

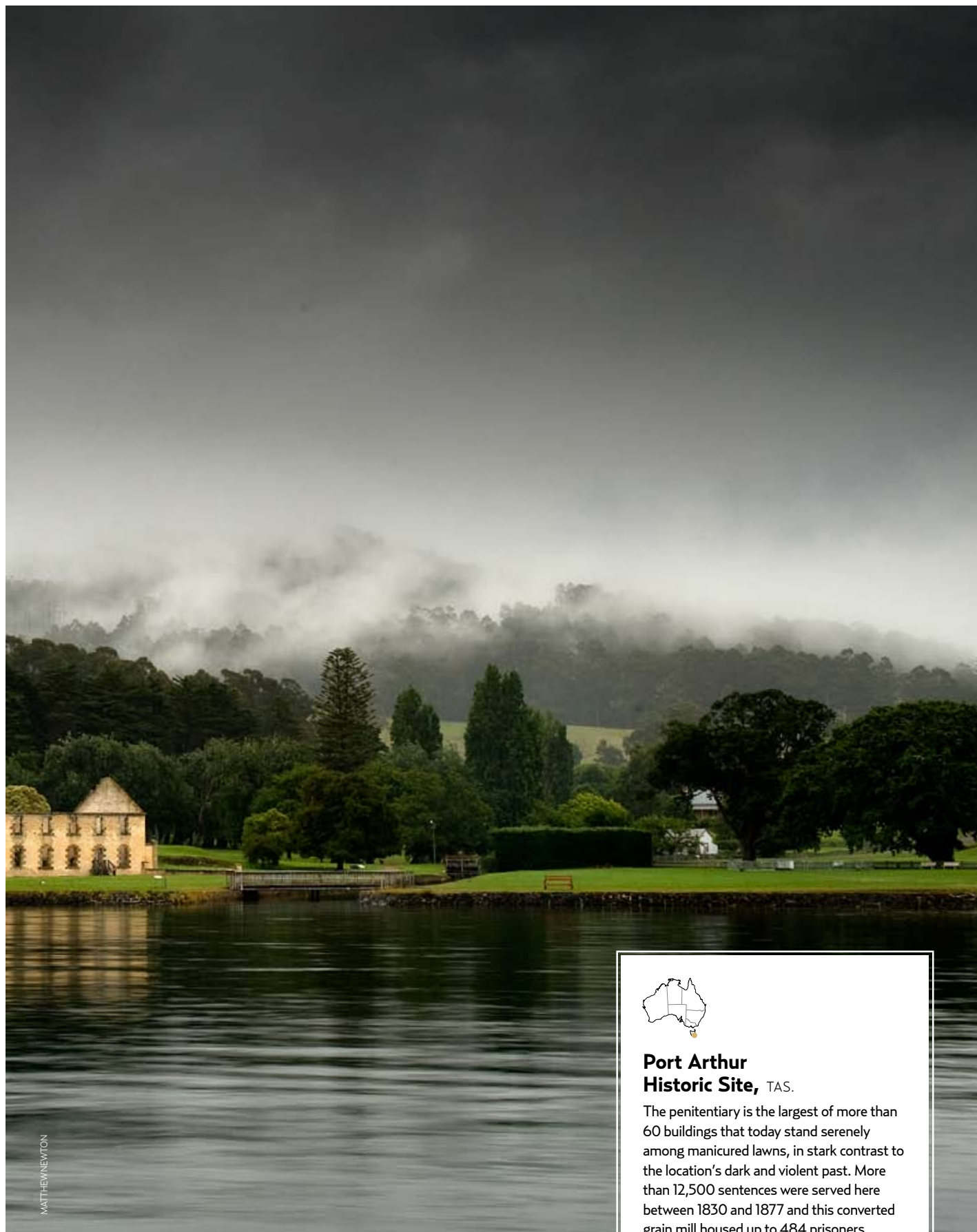
AUSTRALIA'S WORLD HERITAGE

# OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Spanning the continent, 11 sites that best represent  
Australia's convict past — once a source of national shame —  
are our latest addition to the coveted World Heritage List.

STORY BY **ASHLEY HAY**





MATTHEW NEWTON



### **Port Arthur Historic Site,** TAS.

The penitentiary is the largest of more than 60 buildings that today stand serenely among manicured lawns, in stark contrast to the location's dark and violent past. More than 12,500 sentences were served here between 1830 and 1877 and this converted grain mill housed up to 484 prisoners.

