Melbourne happens to be the only major city in the English-speaking world to have retained its network of trams. Some of them are quite distinguished, and not just in looks -- or in years!

The Legendary Trams of Melbourne

Text and photos: Jack Goldfarb

On a recent concert tour of Australia, pop singer Elton John went shopping in Melbourne for souvenirs. He spotted one of the city's bright green trams trundling along the steel tracks and fancied one. Reportedly paying A$10,000 for his desired streetcar, Elton took it home to England to set up in his garden as a teahouse.

While few visitors spend such extravagant sums on mementoes of their trip to Melbourne, nothing could be more typical of Australia's Second City than the popular, beloved tramcar.

More than a century ago, an enterprising American, Francis B. Clapp, introduced public transport to Melbourne by organizing a fleet of horse-drawn trams. Clapp later replaced the dobbins with cable traction cars, modelled after the San Francisco hillclimbers.

Subsequently, fare-paying Melburnians rode a succession of experimental steam trams, gas trams and battery-driven vehicles, until electric tramcars with overhead power lines took over and became the most successful people-movers of them all.

During World War II, with petrol strictly rationed, electric trams throughout Australia performed admirable service trafficking millions of passengers to and from work at all hours. In Melbourne alone, in 1944-45, the "old green rattlers" and "boneshakers", as they were affectionately called, hauled a billion riders a year. The electric power was generated by Australia's own huge coal reserves down under.

When the war ended, however, there began a mad rush to dismantle the "old-fashioned" tram system. Sleek, streamlined, more flexible diesel buses were "in." Car owners, now in the majority of Australian households, complained about the lumbering, slow-moving trams. Motoring associations, police and the press campaigned loudly to "modernize" and speed up traffic. Look at America, cried the critics, they're updating and upgrading their mass transit systems! Municipal authorities across Australia yielded to the pressure for "progress."

Except in Melbourne. Its wide main streets (some nearly a hundred feet across), laid out in checkerboard pattern, provided enough room for trams and motor cars to coexist. Traditionally conservative, Melburnians maintained a nostalgic respect for the past, the boomtown years of "Marvellous Melbourne" in the late nineteenth century, and the times

View from Bourke Street. On either side is a shopping mall, and the State Parliament (with colonnades) is in the centre. The Gothic spires of St. Patrick's Cathedral soar in the background.

of the historic gold rush in the State of Victoria. The trams of those days provided the convenient public transport that accelerated the shift of the working classes to healthier suburban areas.

Concerned, too, for the present environment, the city fathers chose to keep their pollution-free trams over diesel-powered buses. Today Melbourne remains the only major city in the English-speaking world to have retained its tram system intact.

In recent years that system has been thoroughly revitalized. Suburban routes have been extended. The old green rattlers have made way for smooth-running, high-speed streetcars sporting colour combinations of tangerine and chocolate, gold and green. Some trams even became art forms, their exteriors strikingly decorated in vivid Pop-Art designs, the talented work of local art students.

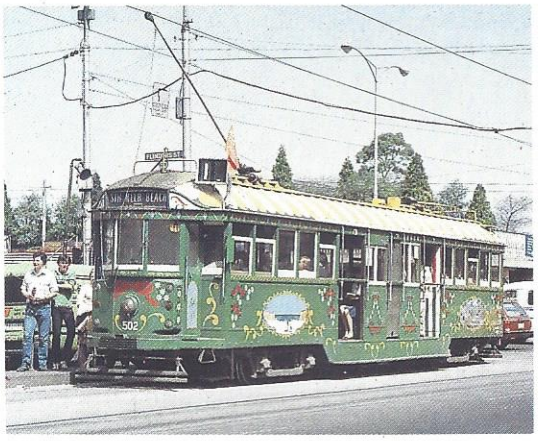
Today nearly 700 trams cruise the network of 135 miles of double track and are considered a singular asset, enhancing the city's Victorian quality with a special charm.

Not all of Melbourne's tramcars ply their routine rounds shuttling their share of the 200,000 passengers a day who commute between the placid leafy suburbs and the central commercial districts. Some trams lead a much more exciting life.

Take Tramcar Number 442, for instance. If you do, you board an elegantly furnished, award-winning restaurant that rolls along the tracks several times a day serving superb gourmet cuisine. Lunch and tea are offered in the afternoon, but for dinner you must book far in advance for the thirty-six plus velvet seats on this popular evening run. Probably the only restaurant tram in the world, this "moveable feast" makes a three-hour, forty-kilometre trip roaming, switching and looping through the streets of metropolitan Melbourne while diners indulge appetites in a leisurely-paced five-course gastronomic feed, awash with a

flow of spirits, wines and liqueurs. The cityscape sweeps by: brightly-lit stores and shopping arcades, classic Victorian and Gothic facades of stately public buildings, handsome town houses with "lacework" balconies and landmarks, old and new -- the Victorian Arts Centre rotunda, the sprawling Royal Botanic Gardens and the old Melbourne Gaol, where they hanged the notorious badman Ned Kelly. The diners' privacy remains unintruded behind sound-proof, "one-way view" windows.

