



## **PRESTIGIOUS SOCIAL CLUB, BEST GYM FACILITIES IN TOWN, GOOD FOOD, GREAT LOCATION**

**The Athenaeum Club of Melbourne, Australia**

by Lew Toulmin

We stayed at the Athenaeum Club (AC) in Melbourne, Australia for two nights in July 2013, and compiled a full report.

### **History**

The AC was founded in 1867, encouraged by the Governor and under the Proprietorship of the leading engineer in the colony. The Proprietor rented the clubhouse, took all the financial risks, paid all suppliers, and provided food and drink for the members, all in return for keeping all incomings. These consisted of payments for food and drink, and a mammoth initiation fee of two pounds two shillings, and annual dues of three pounds three shillings! Other clubs in Melbourne had been founded under similar conditions, and failed, but the AC and its older rival the Melbourne Club survived to the present. The club has always been a social club for men, is not for business networking, and has a careful and selective nomination and review process. The Club is the only one in Melbourne to have a significant gym, which includes a lap pool, as described below.

The Club has a large, historic clubhouse built in neo-classical style, with about 80 feet frontage on Collins Street. The ground floor is let to several high end shops, including Prada and Ashley Jewelers, which bring in considerable revenue and help hold down the dues. The entrance is unmarked and discreet, to the right of the shops.



The Club has 1500 members, and has reciprocal relations with 178 clubs around Australia and the world. The Club is social, not commercial, and commercial events are not allowed. The Club allows only men as members, although women are allowed and encouraged to visit, with some restrictions.

## Location and Parking

The Club is extremely well located just west of the state Parliament, on a tram line and near the free tram that circles the CBD. The Club is on Collins Street, the prime shopping and commercial street in the city, and is about 70 meters from an upscale shopping mall and multi-screen cinema. The Club is in what is called the “Paris” end of town. The Club is across the street and about 75 meters from a fabulous chocolate shop, “Coco Black,” which has lovely dark and milk chocolates and coffee, and a sit-down café area.

The Melbourne CBD is in an easy to understand rectangular grid of about 70 blocks, and the Club is near the eastern end of the grid. The CBD has more intensive public transport, in the form of numerous trams and buses and a subway, than any city we have observed in traveling to 140 countries! The city overall is about five million, and has been consistently rated as one of the most livable cities in the world. It is very arts, food and wine-oriented, and is sort of a combination of San Francisco and a smaller New York.

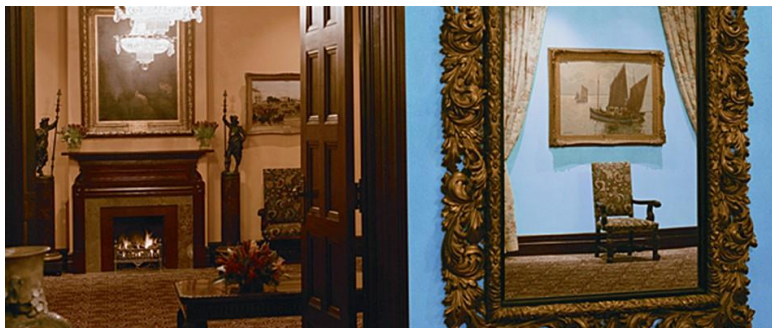
Secured parking is available at a nearby lot for only \$17 Aus (\$15 USD) per day, a substantial discount. Unloading can be done in front of the club, if arriving by cab, although because of the nearby trams, it may be wise to unload at the nearby Intercontinental Hotel. Street parking is not available.

Ditch the rental car, since public transport is readily available and auto traffic is slow, unless you want a car to visit one of the nearby wine valleys or the famous Mornington Peninsula, south of town, which has over 150 wineries and numerous cheese outlets.

If you are a Nevil Shute fan, his former house SE of town is reportedly available for short term overnight rentals; we tried to organize this but got no reply from the on-again, off-again owners.

## Public Rooms and Facilities

The building is six stories high, including its usable basement, and has about 80 feet on Collins Street. It is built of white stone in a neo-classical style. There is no garden.



