



Spanned by no less than 14 bridges, the wildly meandering Brisbane River slices the city in half.

Cinderella has some new shoes

Sarah Lang explores Brisbane and finds the city has blossomed into a bastion of culture.

WHEN I think Australia, I think Sydney or Melbourne and briefly picture the Outback.

But, although it's Australia's third-biggest city and attracts more international holidaymakers than Melbourne, I don't know much — well, anything really — about Brisbane, except that it's a gateway to the Sunshine and Gold Coasts. But it's not a mere pit stop.

In recent years, Brisbane has grown up, forging its identity as a much more cosmopolitan city. It's certainly shucked off the label of cultural backwater, given the glut of galleries, arts centres and museums — including the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA), Australia's largest. In the past three years, Brisbane's been the only Australian stop for world-touring exhibitions such as Andy Warhol in 2007, The Met (Metropolitan Museum of Art) in 2009; and, from August, it welcomes the Valentino Past/Present/Future retrospective with its signature red-hot couture. Take that, Melbourne and Sydney.

And, until April 5, Brisbane is playing host to the stunningly good 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at GOMA and the Queensland Art Gallery.

It's a truly world-class exhibition, and not just because it comprises 160 artists from 25 countries including Tibet, Turkey, Iran, Cambodia, North Korea and Burma. Among 313 other works across all mediums, you pass 400 identical figurines of Chinese men waving lotus flowers above their heads; a giant, golden mushroom cloud made of pots and pans; a stuffed elk covered in crystal bubbles in which you see dozens of your own and the elk's reflections. The exhibition is hugely informative and I must own up to finding the kids' text panels explaining each artwork as useful as the "grown-up" ones.

Back outside in that steadfast



Queensland sun, it's not hard to see why the Aborigines called Brisbane "Mian-jin" (place shaped as a spike). The city is sliced in half by the blue zigzag of the wildly meandering Brisbane River, and the public-access Brisbane Riverwalk, part of which "floats" jetty-style, now connects more than 20km of pathways, roads, bridges and parks.

But the best way to see the city is how the early settlers saw it: by boat.

Two centuries on, there's a lot more to look at as we board a tiny rigid inflatable, the kind used by special forces around the world. (Word to the wise: you straddle the seat, so don't make my mistake of wearing a short skirt.) Given the number of yelp-inducing spins and turns and his ear-to-ear grin, our ex-Navy skipper Darren obviously enjoys his job.

As he steers, he tells us titbits about Brisbane places and history. For instance, those stately Victorian homes are raised off the ground to allow airflow, with wraparound verandas for shade. And how many bridges does Brisbane need? Fourteen, it seems, with two under construction. Darren's also happy to drop us off wherever we like along the river.

Next up, we trade the river waters for sun, sand and surf at Moreton Island, one of the world's biggest sand islands and 95 per cent national park.

FACT BOX

Getting there: Pacific Blue flies Auckland to Brisbane daily with one-way internet fares from \$179, on sale until March 11, for travel April 19 to June 30. www.flypacificblue.com

Stay: At the luxurious 4.5-star Novotel Brisbane Airport. www.novotel.com.au

Eat: Brett's Wharf Restaurant. On the river's edge, celebrity TV chef Alastair McLeod whips up delicious seafood dishes; vegetarian options too. www.brettswharf.com.au

Drink: 5th Element Bar and Cellar, with Australasia's largest selections of wine to taste, delicious cocktails and terrific tapas. www.5thelement.com.au

See: The 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of

Contemporary Art at GOMA (www.qag.qld.gov.au) and the Queensland Art Gallery, until April 6.

Explore: Shipwreck snorkelling, dune "sandboarding", 4WD driving or even lighthouse touring on MiCat tours of Moreton Island. www.micat.com.au

Climb: The Story Bridge, a 2.5-hour hike which rewards you with 360-degree views of the city, river and surrounding mountains.

Walk: Along the Brisbane Riverwalk and through 16ha South Bank.

