



Brisbane: Loud, proud and charming

Brisbane has many claims to fame. The city affectionately described by locals as Brisneyland or BrisVegas was the world's busiest submarine port during the Second World War. Thirty years ago, it was the host of Expo 88. It is the home of the Gabba cricket ground, the Bee Gees and the late Crocodile Hunter, Steve Irwin. It is the birthplace of Lucas' Papaw Ointment and that Australian delicacy, the lamington.

Yet in the not-so-distant past, Tourism Australia promoted the city not as a destination in itself but as "The Gateway to the Gold Coast" or "A Portal to the Pacific": a mere rest stop before the thrill rides at Dreamworld or an underwater adventure on the Barrier Reef. Brisbane's other nickname, the Cinderella City, is a reference to her neglect and a dig at her older stepsisters (neither Sydney nor Melbourne are ugly, of course, but both are incredibly vain).

The nickname, however, also reflects her tale of rags to riches – and riches to riverside living with city views. A subtropical paradise with 280 days of sunshine a year is not a bad place to live – or visit.

Sure, June is upon us, but let's get one thing clear: in Brisbane, there's no such thing as winter. At a balmy 22 degrees, you won't need your ear warmers or Ugg boots. Of course, you'll see locals who insist on both, and in King George square, there'll be babies zipped up in ski suits, but this is beside the point. The city itself has never (repeat never) recorded a temperature below zero.

So, pack togs and flip-flops because your first stop is South Bank. This flourishing inner-city suburb is the microcosm of Queensland: surf, sun and, more recently, electric scooters. At present, some of the scooters are out of order after hackers changed the audio instructions to offensive messages, such as, "No! F@!& off! You're standing on me!" The scooter operator, Lime, has refused to comment, while the scooters themselves, known as Limes, have been rebranded by angry commuters as lemons.

In the parklands, away from the fuss, there's a rainforest walk with lazy blue-tongued lizards, tropical fish and a pair of squawking lorikeets, appropriately named Kath and Kim by the council. In every direction, there's picnic pavilions and sausage sizzles, cascading water fountains and, overhead, a canopy of magenta bougainvillea. In the heart of the park, near the throbbing Piazza, there's a playground that resembles a circus, with tightrope walks, a star-shaped swing and, to the crowd's delight, a giant hamster wheel with spinning kids inside.



Further along, there's a popular Thai restaurant that overlooks a lily pond with singing frogs and the odd mosquito. For \$30 (£15), you can order the house specialty: Moreton Bay Bugs with garlic drizzle, served on a bed of steamed greens. Beyond the bugs – both edible and non-edible – there's a walking trail that leads to the city's soul: a sparkling lagoon, fenced with palm trees and enclosed by a halo of gleaming white sand. Streets Beach, the only man-made metropolitan beach in Australia is a swimming hole in the city. And of course, it's patrolled by life guards all year round. Grab a spot in the shade, if you can find one, and as you crack open a beer, take a moment to remember your friends in Melbourne; it's 6 degrees there.

In August, the carnies come to town for the Ekka, or the Royal Queensland Show. Tickets are reasonably priced but cheaper with a Twilight Pass or a discount code: usually "FlyingPigs" or "LlamaSelfies" (whatever is the star attraction of the year). Germaphobes will warn you to save your dollars and stay home: the Ekka flu, whether a real malady or an enduring myth, always scares some folk away. But since the opening of the show in 1876, germs have closed it only once: in 1919, when, at the height of the Spanish flu, the site was used as a makeshift hospital.

Of course, the show, like the city itself, has evolved over the years. An early competition for the best manure has been replaced with cow paddy bingo, while a contest for the fastest walking horse is now a wild colonial wagon chase. Sideshow Alley, once a mere stage for illusionists and jugglers, is now a colourful blaze of neon rides and cleverly rigged games: knock 'em down, bust-a-balloon, and the infamous laughing clowns. In the arena, after dark, bumper cars are upgraded to V8 supercars, and a guy on an electric guitar strums out a surprisingly recognisable, even likeable, rendition of *Waltzing Matilda*. After the singalong, a drawn-out countdown erupts into fireworks, while a tiny spark sets off Dave the Human Cannonball; the closing bang is immediately followed by the even louder roar for an encore.

Reader, this is Brisbane: obnoxiously loud, almost offensive, but charming in her ruckus, her obscurity and her secret ambitions.

Also in that tradition is another annual ritual: The State of Origin. A best-of-three rugby league match between Queensland and New South Wales (the Cane Toads and the Cockroaches), the Origin is the pinnacle of Australian sport. If the Mighty Maroons are up, then you're in luck; there'll be two-for-one meals at your local pub and a free round on Baz before he gets kicked out. If the Maroons are down, it's best to avoid the pub altogether.

If you'd rather rise above the carnage, there's the 80-metre climb to the top of the Story Bridge: one of only three legally climbable bridges in the world. Australians never break the law.

But Brisbane is a law unto herself. She's not coming of age and she's not the most mature of her sisters. She's not always a positive role model, especially when it comes to profanities, but she's not, as Doctor Who once said, a negative interface to the universe. She's simply a curiosity. Aren't we all?