The sumptuous decor -- thickly padded burgundy velvet booths, brass light fittings, ash wood panelling and plum-coloured carpeting -- together with the posh ambiance and the excellence of the international haute cuisine, have won this streetcar named 'Melbourne' a top restaurant award from the Australian Tourist Commission.



One other tram leading a dramatic life is the one that recently roved the rails as a mobile theatre. Actors and actresses boarded at designated stops along the route, stepping right into their roles. They played their parts on the floorboard "stage" and made their exits at subsequent stops to rounds of applause. There was little chance of curtain calls as the tram clanged off. Still other thespians, posing as tram passengers -- a rowdy drunk, a bickering married couple -- also became part of the performance in this "theatre of the real." Whatever the merits of the productions, the theatre critics had a built-in cache of cliches to sprinkle into their reviews: "a moving experience," "the audience was transported," "a show assured of a long run."

Like old soldiers, old Melbourne trams never die, they just fade from active service and are recruited into new careers. Like the tramcar a well known television personality used on specially laid tracks to shuttle him from his private landing strip to his house. Or those converted into fish and chip shops, hothouses, tool storage sheds, even trailer homes. Still others have emigrated abroad to become born-again trolleycars such as the half a dozen vehicles presently forming a new transit system along Seattle's rejuvenated waterfront.

If trams could talk, one old veteran, Number 980, now a paint storage shop in the Preston maintenance depot, would reminisce about its past glory as queen for a day. Brilliantly illuminated and ornately decorated with the royal insignia, old 980 conveyed Her Royal Highness, Elizabeth II, and Prince Philip through the streets of Melbourne on the couple's historic post-Coronation visit to Australia in 1954.

Melbourne's ongoing romance with trams has bred a legion of aficionados who have founded "preservation" societies, established museums, and published encyclopedic volumes on their favourite subject. The Tramway Museum Society (not to be confused with the Tramway Riders Association or Railroad Historical Society) supports at least three museum sites in the Melbourne area. Dedicated volunteers scrape, repaint and restore antiquated rolling stock. Vintage trams offer rides on little stretches of track for the nostalgia of the older visitors and the amusement of the young.

Conversations with zealous tram buffs like George Wilcock and Arthur Ireland of the Bylands Tramway Museum can overwhelm the listener with their prodigious knowledge of tramiana. The talk is of 'double bogies', 'birneys,' 'toastracks,' 'single truck cars.' These enthusiasts have impressive track records in their capacity to rattle off the history and technical data of over twenty different classes and

Local artists are allowed to decorate trams (left) in fancy designs and colours. An elegant, award-winning tramcar restaurant serves gourmet cuisine as it trundles along Melbourne's streets.

types of tramcars, past and present.

The variety of literature is similarly extensive. Histories, handbooks, journals, guides and photos fill the shelves in local bookshops.

A century of trams in Melbourne has inevitably produced a wealth of folklore: stories of kind-hearted trammie conductors helping pram-pushing mothers down the steps only to be left behind as the trams sped away; of irate suburban landowners cutting power lines across their property because royalty payments were overdue; of generations of youngsters who sat, and still sit, hour by hour on busy streetcorners recording the serial numbers of trams rolling by; of the nervous elderly lady who -- when electric trams were first introduced -- asked the conductor if she would get a shock by stepping on the track. "No, Ma'am," replied the trammie, "only if you put your other foot on the wire up there."

Number 72 service, down Swanston Street. The Melbourne Town Hall clock towers overhead.

Stand at the central intersection of Bourke and Queen streets today and look east on tree-lined Bourke to the Victorian-era district at the far end: the white-columned Parliament Buildings, the soaring Gothic spires of venerable St. Patrick's Cathedral, the elegant landmark Hotel Windsor, the majestic domes of the wood and glass Royal Exhibition hall. This is nineteenth century Melbourne.

In the foreground on Bourke Street gleams a twentieth century shopping mall with open-air cafes, contemporary designed street lamps and trendy red-brick paving. Adjacent are giant department stores, luxury hotels and airline offices -- vital fixtures of a modern city.

Linking the two Melbournes and the two centuries is a steadily-moving procession of orange and green tramcars, like time machines, bringing travellers through a timewarp from one age to another.

But what future for Melbourne's trams? Are they really more than romantic relics of a bygone era? The city's experts answer that the trams are enduring, reliable public conveyances securely set to carry millions of Melburnians well into the twenty-first century.

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