



PICTURES: TOURISM TASMANIA

# HEAVEN AND HELL

## Immersed in the historic tales of Port Arthur

LUKE SLATTERY

**T**he visitor to Port Arthur arrives primed with infernal images of its days as a penal colony; a wretched purgatory when it wasn't a living hell. So dire was what passed for a life in this factory-like penitentiary that inmates welcomed a spell in the nearby coal mines as a relief and a "change of air"; or so wrote Marcus Clarke in his convict-era classic, *For the Term of his Natural Life*.

The Port Arthur convict settlement, facing a lovely harbour tucked away on the pristine Tasman Peninsula, was established in 1830 as a timber camp but by 1833 it had become a secondary-punishment station, a jail for convicts of the worst kind. These were the repeat offenders or, in a striking phrase used by Robert Hughes in *The Fatal Shore*, "double-damned incorrigibles". The wretched recidivists, together with political rebels who could not or would not be reformed, were put to work felling trees of enormous height for lumber that could be used for buildings or the vessels under construction at the colony's dockyards. In its brief life the docks churned out 16 ships and 150 small boats. After the trees were cut down, groups of 50 or so men formed "centipede gangs" to lug them out of the bush.

Escape was well-nigh impossible. On one side of the colony spread an expanse of ocean buffeted by gales from the south; on the other loomed mountains and forests and the same treacherous weather. Given a choice between sharks and snakes, most chose to risk the latter. It rarely ended well.

"A farmer not many years ago found a skeleton tangled up in scraps of clothing, still

in chains," explains Colin Knight, my guide for a day on the Wheel of Fate private tour, a deep dive into convict history with a stop at the commandant's residence for libations and, when the dive is over and you surface for air, a splendid lunch.

Our tour begins at the cavernous visitor centre, designed by award-winning Tasmanian practice Rosevear Stephenson, and a quick introduction. I realise at once that I've previously taken a standard group tour of Port Arthur with Knight, who sports long white whiskers and a black beret and has a thespian air. Six months have passed and today we're meeting in autumn, but on that spring day last year I was acutely conscious of being one among many with no claim on the guide's attention. Today, on this premium tour, I have him all to myself.

As we walk down to the harbour, Knight explains a little about the Wheel of Fate concept. Port Arthur's story is largely the history of petty criminals. High, and not so high, crimes were dealt with on the English gallows at a time when about 220 offences were pun-

ishable by death. Birth "in the wrong place at the wrong time", Knight explains, was typically the first of many misfortunes. Poverty was hard to escape. "It was something you had no control over."

He breaks from history to reflect on the universality of his theme. "We talk about the fickle finger of fate, or the goddess Fortuna; we say: 'For God's Sake!' or 'By Jove'. The ancients might have sacrificed to the gods. We might tend to pray. Port Arthur concentrates this much larger human theme on to a specific time and place."

We pause, and Knight taps and swipes at a tablet to bring up images of child labourers from Victorian England not long after the founding of Port Arthur.

He points to one of an adult chimney sweep and his diminutive "climbing boy", aged about six, who was sent up the chimney as a kind of human broom. "These children were often orphans and were sent to work or steal by their impoverished parents," he says. "The work was often dangerous and must have been horrible." Other images are of

children working down coal mines and in textile factories.

The great literary representation of child labour – simultaneously a *cri de coeur* – is Charles Dickens's *Artful Dodger*: occupation, pickpocket. In *Oliver Twist* the eponymous hero is for all intents and purpose an orphan. Says Knight: "Dickens writes that 'He might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar'." But he was born, instead, into poverty and crime.

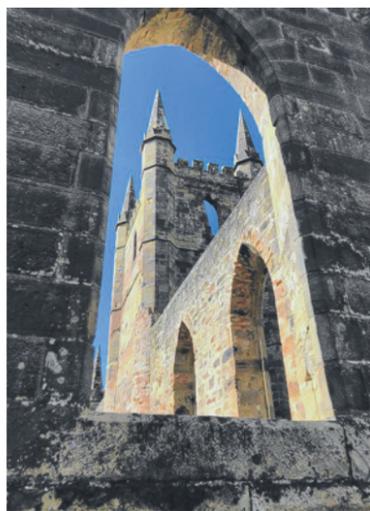
Oliver, along with the *Artful Dodger* and his band, are led by the canny Fagin, who as Knight points out, was modelled by Dickens on a small-time crook named Ikey Solomon. Transported to Port Arthur in 1834, Solomon died a free man in Hobart, and was buried in the old Jewish cemetery. "Many of the boys on which Dickens modelled *Oliver Twist* were sent to Port Arthur and kept at Point Puer (Latin for boy), well apart from the adult offenders," he says, motioning to a low-lying promontory separated by a channel a little more than 100m wide from the convict cemetery, or Isle of the Dead. "It was the first purpose-built British reforming institution for boys." Many youngsters were taught a trade out at the point, he explains, and some went on to lead successful lives.

