

## CULTURE VICTORIA

# It's a flower-powered Frida fest

A global icon comes to Bendigo, and everyone's on board.  
By *Belinda Jackson*

I'VE come to see Frida," I overhear a woman telling another, as she admires a collection of perfume bottles. It sounds like she's popping over to see a friend, not a woman who died more than 70 years ago, and who'd probably never, ever heard of Bendigo.

The speaker could be excused for her familiarity with Mexican artist Frida Kahlo; the latest exhibition at the Bendigo Art Gallery, *Frida Kahlo: In Her Own Image*, is at times so intimate you'd think it was your bestie's drawers you were rifling through.

The exhibition opens the door on Frida's life - her pet spider monkey, her deer, her husband Diego and the pack of Xoloitzcuintli, Mexico's hairless dogs, who all followed her through life and onto the canvases.

There are the sepia photos of the smiling child Frida, before her body was ravaged by polio, which left her right leg shorter than the other. A bottle of her Shalimar perfume. Her Revlon Everything's Rosy red lipstick. The eyebrow pencil she'd use to thicken her faint monobrow and accentuate her little moustache as she played with gender and identity - all items locked away in her home, La Casa Azul, for 50 years after her death in 1954.

There she is again, one of many photographs of her in a hospital bed, recovering from a horrific traffic accident where she was impaled by a metal pole, which entered near her hip, exiting through her vagina.

I am not the only one squirming or gasping as the captions are read, silently, by my fellow art lovers.

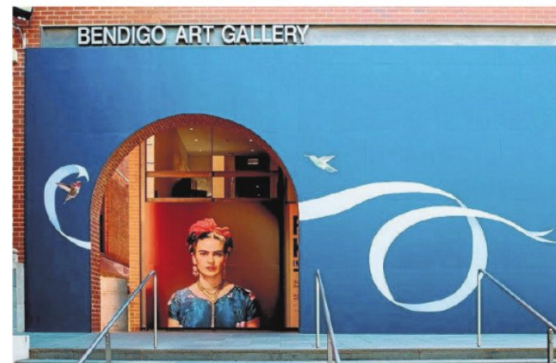
She later suffered a "traumatic" miscarriage due to, it is intimated, the destruction of her uterus in the life-threatening accident, and a year before she died, in 1953, her shortened leg was amputated.

The exhibition also details her life with husband Diego, the "elephant" to her "dove", as the couple was dubbed.

Mexico's most celebrated artist at the time of their marriage, he was 20 years older, a foot taller and three times her size. He was also two marriages ahead of his young wife, and philandered shamelessly throughout their time together; it was the fling with Frida's sister, Cristina, that pushed her to divorce Diego in 1935.

So-called tortured artists complaining of the Parisian cold or lack of absinthe need to get a grip, I think as I walk the vast exhibition. And yet, despite the trauma, the exhibition is incredibly joyful.

Frida looks into the camera from yet another bed, a plaster orthopaedic corset



that literally held her broken body together - but as in every photograph, she is creating. Her corset is an artwork of leaves, eyes and doves interwoven with the hammer and sickle. There's the affair with the burlesque entertainer Josephine Baker in Paris, Frida's romance with Leon Trotsky, who spent three years in Mexico City where he was assassinated in 1940, and her remarriage to Diego a year after their divorce.

Just as it did with the Grace Kelly and Elvis blockbusters of previous years, the exuberance of what's happening within the walls of the gallery spills out onto the streets of Bendigo. Taco trails! Floral headpiece workshops! A fiesta tram! Mexico has come to town and Bendigo is on board, celebrating Frida and her beloved home country.

I take a quick snap in front of the Bendigo sign in the centre of the city, inspired by Frida's last painting, the upbeat "Viva La Vida", before hitting the Taco Trail. It runs across more than 20 restaurants and cafes in the region, including the Dispensary, down Chancery Lane, which has dispensed with medicine and now serves contemporary Chinese cuisine. Its take on the taco is a Xinjiang-inspired lamb taco with a spice

kicker, best cooled by a Tommy's margarita, served over ice with agave nectar replacing the classic Cointreau.

They take their mezcal and tequilas as seriously in the Dispensary, with the Ancho Reyes Verde liqueur of green roasted poblano chiles and QuiQuiRiQui mezcal from Oaxaca on the shelves.

At Australia's oldest operating tram depot, the espresso machine is running hot inside Tramways cafe, a green-and-white N-class tram Instagrammably garnished in flowers outside and in.

While tequila is not on the menu of this parked tram, the must-order is the Golden Taco (spoiler alert, it's actually a waffle, but who's quibbling?). Scoops of boysenberry ice-cream and salted caramel ice-cream are syrup-lashed and sprinkled in edible gold because - well, this is Bendigo, richest city in the world during the 1880s gold rush, and it's not afraid to remind you.

During the fiesta, there are tequila-making sessions, Mexican cooking classes and even a new cerveza, Rancho Cerveza Mexican Lager, brewed by Cornella Brewery, 40 minutes' drive west of Bendigo.

I spy breakfast tacos on cafe menus, shop

windows garnished with flower garlands, echoing the flowers Frida would weave into her plaited crown of hair, burning cigarette propped up on a nearby ledge. Always with a cigarette. A global phenomenon, a long-dead icon, yet still among us, firing up the fiesta.

*The writer was a guest of City of Bendigo*

## TRIP NOTES

**What:** Frida Kahlo: In her own image is showing at the Bendigo Art Gallery until July 13. [bendigogallery.com.au](http://bendigogallery.com.au)

**Getting there:** Bendigo is about 150 kilometres from Melbourne. If you're taking public transport, the cheapest way to get there is via the V/Line train. A regular bus service operates from Tullamarine airport. [ptv.vic.gov.au](http://ptv.vic.gov.au); [bendigogairportservice.com.au](http://bendigogairportservice.com.au)

**Staying there:** Hotel Ernest Bendigo is a 10-room art hotel in a 1864 building that once housed the city's first bank, and is 100 metres from the gallery. From \$296 a night. [hotelbendigo.com.au](http://hotelbendigo.com.au)

**Explore more:** [bendigoregion.com.au](http://bendigoregion.com.au)