IT'S A SCORCHING GREY January day in the hills north-west of Sydney. The sun, glaringly bright behind the clouds, renders the landscape so searingly hot it's almost brittle, the edges of angophora leaves are sharp enough to cut, the metallic sheen of their burnished trunks almost molten. The path is thick with branches and spider webs.

We are part-way up Devines Hill, surveyed in the 1820s to connect Sydney with settlements in the Hunter Valley. It's steep and cobbled, with glimpses beyond of rows of purple ranges, to the vertiginous poles of tall, straight gums, and the wide, green plain of the Hawkesbury River. Sheer rock – Sydney's sandstone, brushed with rich reds and oranges – rises up on one side, the hand-driven drill holes once used to blast sections of it away still visible. This stone was then hewn to form the great walls, up to 12 m high, which buttress the lower side of the boulevard as it drops into the valley below. The sound of cicadas reverberates and swells against these high panels of rock. Squadrons of mosquitoes, huge and hungry, swoop on any stationary flesh. To stand, sweating and bitten, looking onto nothing but trees and sky, with the screaming tinnitus of thousands of insects in your ears, it's impossible to think you might ever be anywhere else – the only question is, do you believe yourself to be in the 21st century, or in an older, harder age, almost 200 years previously?

This place is a small section of the Old Great North Road, constructed by gangs of convicts – 720 in all, some in chains – between 1826 and 1834. On the one hand, a feat of 19th-century civil engineering, on the other it's one of the ultimately futile exercises undertaken to exhaust different gangs of felons; by the time the road was complete, it had been almost entirely abandoned in favour of other routes and coastal steamers.

In 2010 the road became one of 11 Australian sites awarded World Heritage listing as “the best surviving examples of large-scale convict transportation and the colonial expansion of European powers through the presence and labour of convicts”. “There's a [World Heritage] listing for the slave ports in Ghana,”



“By going to [Port Arthur, visitors] can look into the dark soul of humanity and learn something about our past.”

explains University of Tasmania Associate Professor Hamish Maxwell-Stewart (above). In Mauritius, a site was listed to represent the international experience of indentured labour (when a migrant agrees to work without pay in exchange for their passage, food and lodging). “Our argument was that the Australian sites were the best example of transportation, and that transportation was the third great system of unfree labour,” says Hamish.

The Australian sites span more than 1500 km north–south – from Norfolk Island to Tasmania's Tasman Peninsula – and 5000 km east–west, from Norfolk to Fremantle, WA. Beyond the Norfolk sites, initially settled just six weeks after the First Fleet arrived in Sydney in 1788, mainland sites in NSW encompass Old Government House and Domain in the Parramatta, Hyde Park Barracks, and Cockatoo Island in Paramatta River – as well as the Old Great North Road. In Tasmania, they comprise the Cascades



**Canary's wharf.** Distinctive yellow and white uniforms earned Sydney's convicts the nickname 'canary birds'. Two are depicted here writing letters in a rare moment of ease on Cockatoo Island.

Female Factory in Hobart; Port Arthur and a convict-worked coal mine on the Tasman Peninsula; two farming estates – Brickendon and Woolmers – near Launceston; and the Darlington Probation Station on Maria Island. The final property is the Fremantle Prison in WA, built by convict labour in the 1850s.

The transportation system processed more than 166,000 people in Australia, from the 700-odd who arrived on the First Fleet's ships to the 50 whose care was transferred to the WA government almost 100 years later, in 1886 – 18 years after transportation ended. The last convict was released from Fremantle in 1906. And through the landscapes of these 11 different sites you can begin to imagine some of their stories.

TO DRIVE DOWN the scarp into the Georgian architecture of Kingston and Arthurs Vale on Norfolk Island is to feel you've driven out of the 21st century. There are few cars, no streetlights, and the ambient noise is the wind brushing tall, dark pine trees. There are cows, seabirds, a few chooks, and more than 40 buildings, including the prettily colonnaded houses of Quality Row, the imposing utility of the Commissariat store, the barracks, Pier Store and Government House, set with deep verandahs and pleasant gardens. All were built by convicts – and some with possible revolt in mind: Catherine Robins, resident of one Quality Row house, bars the heavy internal wooden shutters on her front windows and gestures to the thick walls. “Built to withstand intrusion,” she says. The beauty of the view outside extinguishes any lingering frisson of horror or violence.