One of these was Jeremiah Melbourne, transported for stealing three pairs of trousers. He left Point Puer as a skilled stonemason and went to work in Melbourne during the early boom years. "As a respectable citizen he would never mention Van Diemen's Land, and his six children seem not to have known he'd been transported," says Knight. "But a distant cousin in Western Australia claimed that his story had been passed down to her." A few curious details lend the story an air of authority: Jeremiah and his brother had been dragged away from their mother screaming, and on the voyage out they survived on uncooked turnips.

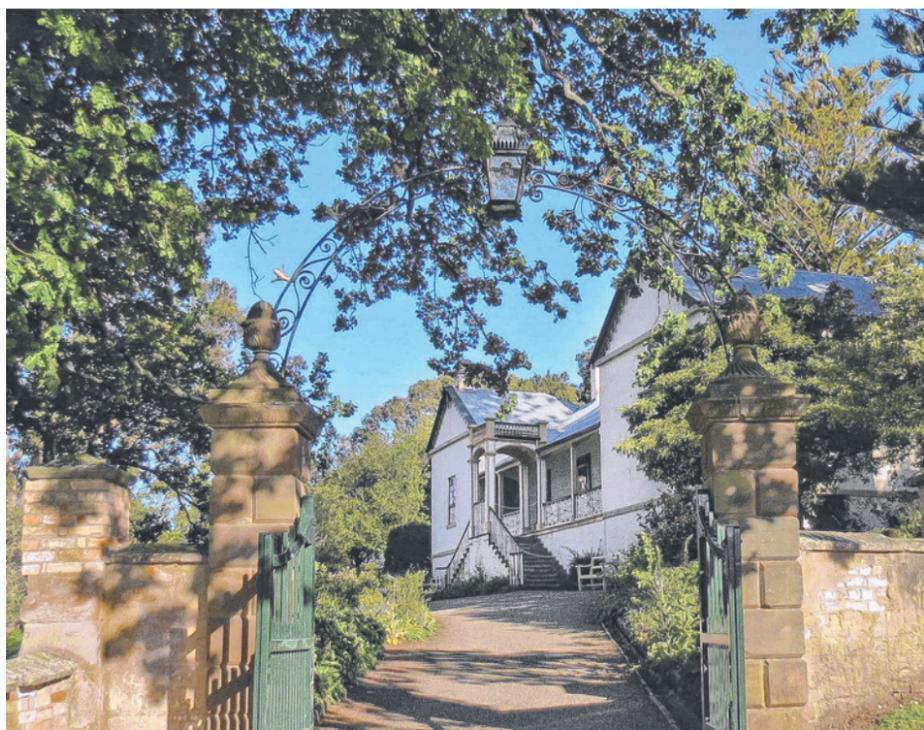
One of the charms of the Wheel of Fate tour is that it takes in the broad sweep of his-



Port Arthur, established in 1833 as a jail, main; the Separate Prison, left



Isle of the Dead, above; church ruins, above right; commandant's cottage, below; Mark Lester as the character Twist in the 1968 musical film *Oliver!*



#### IN THE KNOW

The four-hour Wheel of Fate tour is available until April next year for a minimum of two people and a maximum of 10; \$300 a head and an additional \$200 for a conservation specialist. The tour includes an expert-led immersive talk, behind-the-scenes access to heritage buildings, a two-course meal with canapes and beverages.

[culturalattractionsofaustralia.com](http://culturalattractionsofaustralia.com)  
[discovertasmania.com.au](http://discovertasmania.com.au)

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tory yet maintains a tight focus on human stories – real people. Knight mentions Matthew Gunson, who at the age of 16, when he was transported to Port Arthur for seven years for stealing a pearl ring, was just over 1.2m tall. He told the courts he was “sent out thieving by my mother, if I did not bring home two or three shillings every night I was to be turned out of doors”.

These are riveting stories that take up the universal theme of fate, and the obscenity of child labour, its literary depiction in *Oliver Twist*, and its traces in the historical records. In my guide's hands these threads are woven masterfully into the history of Port Arthur.

Along our stroll through the four-floor



penitentiary, originally a flour mill and granary, and the creepy Separate Prison designed on the principle of psychological rather than physical torture, Knight decants more tales. There are bushrangers, psychopaths, successful escapees (one of whom likely murdered and barbecued his fellow fugitive), and men who did their time stoically and went on to live into old age, taking the secret of their Port Arthur years to the grave.

Another alumnus of Port Arthur was the forger Henry Savery, who wrote Australia's first novel: *Quintus Servinton: A Tale founded upon Incidents of Real Occurrence* (1831). The wheel of fate was unkind to Savery. He fell into debt, succumbed to alcoholism, and after twice attempting suicide most likely died of a stroke. He is buried on the Isle of the Dead.

When the tour is nearly over – all that remains is a stroll past the ruins of an unconsecrated church – we enjoy a fine three-course meal with local wine in the dining room of the visiting magistrates' house. Looking on to the gardens and the harbour beyond, all of it bathed in autumn sunshine, it's hard to imagine a lovelier setting for a hell on Earth.

