

The way to a woman's heart . . .

Monique Balvert-O'Connor fits some cycling into her busy dining schedule

AS MY teeth sink into spinach and feta encased in golden folds of filo pastry, I start to question exactly what sort of tour this is.

I'm straddling a bike with the spanikopita in hand and mouth, participating in what is supposed to be a bike tour of inner-city Melbourne, yet is becoming more and more of a gastronomic journey. Melissa's Greek Café in a bustling inner-city street is but one of many feast-your-senses stops.

Which is exactly what Murray Johnson has set out to achieve. This Melbourne journalist, photographer and Real Melbourne Bike Tours owner has planned his tour as a scratch-and-sniff, sensually interactive experience.

As my husband and I have gleefully discovered, the sense of taste is well catered for in this tour, which includes the cost of food sampled along the way. Given that we love both food and cycling, we're in heaven.

We've already pedalled in Murray's slipstream to a sustaining juice bar and to Café Brunetti for excellent coffee and a taste of food from yet another of the cultures prevalent in this wonderfully cosmopolitan city. At last count there were about 100 different nationalities living in Melbourne, Murray tells us as we devour tiny Italian pastries, with 18 distinct cultural precincts.

We cycle through some of them, such as Lygon St (aka Little Italy), on our four-hour tour that is certainly not geared exclusively at biking enthusiasts. We cycle on flat terrain, covering only about 10 to 12km, so there's plenty of time to stop for lunch at Queen Victoria Market, where some serious salivating kicks in.

Within minutes I'm mentally kicking myself for booking accommodation sans kitchen, as the produce displayed at this awe-inspiring market makes me ache to gather up irresistible supplies and get cooking. At the seafood stall, Murray shows us his favourite marinara mix. He also points out specialty cheese, handmade pasta and boutique beer stalls, as well as Melbourne's best bakeries.

We marvel over pickled octopus and find smoked kangaroo at a West African meat stall, of all places. We sample smoked trout dip, share a spicy Turkish lamb borek and a roll with bratwurst, sauerkraut and mustard washed down with Marlborough sauvignon blanc courtesy of a wine-tasting enterprise. In summer bikers are treated to an antipasto picnic of market food.

There's nothing like a pedal to work off our lunch and, along the way, Murray feeds us morsels of



REAL MELBOURNE BIKE TOURS OWNER MURRAY JOHNSON HAS PLANNED HIS TOUR AS A SCRATCH-AND-SNIFF, SENSUALLY INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE.

information about various cheap and cheerful places to eat and dining delights with a difference. There's a Spanish café inside a Scottish pub, for example, and a Greek Tavern without a menu.

He points out Afghani and Russian eating establishments and a \$4 pizza joint amidst the bohemian wonders of Brunswick

St, which he declares his favourite street in Melbourne, if not the whole world. Here too can be found Tea 2, which sells hundreds of different teas.

In the heart of the city, we wend our way through narrow cobbled lanes lined with tiny coffee shops and eateries, including Melbourne's smallest restaurant, with

» CHECKLIST

MELBOURNE

■ **Bike tour tips:** Schedule this biking event as a must-do for early on during your Melbourne visit as tour guide Murray will arm you with information for your stay. He provides not only quirky inside information about this exciting city, but also handy tips on great places to eat, drink and visit.

The tours run daily between 10am and 2pm. They leave from Vault 14 next to the river cruise ticket offices at Federation Wharf that's riverside below Federation Square. The current cost is A\$89 (\$108.75) for adults and A\$69 for children and this covers the tour, coffee, juice and pastries en route and lunch at Queen Victoria Market.

Contact Murray on biketours@rentabike.net.au, check out the website www.rentabike.net.au or phone +61 417 339203 (from overseas) or 0417 339203 (from Australia). The tour is four hours. The distance cycled is between 10 and 12km and the terrain is flat.

■ **Wining and dining:** Try Jim's Greek Tavern in Johnston St where there is no menu. Tuck into a whole range of Greek food for A\$38 a head.

Or The Toff in Town, a classy pub upstairs in Swanston St. One bar comprises a train of private booths from which, yes, you can close the door and order via bell service.

Others worth a look are Young and Jacksons' upstairs salon, MOO Bar, DeGraves Espresso Bar in DeGraves St and Madame Brussels on Bourke St.

EASY DOES IT: Cyclists cover mostly flat terrain — and only 10-12km of it in a day — so there's plenty of time for refreshment stops.

just 10 seats, and a shop that only sells cupcakes.

As we traverse the nooks and crannies, keenly digesting Murray's commentary along the way, there's a sense of getting to know this city from the inside out.

Of course Murray's dialogue extends beyond the culinary, and we learn a whole host of facts about Melbourne city.

On this sensory tour he has us sniff and feel the hand cream in Aesops, a renowned natural cosmetics company. The same neighbourhood is home to the quirky Dr Follicles — a men's salon where a free Aussie beer's on offer with every haircut, and a Books for Cooks store that boasts about 15,000 culinary tomes.

From Murray we learn that Aussie Rules was invented to keep Melbourne's cricket players fit over winter and that the red strip on the Eureka Tower represents the blood shed in a miners' revolt.

Murray planned his bike tour as an inside view of why Melburnians love Melbourne. There's much to love — except our bathroom scales when we return home from this city full of divine treats, eateries and even a gourmet bike tour.