

Experience the thrill of VIP access



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Here at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, Phar Lap's heart is one of the most popular items on display, still a symbol of national pride almost a century after the champion racehorse died. If I'm being honest, though, I would probably just look at it for a few seconds and then wander on to the next exhibit if I didn't have Laura Cook showing me around.

Laura isn't usually a guide. She's actually one of the museum's curators, but visitors can now arrange a special private experience called Big Histories where she will get to the heart of the items' stories, revealing the background to how they were acquired, why they were chosen, and even how they're conserved.

"It's very fragile tissue in formaldehyde," Laura says as she points at the enormous organ that once powered Phar Lap's success. "So, all this showcase has vibration mitigation measures built into it so people banging on the glass or even walking past don't vibrate the liquid it's suspended in."

Laura takes me to a painting that I might have otherwise walked past - Uta Uta Tjangala's *Yumari*, one of the seminal works of contemporary Indigenous art. It turns out I've actually been carrying some of it around for years, printed as a background in my Australian passport. And Laura also shows me one of her favourite pieces - the first Holden prototype from 1946.

"There were some small minor modifications, but every FX Holden that came off the production line two years later is essentially the same as this car, so it's an amazing part of Australian history," she explains.

Laura tells me the museum has acquired one of the (if not 'the') last Holdens ever made in Australia, and it's currently at a storage shed in Mitchell. You can see it on another exclusive tour the museum offers, called Out to the Shed, which takes you through more of the collection that's not on display (only about four per cent is ever visible at the main museum site).

The tours are part of a program of special experiences offered by 17 of Australia's top sites, known as the Cultural Attractions of Australia. You can do a behind-the-scenes tour of Parliament House in Canberra, explore Sovereign Hill in Ballarat by lamplight when everyone's left, and get exclusive access to the art collection at Fremantle Prison.

"There are so many passionate people who live within the walls of these museums and attractions," the executive officer of the Cultural Attractions of Australia, Annabel Sullivan, says. "So, it's a chance for them to tell their story and share with people what they know and what they do every day."

These opportunities for special access are certainly unique, and lots of them are also quite affordable and accessible for the average visitor: the National Museum's Big Histories tour is \$125 per person, including lunch and a drink. But then there are also



Take a tour by lamplight through Ballarat's Sovereign Hill after everyone else has gone home. Picture: Supplied



National Museum of Australia curator Laura Cook takes Michael Turtle on a private tour of the collection. Picture: Michael Turtle

the blockbuster experiences - the incredible (and, in some cases, incredibly expensive) opportunities that you will be talking about for years to come.

Opera Australia will let you have a walk-on role in one of its productions, with a costume fitting, hair and makeup, rehearsal, and backstage photos. It costs \$5000 but includes two tickets so someone can watch you, and you can then catch the rest of the show.

The National Gallery of Victoria offers a package where you can have a private after-hours tour followed by a private fine-dining meal in front of Giambattista Tiepolo's masterpiece, *The Banquet of Cleopatra*, with live music performances... but the whole evening costs \$39,000 for eight people.

And, what's the most extreme offering in the Cultural Attractions of Australia pro-

gram? It's got to be the \$50,000 (per person) epic trip to Mona in Hobart, with private jet transfers from Sydney or Melbourne, luxury accommodation, exclusive tours, and a personal dinner and wine adventure with the museum's founder David Walsh.

The overarching Signature Experiences program was originally designed by Tourism Australia for the international market to create extraordinary moments that might be the foundation stone of an entire trip to Australia - unprecedented access to the MCG for cricket fans, a VIP tour of the planes at the Qantas Founders Museum in Longreach for aviation buffs, or history enthusiasts being able to touch some of the important items in the collection of the WA Maritime Museum.

The pandemic has, of course, changed all of this, but it's interesting to see how



You can dine amongst the masterpieces at the National Gallery of Victoria. Picture: Supplied

relevant the program still is for the domestic market. If you're visiting Port Arthur in Tasmania, an in-depth tour is going to add to your understanding of the heritage site. If you want to celebrate an important anniversary, perhaps you could do that with an after-hours experience at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra that includes a private degustation dinner with courses inspired by particular artworks.

In my case, exploring the National Museum of Australia with Laura leaves me looking at this cultural institution in a new light, filled with new information, but with one question she was unable to answer still burning... who killed Phar Lap? Oh well, big histories often come with big mysteries. **Michael Turtle was supported by the Cultural Attractions of Australia. See more on his Travel Australia Today website.**