

# A CAPITAL CHOICE

**DESTINATION** Australia's purpose-built 'bush capital' has cleverly transformed its image becoming a major destination for corporate travellers as **Chris Pritchard** discovers



A **BORED-SOUNDING** boss announces a forthcoming trip to Canberra - which hasn't been on company itineraries for 15 years - and betrays a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

It's an outdated perception that the national capital is somehow a lesser destination than our state capitals and it's a cue for an executive PA to beat a drum for a place which is now exceptionally rich in diversions.

A young city, Canberra's centrepiece - 6.46-square metre Lake Burley Griffin - is

only 53 years old. The Australian Capital Territory itself was born as recently as 1911 and Parliament began calling Canberra home only years later.

When American architect Walter Burley Griffin won a competition to design a new federal capital, he envisioned broad roads slicing across former outback, with pockets of population and business activity separated by broad bands of green parkland. His empty canvas became Canberra. A relative minnow and home to only 357,000



inhabitants, the city immediately worked well as an efficient and easy-to-use base for bureaucrats, but suffered from a bland- and-boring image.

But new developments are rapidly changing the landscape of our so-called 'bush capital'. Indeed, the moniker seems increasingly inappropriate as Canberra's metamorphosis creates a surprisingly sophisticated small metropolis.

Positive change is no secret. Tourism is a growing industry as more people become

aware there's plenty to do. Business visits are surging. Canberra's popularity as a meetings venue has also been boosted. Importance as a hub of research and tertiary education is similarly on the up.

As Australian Capital Territory (ACT) chief minister Andrew Barr observes, today's Canberra is "confident and business-ready." What's more, he promises "even more innovation."

A walk through the city's retail hub, called Civic, reveals signs promoting Canberra's

planned light rail system.

Canberra Business Chamber CEO Robyn Hendry contends the network "will be good for Canberra region business." It's a view echoed by Canberra Convention Bureau CEO Michael Matthews who alludes to "Canberra's reputation as a knowledge base", noting the capital's "great cuisine and caterers (and) beautiful outdoor spaces" for meetings.

However, Canberra battles what long-time residents (and fans of the city) label an



Canberra airport



National Convention Centre



Through window, lions watch guests dining – Photo: Jamala Wildlife Lodge

➤ ‘image problem’. It’s fuelled by people who haven’t visited in more than a decade - if at all. They perpetuate the myth there’s little to do. However, the pro-Canberra battle is slowly being won.

The boss’s first surprise comes seconds after stepping from an aircraft at Canberra International Airport - a spacious facility (Australia’s newest) replacing a cramped predecessor. It became truly international with the launch this year of flights to Singapore and Wellington. More destinations are set to follow.

Though in town for business, a visitor quickly notices how often the word ‘national’ appears on lists of attractions - everything from the new National Arboretum (featuring 94 mini-forests - some still only knee-high - of trees from around the world) to the quirky National Zoo. Others attracting hordes of out-of-towners include the National Gallery and National Museum. Add to these the nation’s most visited attraction (cynics say this is because there’s no charge for entry), the Australian War Memorial with actual jet fighters, submarines and tanks from past conflicts.

And don’t forget the hugely impressive Australian Parliament (tours available) or the Canberra wine trail with cellar doors at the ready. No, it won’t hurt to remind the boss to allow time to discover contemporary Canberra’s diversions - including Lake Burley Griffin with kayaking and other boating, fishing, short and long walks and a 28-kilometre cycle route around the lake.

### Business huddles

Business etiquette doesn’t differ from that in other Australian cities. The same casual efficiency applies, exemplified by quick adoption of first names. For men, open-necked shirts with no jacket are fine in warm weather. But suits are just as common. Women will be more at ease in business-like attire. Both sexes should remember winters

are a chilly contrast to warm summers. Dress warmly under an overcoat. Cards are commonly exchanged but without ceremony - with decisions swift.

More business visitors come to see bureaucrats and politicians than private-sector companies. Some visit universities and research facilities. A minority, usually export-gearred, head to Canberra’s many embassies. EAs should suggest a quick drive - even a cab detour - through the southern suburb of Yarralumla where some embassies display traditional architectural styles of their homelands.

### Best beds in town

Perhaps the most dramatic of Canberra’s changes in recent years has been the mushrooming of hotels. Nowhere is this more evident than along the Northbourne Avenue hotel strip (with everything from cheap-and-cheerful motels and homely B&Bs to luxury five-stars) leading into the Civic area.

Tops among these is the Avenue, five minutes’ walk from Civic with its back door opening onto the formerly dowdy, but now trendy Braddon quarter, peppered with restaurants and interesting shops. Popular with a corporate crowd for business huddles is a casual craft beer bar (with good restaurant) called BentSpoke Brewing Co. Another good nearby hotel, even closer to Civic, is the Novotel.

Other precincts worth visiting - with an oft-changing line-up of in-vogue eateries, bars and nightclubs - include Manuka, New Acton and Kingston.

Canberra’s number-one place to stay, however, is the garden-setting art deco-style Hyatt, alongside Parliament. The nation’s leaders are often spotted in its public areas. Another top-drawer five-star is the Realm, with its large modern lobby popular for events while meetings are often held in a pillarless ballroom for a maximum of 500 guests.

The centrally-located Crowne Plaza is a minute’s walk to the National Convention Centre and also adjoins Canberra Casino. All of the city’s hotels have meeting rooms of various sizes with the latest technological equipment.

However, the most memorable is Jamala Wildlife Lodge, with five-star accommodation in just 18 rooms spread through the National Zoo’s animal enclosures. Wallow in a spa bath as a bear eyeballs you from outside a thick window. Enjoy a pre-dinner drink as a Bengal tiger gazes in through unbreakable glass. [Guests are reminded to draw curtains when the zoo is open.] At dinner in the restaurant, lions or hyenas peer through glass less than a metre from diners’ plates.

Private board meetings and small conferences have been held at Jamala as have cocktail parties for 50-plus people. Private after-hours zoo tours can be arranged. Some guests at these private functions have been billeted at other hotels with animal-enclosure accommodation limited to key executives.

### Conventional chatter

However, Canberra’s main meeting facility is its National Convention Centre, taking up to 5900 conference delegates and boasting a tiered main theatre seating 2460. Fifteen 15 meeting rooms come in varying sizes - even down to boardrooms for 15 people that can be separately hired. Exhibition space covers 2000 square metres.

The centre’s recent meetings include an International Conference on Nanoscience and Nanotechnology for 1000 delegates, a National Franchise Convention for 650 and a Defence and Industry Conference attracting 2500. Refurbishment nearing completion will upgrade technological equipment.

With its new airport, recently built hotels and improved convention facilities, Canberra aims at further broadening its visitor appeal. ■