Sail: Take a leisurely sightseeing tour aboard classic timber cruiser MV Neptune (www.rivercitycruises.com.au) or a wilder ride on a Rigid Inflatable Boat (www.rivercityribrides.com.au).

Off the east coast, it's just over an hour's cruise from the city on the ferry MiCat, which also offers day tours.

After a picnic lunch by the sea, it's tempting to just lie back on the white sand contemplating the waves. But who could say no to shipwreck snorkelling? The wrecks are 15 hulls (once floating prisons) sunk between the 1960s and 1980s to form a breakwall for small boats, much to the delight of tourism start-ups. Today fish, not convicts, reside there. My mermaid moment came during the fish-feeding when, seemingly out of nowhere, several schools of bright fish appeared from all sides and launched themselves at the bread crusts, slapping ticklishly against my skin.

As for where to lay your head, you'll find luxury that doesn't break the bank at the central-city Novotel Brisbane, or the brand spanking new Novotel Brisbane Airport, the first hotel in the Airport Village precinct.

The new digs will attract those who don't want to rise much earlier than

5am to catch that dreaded 7am flight across time zones, those who get in late at night, and those just stopping for meetings at the many conference rooms and offices either in the hotel or the wider precinct.

But this isn't just an airport. It's also a giant set for TV show *Border Security* where, curiously, an unmanned sign proclaims: "Tell us if you don't want to be filmed".

Outside the airport proper, a multimillion-dollar development project has seen what was once a swamp become a 2700ha mini-city. People from all over drive out here to bargain-hunt at the factory outlet complex.

There's a supermarket, bars, cafes, even childcare centres, with medical centres and gyms en route. Add in the Novotel's rooftop pool (where you feel as though you're floating in mid-air), dramatic atrium space and edgy black-and white photos, and there's barely any need to go to town. Unless you want to see just how much Brisbane's grown up.

HOT DEALS

Phuket

House of Travel has seven-night packages to Phuket flying V Australia from \$1599 a person. Package includes return flights ex Auckland or Christchurch, taxes, seven nights at the four-star Duangjitt Resort & Spa including breakfast, two set menu dinners, cocktails and more. Valid for sales until March 11 for travel May 13 to September 12, with some closeout dates. Contact House of Travel on 0800 838 747 or www.houseoftravel.co.nz.

Gold Coast

Flight Centre has Gold Coast holidays including return airfares to Brisbane and seven nights' accommodation from \$779 a person ex Auckland, \$995 ex Wellington or \$809 ex Christchurch. Valid for sales until March 11, for travel ex Auckland, March 8 to November 19 with some closeout dates. Contact Flight Centre on 0800 427 555 or visit www.flightcentre.co.nz.

London

House of Travel has London packages from \$3299 an adult share twin including return airfares with Lufthansa Auckland to London, four nights' accommodation with breakfast and a



10-day Group B Hertz Rental Car. Travel July 25 to August 29. Contact House of Travel on 0800 838 747.

Antarctica

Kumuka travel is offering 50 per cent off a second 10-day Antarctic Exploration cruise fare with every fare sold for departures March 10 and March 20, aboard the MV Ushuaia. Visit www.kumuka.com for details.

Turkey

Flight Centre has Turkey holidays including return airfares flying Emirates, a five-night highlights of Turkey tour with museum entrance fees, breakfast daily, three dinners and two nights' Marmaris accommodation with breakfast and dinner daily from \$3,999 ex Auckland or \$3,975 ex Christchurch a person. Valid for sales until March 15 for travel April 1-30. Contact Flight Centre on 0800 427 555 or www.flightcentre.co.nz.

Fiji

Our Pacific has a four-day/ three-night Blue Lagoon Cruise in Fiji from \$799 an adult. The deal includes transfers all meals daily and most activities. Airfares additional. Book by March 31, for travel April 1 to November 30. Contact Our Pacific on 0800 80 3454 or www.ourpacific.co.nz