetables from a farm in the nearby Majura Valley (it will become much more of a paddock-to-plate proposition as the farm develops) and either of the brothers Harrington can tell you on what day, by whom and precisely where the fish on your plate was hand-caught. Canberra foodies regard the degustation as the best in town.

Clockwise from top left: Public (5pm); Sage Dining Rooms (7.30pm); Public

21:30

If you want volume and movement, head to Kingston and either B Bar or Lot 33, both in Kennedy Street. However, if something more relaxed is your preference, try NewActon Pavilion (15 Edinburgh Avenue, newacton.com.au/eat/drink) and either the basement bar A Baker, or the stylish Lounge Bar & Library at the Diamant Hotel. If a slice of genuine Canberra history is to your fancy, go back towards Parliament Hill and try the Hyatt on Commonwealth Avenue (canberra.park.hyatt.com).

Formerly Hotel Canberra – the first in the city – it evokes 1920s style in its wonderful old bar. Alternatively, stay at Gorman House for a post-prandial at Mint Garden Bar – fairy lights and stick heaters in the heritage gardens.

+ Paul Daley is the author of Canberra (New South Books).

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