The public rooms of the Club are attractive and very well maintained, decorated in a traditional style with portraits and landscapes. Public rooms include a boardroom, large members’ dining room, mixed dining room, various meeting

rooms and sitting rooms, a snooker room with three large tables, business center, and a substantial library with about 3500 volumes (another contender for the title of “largest club library in Melbourne”). Complimentary wireless computer access is provided in all 16 bedrooms and suites. Breakfast attire is formal, except at the Athena mixed sex restaurant, where a collared shirt and jacket, but no tie, are acceptable. There is a laundry service but no self-service machines. The club offers overnight, free, shoeshine service, a nice service and a savings of \$10 off the shoeshine stand just down the street.

A review of the events for July showed 20 items, including an evening lecture and numerous “tables” (informal talks by an expert before a group of enthusiasts), including aviation, rowing, motoring, wine, rugby, naval affairs, travel, finance, etc. Initiation and annual dues for the AC are in the same approximate range as at the Cosmos Club, according to one staff member.

The most unusual feature of the Club is the gym, which is unique in Melbourne club land. The large gym (about 110 x 45 feet) has free weights, weight machines, boxing dummies and bags, deck quoits, and a room with treadmills, stationary bikes, and elliptical machines. The pool is 60 feet long and four lanes wide, and is thus suitable for lap swimming. It is kept at a comfortably warm temperature. There is also a steam room, an enclosed one-person golf driving range, and an informal cafe. The gym is open 24x7x365.

## Bedrooms

The Club has sixteen bedrooms: five suites, eight doubles and three singles. Suites cost about \$227 USD for double occupancy (plus 10% reciprocal fee), while doubles are about \$203 plus 10%.



Our bedroom, number 42, was comfortable, attractive and was recently refurbished. It was off white colored, but with only fair lighting for reading (but better than the Melbourne Club). It had a good queen bed, small flat screen TV, small refrigerator, mini-bar, desk, bureau, substantial closet, and quiet HVAC. There was a room safe; you need to get the lock from the concierge. The room was about 9 x 15 feet.

The en-suite bathroom was very large, about the same size as the bedroom. It had a large shower, with no tub. The shower was a bit

difficult to adjust. We rated the accommodation as an A-. Our room cost \$220 Australian dollars (about \$203 USD) per night, plus a 10% service charge. This rate is perhaps 10-20% lower than nearby downtown hotels. (For instance, the nearby Sofitel was about \$240-500 USD per night for a similar room, right down the street.) We found this rate to be considerably higher than the Australian Club (which had larger and more attractive bedrooms) but about the same as the Melbourne Club, just about 100 meters away, across and down the street.

## **Food**

Restaurant prices in Australia generally run 50 to 150% higher than in the US, reflecting the minimum wage for temporary workers of \$25 USD/hour (!). Prices in the Club are slightly below the local restaurant average, with \$13 USD to \$16 for starters, \$29 to \$42 for main courses, and \$11 to \$15 for desserts. There is official room service in the AC, with an extensive selection.

We had an excellent starter of a twice cooked Stilton soufflé, very nice and not too strong, followed by a teriyaki glazed barramundi (a very well-regarded local fish), which was extremely tasty. The other main course was a supreme of chicken stuffed with mushrooms, which was also tasty. Our dessert was Eton mess, which was good but did not have enough meringue. Each two-course meal was \$33 USD, a three course meal was available for \$36. Altogether, an A-meal (and we are tough graders in all areas).

## **Service**

All front desk staff were extremely helpful. Your bill is not settled upon departure, but is sent in 1-2 weeks to your address, via postal mail, or to your email address.

The AC does not have “limited reciprocity services.” Services for everyone are virtually non-existent on the weekend. The AC has a website with contact information and a map, at: <http://www.athenaeumclub.com.au/>

## **Rules**

Business attire (jacket and collared shirt, with tie) is required in all parts of the Club except on weekends, and except at breakfast. Jeans, T-shirts, etc. are never allowed. Business papers are not allowed in the club, except in the business center. Women are asked not to use the members bar, gym, billiards room or library. The Athena Dining Room is open to men and women at all times.



We would rate the Athenaeum Club as excellent in food, service, overnight accommodation, and club location. Overall, we would also give it an excellent rating.

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