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St Kilda awakens all the senses

A romantic weekend in Melbourne's seaside suburb delivers a divine gourmet adventure, writes JENNA MEADE

THE sun is shining, the reggae beats are playing and I'm cruising down the boardwalk on the back of a rickshaw overlooking the beach.

Around me, people are skateboarding, swimming and playing volleyball. A couple of them stop to high-five our driver, Nate, whose dreadlocks perfectly match his relaxed ride.

While this could easily be mistaken for a California setting, I'm only an hour from Geelong.

This is summer in St Kilda.

I haven't spent a lot of time in the suburb before. I've dropped in to do a spot of shopping or to catch up with mates for a beer, but this time I'm here to explore St Kilda in a different light.

There's the unmistakable hip vibe that it has always had, yet it has diversified itself to offer appealing weekend escapes for everyone from big families to loved-up couples. This trip for me is more of the latter, with my boyfriend Scott and I venturing down the Princes Highway for a weekend of romance.

We check in to the chic Cosmopolitan Hotel, a stone's throw from all the action, and head to bustling Acland Street.

This strip is the stylish heart of the suburb, and at noon on a Saturday it is alive with people shopping, dining or sipping on a glass of wine.

We start our culinary trail right here at Veludo, a cafe and bar that instantly emanates St Kilda's unique personality with its eclectic, mismatched furniture and funky music.

We sink into the couches and feast on a selection of nibbles – including 12-hour brisket,

pickles and aioli sliders, and spiced chicken, smoked salsa and avocado tacos – then duck upstairs for a beer and more food while overlooking the street action below.

Just as we're finishing the last of the melt-in-your-mouth calamari, Nate pulls up to take us for a tour around the suburb.

As we head along the beach towards the iconic pier he tells us St Kilda Rickshaws is a new concept for the suburb, but is already proving a hit with locals and visitors alike. Most recently, Rebecca Judd jumped in the back for a tour.

Nate smiles as he points out his romance factor; blankets tucked away underneath the seat that would be perfect for snuggling under on chilly nights.

I sneak away for a facial while Scott busies himself with a wander around the shops. I know

it's a romantic weekend, but a little solitary indulgence can't hurt, right?

As soon as I enter Endota Spa I'm immersed in serenity. The hustle and bustle is left behind on the street and now all I need to do is relax.

A heavenly 45 minutes later I step back out on to the street with glistening cheeks and an even sunnier disposition.

We're spoiled for choice with gourmet delights for the rest of our stay.

There's the passionfruit and white chocolate concoction at cocktail lounge Robarta – which we sipped while snacking on delicious Asian fusion tapas – and the seafood spread at Claypots, where the patient staff happily talk you through the ever-changing fresh menu and help you choose the best experience for your palate.





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*There are many sides to St Kilda awaiting exploration.
Photo: Brendan Francis.
Bottom centre: The seafood meze at Claypots; bottom
right: A wine flight at Milk The Cow.*

We decide on the seasonal meze – which boasts grilled stingray, baked capsicum and eggplant, julienne carrot with sultanas, baba ghanoush and sweet fig – and the sizzling garlic king prawns and walnut-crust duckfish.

As an added treat, live music plays from the restaurant's gorgeous courtyard, which is decorated with candles and fairy lights.

But the gastronomic highlight for us is our nightcap at late-night Fitzroy Street fromagerie Milk the Cow.

We opt for a cheese flight – a delicious board with five artisan cheeses and matched wines, and housemade lavosh to cleanse the palate.

Our waiter shows us the many ways to enjoy the experience, from pairing cheeses with cocktails to gooey pots of cheese fondue to ordering more flights with beers, ciders, sakes or whiskies.

We wake up the next morning feeling hazy after slightly too much indulgence, but our

stand-up paddleboarding date quickly quashes any chance of developing a hangover.

Our enthusiastic instructor, Amanda from Kite Republic, gives us a rundown of the boards and we hit the ocean with the determination to fulfil the name and stand up.

We quickly discover the activity is quite a workout, which is probably a good thing considering the amount of food we'd devoured

in the last 24 hours. Not only does it work the core and upper-body, but it helps to switch the mind to a calm, meditative state. Amanda tells us that's why her stand-up paddleboarding yoga sessions on Saturdays are becoming so popular.

It's a choppy day in the bay, but we slowly make our way up on the boards, with all three of us cheering as we each wobble on to our feet.

Our energetic morning ends with a refuel at Republica, which overlooks the beach and the



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other paddleboarders who are out trying their luck in the wavy conditions. Bacon lovers take note: order the free range honey-cured pork, a yummiier and healthier alternative to its more greasy brother.

From adventure to food and wine, our St Kilda weekend not only delivered the romance, but is already urging us both back for another escape before the sun sets on summer.

** The writer was a guest of St Kilda Tourism Association. The package revolved around the current Eat Stay Play package, which includes accommodation at Cosmopolitan Hotel, spa treatments at Endota Spa and a two-course lunch at Veludo Bar and Restaurant from \$210 per person. To book, call Cosmopolitan Hotel on (03) 9534 0781.*



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Travel deals ...

Sydney, NSW

Stay at Radisson Blu Plaza Hotel Sydney (5-star, AAA rated) and pay from \$455 per night for two adults and two children under 12 years. Includes accommodation in an Atrium Room, buffet breakfast daily for two adults and two children and two Go Wild passes to Luna Park per stay. Valid for travel from mid-February to end of March 2015, or until sold out. Ph 1300 88 7979 and quote "Luna Park Fun" or see wotif.com/hotelw1727



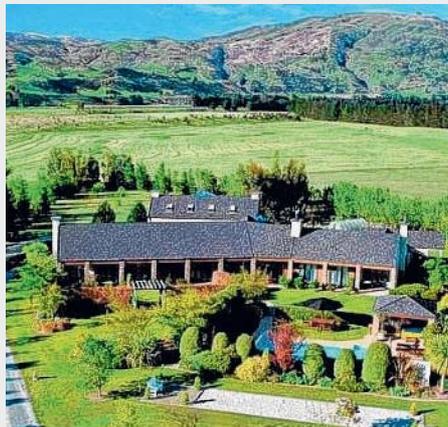
Bendigo, VIC

Stay at the Art Series – The Schaller Studio (4.5-star, self rated) and pay from \$125 per night, for two people. Includes accommodation in a Workspace Queen room, glass of sparkling on arrival, parking, late check-out at 1pm, Wi-Fi and passes to the local pool (subject to availability). Valid for travel until early March 2015, or until sold out. Ph 1300 88 7979 and quote "Workspace Queen" or visit wotif.com/hotelw53577



Wanaka, New Zealand

Stay at (5-star, Qualmark rated) Lime Tree Lodge from \$336 per night for two people. Includes accommodation in a Luxury Guestroom, evening aperitifs, breakfast, transfers into Wanaka and Wi-Fi. The lodge offers a pitch and putt golf course, pool, spa and croquet lawn. Valid for travel until end of March 2015, or until sold out. Ph 1300 88 7979 and quote "Luxury Guestroom" or see wotif.com/hotelW59789



All deals are subject to availability and change.



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Above: Nate from St Kilda Rickshaws ready to show off the suburb's sights.