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A meandering trail through secret Adelaide

By Kerryn Goldsworthy

AS A TOURIST in any foreign city that has a river, one of the first things you do when you arrive is to work out where you are in relation to that river. Cities built on rivers have grown up, along or around them; the street plans, districts and suburbs more often than not have developed in accordance with the flow of the river and the contours of its banks, and are oriented towards the water.

If you have been to Paris, you need only say to yourself "Left Bank" or "Right Bank" for the remembered shape and features of the city to rise up in your mind; if you have been to Florence, the name of the Ponte Vecchio will recall to you the image of that ancient bridge, crowded with jewellers and travellers, while the walls of cream and grey and terracotta buildings that line the banks of the Arno are reflected upside down in its peaceful, pastel-coloured water.

It may be that, for some, merely to mention the River Torrens in this context is to come back to earth with a painful thud. But the principle is the same: Adelaide was built around the river. The contours of its banks at this point in its course were the most suitable for the laying-out and building of a city, and it provided an immediate water supply for the colonists. On either side of the little river that rose beyond Mt Pleasant in the Mt Lofty Ranges and meandered its way down onto and across the plain, dividing north from south in its westward flow to the sea, the streets and squares of Adelaide and North Adelaide were laid out.

The city is characterised by its regular grid pattern of straight streets on flat ground: a city of easy walking and long views, through which you seem to move in only two dimensions. But to follow the river along Linear Park's walking and cycling track is to get a radically different sense of the way your body is moving. The river is all curves and slopes, and as you move along them, the view ahead is periodically hidden by rounded corners and rising hills, and consists not of houses, shops, cafes and hotels but of River Red Gums, or reed-beds, or flights of rainbow lorikeets zooming low overhead.

The River Torrens Linear Park is 35 kilometres long from end to end, along a track that takes you through nine local councils and numerous riverside playgrounds and parks, from the river's outlet at Henley Beach South through the city and Torrens Lake in Elder Park, and out through the north-eastern suburbs to end beyond Athelstone. But riding or walking along this track tends to make you forget about where you are in terms of suburbs or main roads, or even of direction; you focus instead on the fact that you're moving with (or against) the flow of the river, following its natural course through the landscape. Even just to use the phrase "linear park" is to conceive of public space differently from the way we usually do.

The best-known and most-used part of Linear Park is the stretch through Elder Park along the Torrens Lake, where the river flows through the city. After the original creation of the Torrens Lake in 1881, Elder Park and the banks of the river were landscaped to enhance it, and this is still the most traditionally park-like stretch of the river, with European trees and 19th-century Old World notions of what a park should look like: neat flowerbeds, prettily ornamental bridges, discreet shrubbery and large sunny stretches of bright green velvet lawn.

However, down in Lockleys or up in Paradise, things along the river are very different. The landscape has been "improved" only as far as is consistent with water management, tree-husbandry, and public safety and comfort. The subtle scents and colours of native vegetation prevail, and you move along an undulating strip of peaceful bushland that has been reclaimed from the urban and suburban landscapes.

Author Patrick White once described the strange boundary lines between suburban garden and native bushland: "The wands and fronds of native things intruded still, paperbarks and various gums, of mysterious hot scents, and attentive silences: shadowy trees that, paradoxically, enticed the eye away from an excess of substance." It's an accurate description one of the most extraordinary stretches of Linear Park – the St Peters River Park.

Not 10 minutes from the heart of the city, this is a secluded stretch of river where the formation of a real billabong has been helped along only slightly by human management, with the ox-bow formation curving round the oval where East Adelaide Primary School students play cricket.

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On the morning of a still, cloudless, 38-degree January day, the whispery bush-landscape silence is broken only by the occasional moan of a malfunctioning burglar alarm from the nearby houses of the well-heeled. Here, in an inner suburb on a weekday, I encounter in the space of 20 minutes only three other people: one young female jogger, one small boy on a bike, and one middle-aged woman taking her dog for walk. There are, on the other hand, hundreds of birds, including a lot of rather bossy-looking ducks. The track curves back towards the city across a little wooden bridge; beyond that, it swoops down and out of sight down a shadowy green tunnel of leaves and branches.

The Linear Park track is not a continuous off-road path from one end to the other; there are numerous places where the track will take you onto the road for a while before you can re-enter the park. But to walk or ride along even just a small part of it is to realise that there's another, more secret Adelaide. You can see the city from a completely different angle, and understand it better by moving through the contours of its setting, along the river to the sea.



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