

# Arcade Games

TIME TRAVELLING ON MELBOURNE'S HISTORIC RETAIL TRAIL BY SONAL SHAH



Giants Gog and Magog, the mythic timekeepers at the Royal Arcade, guard Gaunt's Clock and have been striking the adjacent bells every hour since 1892.

**M**elbourne feels less like a small city than a miniaturized big one. Roughly the size of Delhi's old walled city, its central business district is compact enough to survey on foot in a few hours. Its regular grid, buildings in diverse architectural styles, and vibrant summer streets bristle with reasons why Australia's good-time capital constantly tops global "liveability"

lists. They also provide clues about its economic booms, beginning with the gold rush of the 1850s.

Melbourne's historic core is the "Hoddle Grid" street system, laid out in 1837 and named for its planner. Here, east-west streets intersect perpendicularly with small laneways, which originally provided service access to the buildings of each block. Since the 1990s, these have been redeveloped as

open-air eating and shopping areas. With distractions on every corner, it's helpful to use the city's enclosed arcades to orient oneself.

The critic Walter Benjamin deemed arcades "the most important architecture of the 19th century" in his massive, unfinished study of them. Melbourne once had over a dozen of these 19th- and 20th-century structures—somewhere between shopping mall and souk—inspired by their forebears in London, Paris, and Milan. Strolling through a handful of Melbourne's surviving arcades, I glimpse aspects of the history of this colonial outpost, from the 1860s to the 1960s.

## GOLD AND OLD

The **Royal Arcade**, Australia's oldest still standing, opened in 1870, towards the latter half of the gold rush that brought hundreds of thousands of immigrants to Melbourne's ports, almost doubling its population annually for several years. The boom-town's first opulent flush is reflected in the Royal Arcade's restored interiors, its yellow-gold walls, and a lofty, skylit ceiling. The expensive boutiques here pick up the whisper of Melbourne's past wealth and amplify it in their glittering window displays. I notice a few odd gems amongst the jewellers and chocolatiers; for example, Spellbox, a magic supply store run by a self-proclaimed witch.

I stop to look at the arcade's centre-piece clock, flanked by two seven-foot statues of ancient soldiers. These two giants—Gog and Magog of various end-times legends—were inspired by a similar pair in London's Guildhall. Stationed opposite a statue of Chronos, the ancient Greek personification of time, they mechanically beat out the hours until doomsday as people shop below them. I think about Benjamin's observation that architecture betrays the mythological imaginings of its makers; here, with each toll, these mythic figures resoundingly endorse the ruling principle of the industrial age: that time is money.



### COMPLETELY FLOORED

Across Little Collins Street is **Block Place**, a partially covered lane (with the cavernous Basement Discs record shop and performance space beneath it) that leads to **Block Arcade**. Inspired by Milan's Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, the arcade opened in 1892, just as Melbourne's land boom of the previous decade gave way to a financial slump. Named after the area's pre-existing ritual of young men and women "walking the block" in opposite directions, the arcade invited romance to take shelter and thrive under the roof of commerce.

The Block's most dazzling feature is its mosaic floor. It becomes even more impressive when I learn that the floor survived the boots of World War II soldiers under felt carpeting, and that it has, over the years, been repaired using leftover tiles from an original shipment. Another Block original is the Hopetoun Tea Rooms. It's difficult to decide which is more ornate, the Victorian wallpapered walls behind its glass windows, or the gorgeous cakes in the vitrine outside. I resist the urge to join the snaking line for a table, and duck into the Gewürzhaus spice shop instead to buy little packets of truffle salt and powdered Australian bush herbs by weight.

### RETRO METRO

South of Block Arcade, across Collins Street, is the **Centreway Arcade**. It is more notable for its Edwardian Baroque facade from 1912, than its interior, which was converted to a soaring, glass-filled temple to designer shopping in the 1980s. I quickly walk through to Centre Place, a clutch of tempting cafés and bars, which opens onto Degraives Street and its popular Degraives Espresso Bar.

More commuter-friendly coffee is to be found in the subterranean **Campbell Arcade**, which was built to relieve the pedestrian traffic at Flinders Street Station. The arcade's art deco shopfronts were retro when it opened, in 1956; its pink tiles and black granite pillars recall the prevalent palette of its era. The businesses here are both functional and creative: an old-fashioned barbershop run by an opera singer; a zine print shop; and cup.of.truth, an alcove selling one of Melbourne's most sought-after coffees.

### CATHEDRAL OF CRAFT

Down Flinders Lane, the **Nicholas**



The Nicholas Building's leadlight ceiling (top) is the first and last remaining feature of its kind in Melbourne; Block Place, one of the city's covered pedestrian laneways, is packed with cafés and eateries (bottom) ideal for a pit stop while shopping in the adjoining heritage Block Arcade.

**Building** and its ground floor Cathedral Arcade, built in 1926, house a warren of artists' workshops and quirky boutiques. I imagine the building has been spruced up since Gregory David Roberts wrote *Shantaram* on its second floor, but probably not much. Downstairs, poetry bookshop Collected Works and the huge RetroStar Vintage Clothing beg for longer visits.

### STAMPED OUT

My last stop is the **Port Phillip Arcade**, which opened in 1961 on the site of a 19th-century hotel. The arcade was refurbished in the 1990s, and except for a metal and mosaic representation of the sea god Neptune on its facade, is not particularly eye-catching. Inside is Max Stern & Company, a philatelist's delight. A prominent stamp dealer, Stern died recently at 94, perhaps fortunately avoiding the demolition of the Port Phillip Arcade, slated for 2017, to make way for

Melbourne's new Metro Rail tunnel.

Even if it comes at the expense of a retail relic, the metro tunnel is a necessary measure to ease the pressure on Melbourne. Attracting about 1,00,000 immigrants annually, it is Australia's fastest growing city. And after all, it's possible that public transport will be considered the most important architectural feature of our century, while arcades remain, as Benjamin wrote, "residues of a dream world." ●

### THE VITALS

Melbourne's arcades and laneways are easy to explore with Google Maps and a willingness to fall down rabbit holes. For greater historical insight, however, take one of the city's dozens of walking tours. Kathy Deacon of MELTours showed the writer the arcades and more, with lots of trivia along the way ([www.meltours.com.au](http://www.meltours.com.au); 2.5-hr tours about AUD70/₹3,500).