Luke Slattery was a guest of *Cultural Attractions of Australia*.



Lagoon at JW Marriott Gold Coast Resort & Spa; Executive Suite, below

## THE NEW WAVE

A slick new look for a Gold Coast icon

CHRISTINE McCABE

Dawn arrives bright and clear over the cerulean waters of the Gold Coast as surfers, appearing small as sardines from my 27th-floor eyrie, paddle out to meet the break.

It's impossible to miss a thing from room 2715 of the recently refurbished and rebranded JW Marriott Gold Coast Resort & Spa. There are views up and down the coast, from the bed, the stylish living room and the corner bathtub, which is the size of a small plunge pool. Meanwhile, the balcony affords a drone's-eye view of the resort's famous lagoon complex, with its palm trees, waterfalls and fishy coves.

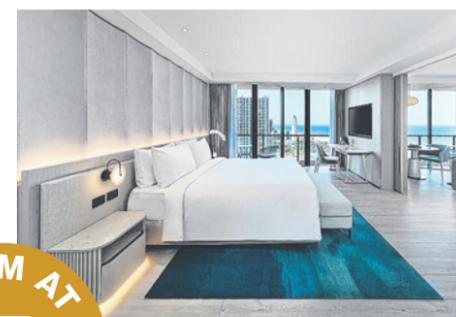
As part of a \$35m makeover unveiled in December, the lagoon was drained, and 300 tropical fish sent to holiday at SeaWorld while the grottoes and white sand beaches were given a spring clean.

The revamp was central to the rebranding of the three-decade-old, family-friendly Surfers Paradise Marriott Resort. By becoming a JW Marriott, the first in the South Pacific, the hotel joins a stable of 100 properties worldwide, offering “elevated” facilities and services. The day spa is the last piece of the puzzle and will close at the end of July for renovations and expansion, reopening in December.

Management went back to the original architects and designers, DBI, to zhuzh up the 223-room resort. In the cavernous lobby, they unearthed and reinstalled the old rattan punkah fans (a lovely touch), rubbed back the handsome sandstone floors and rezoned the space to include the signature JW “concierge library” alongside the Chapter & Verse bar, inspired by Judith Wright's poem *Lyrebirds*. The signature cocktail is served in a vessel shaped like a bird, but the hirsute mixologists also make a mean cuppa, which I enjoy in a highbacked cane chair, a contemporary version of the sort favoured by Jonathan Quayle Higgins III in the original *Magnum PI*, if you're old enough to remember him. (High tea is also available; I'm sure Higgins would approve.)

DBI has taken the Gold Coast's beaches and lush hinterland as its inspiration, so there's lots of greenery and potted palms plus natural finishes, including timber, stone and cane.

The sun-drenched guestrooms, offering coastal or hinterland views, feel very Miami, all soft sand whites and sea blues with pale timber floors. In the junior suites there's a separate living room, king bed and giant TVs in each room. A sleek credenza houses a minibar with coffee-pod machine and proper milk (from a farmer-owned dairy). In lieu of bottled water, guests are supplied with a glass flask; there's a refilling station (with



ice) on every floor. It's a brilliant idea.

Breakfast, served in the all-day dining Citrique, is an enormous buffet almost as large as the lagoon, with everything from full English to waffles with ice-cream (in these Covid times, dishes are behind glass and guests are served rather than helping themselves). Next door, a small cafe sells picnic fare, courtesy local providers, and fresh produce from a rapidly developing kitchen garden at the rear of the resort where the chefs tend the vegetables, worm farm and native beehives. As part of the signature Family by JW program, Citrique hosts cooking classes for children, who are welcome to forage in the garden first.

Also new is the signature Japanese restaurant Misono, on this Saturday night frantically busy and unbelievably noisy as diners shriek with delight at the teppan-yaki chefs' antics. A private, quieter dining room is available for adults (and a whisky bar with outdoor terrace). Better yet is the sushi bar, where I retreat to enjoy a quiet evening watching the talented chefs at work.

But the heart of this well-loved resort, reimagined to cater not only to families but travellers of all ages, remains that magical lagoon, complete with sand and living coral. There are plenty of quiet, leafy nooks to hide away in and pools of various depths, plus secret grottoes and waterfalls. A brilliant water slide winds through a “mountain” (fish are fed daily at 9.30am in the saltwater lagoon). A bar, food truck and 11 private cabanas (for rent from \$95 a day) complete the picture, while an adjoining 10-berth marina on the river offers jet ski and paddleboard hire.

Although the hotel is less than a five-minute walk from the beach, most guests find little need to leave the lagoon. And why would they?

Christine McCabe was a guest of JW Marriott Gold Coast Resort & Spa and Tourism and Events Queensland.  
[queensland.com](http://queensland.com)

#### IN THE KNOW

JW Marriott Gold Coast Resort & Spa is on Ferny Ave, Surfers Paradise. Almost all guestroom categories have balconies; from \$329 a night.  
[marriott.com.au](http://marriott.com.au)