



#TASMANIA #PORTARTHUR

The feast of fate

A new Cultural Attractions of Australia tour highlights Port Arthur in all its gory glory. Then there's the gourmet feast... *By Steve Madgwick*

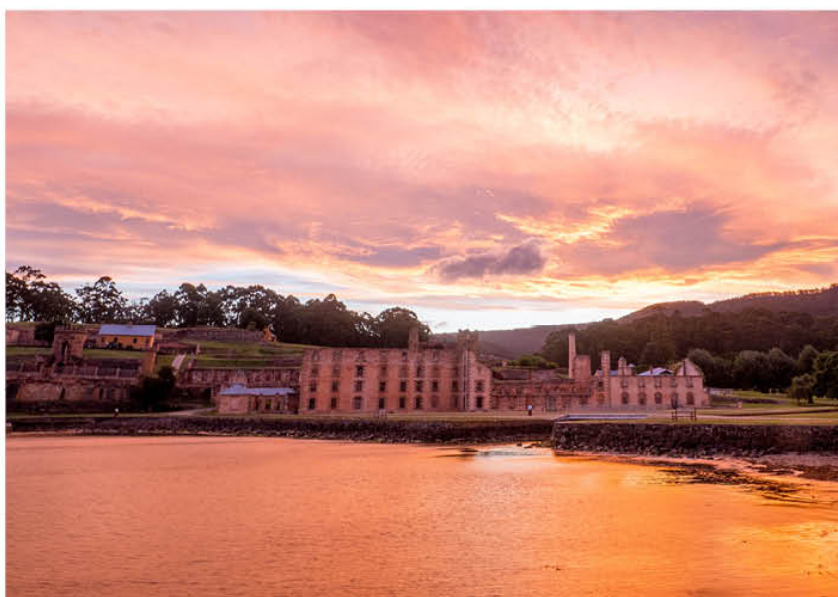
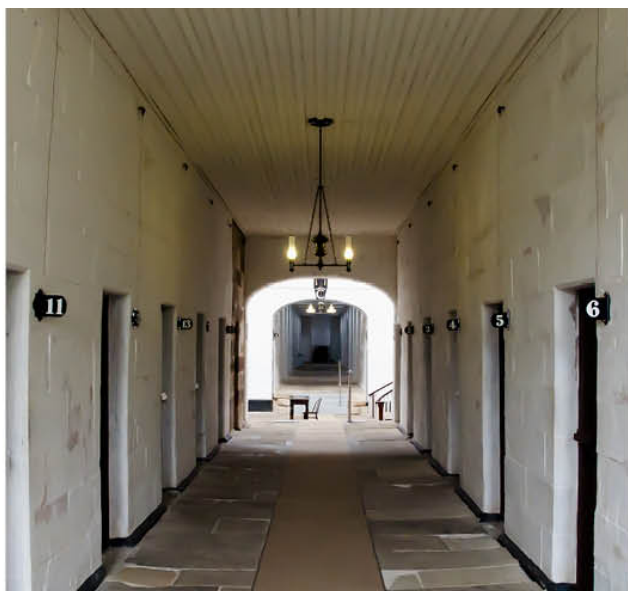
Perched on a floral sofa inside the Commandant's House, which whiffs of Grandma's linen press, Colin Knight recounts grave and gory anecdotes from Tasmania's Village of the Damned and Australia's true-crime Shangri-la: Port Arthur Historic Site. He gauges my reactions to tailor the 'Wheel of Fate' to my proclivities; meanwhile, he's repelling rubbernecking folk behind the ropes so I can sip a glass of 'A' by Arras Premium Cuvée in relative serenity.

This new private tour is the antithesis of hurried school excursion-style jaunts you might expect of Tasmania's 40-hectare, starkly picturesque convict

penal settlement, not least because of the private banquet finale. The 'Wheel of Fate' comes from the stables of behind-the-ropes virtuosos, Cultural Attractions of Australia.

Knight unlocks foreboding recesses of the 'Imperfect Georgian' Main Penitentiary, 'Silent' Separate Prison and sinister Senior Surgeon's basement (site of unofficial human dissections), physically and in less tangible ways. Spaces that once held – some say still hold – the most depraved/and or desperately unlucky characters in history, from convicts-turned-bushrangers to real-life Dickensian 'urban hunter-gatherers' (inmates Isaac Solomon and Samuel

ABOVE: Port Arthur Historic Site holds many tales of gory horror in its depths. © Hype TV. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A Port Arthur prison corridor © Shutterstock; beauty among the history © Alastair Bett; imbibe while you learn and get hands-on on a 'Wheel of Fate' tour © Peter Whyte; delving into Port Arthur's history © Peter Whyte



TRAVEL FACTS

INFORMATION

culturalattractionsofaustralia.com

Holmes reportedly inspired Fagin and the Artful Dodger), sent to Van Diemen's Land by the ill-fated lottery of life.

The tour's philosophy is to find the humanity behind the convict freakshow so entangled with Australia's modern identity.

The "highly intelligent and relatively gentle" William Westwood, victim of the Wheel of Fate at a tender age, is a prime example. Charged with highway robbery at 13, he was transported at age 16 for stealing a six-shilling coat. "By coincidence, the person whose coat he stole was in the same shop to buy a new one – and was offered his own," says Knight.

Westwood's trajectory was defined by his jailers' whims and his own yearning

for freedom. After helping to save a boat crew, he was allowed to work outside Port Arthur under a malevolent employer before escaping to become a bushranger. 'Jackey Jackey', as he became known, would "dress up in a nice suit for his robberies" and once, reportedly, "danced with a commandant's wife during a stage coach robbery".

Recaptured, he was hanged on Norfolk Island after leading a murderous rebellion against a creepy commandant. "If fate hadn't turned him to crime before puberty, born today, he could have been an entrepreneur," says Knight as we move on to enjoy our 'last meal'.

Inside a private dining room in the Visiting Magistrate's House, chef Scott

Greensmith serves up chicken pistachio and garlic terrine wrapped in pancetta, followed by a crispy-skin pork belly, twice cooked, paired with a Norfolk Bay pinot noir.

Over a "simple" Eton mess, the talk turns to how Australia has changed since the days of floggings and the equally repugnant physiological punishment of Port Arthur's 'silent' prison, which "routinely sent already vulnerable characters insane".

"Port Arthur was not a world significantly different to ours, although in some ways it's like another planet," says Knight. "Now, everyone's life expectancy is extraordinary by comparison but, back then, if you bit your tongue you might die." Food for thought indeed. 🍷