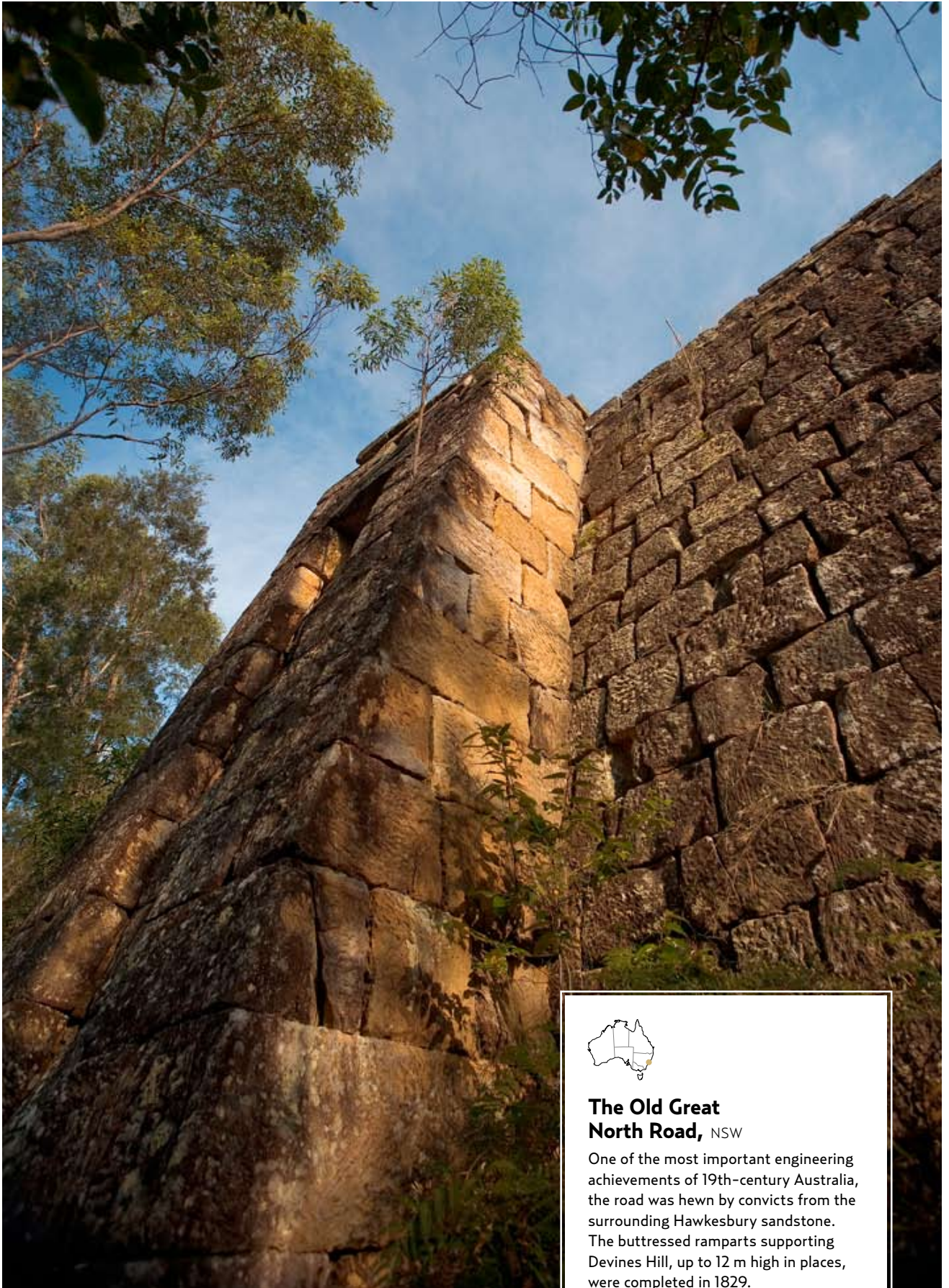
“The lash, the chain, the blood and guts, everyone thinks they know that,” says Bruce Baskerville, site manager for the Kingston and Arthurs Vale Historic Area on Norfolk Island. “But the convict story is more than leg-irons.”

“I'm always reminded of a convict called Linus Miller,” Hamish says. “He ended up at Port Arthur and said, ‘Look on the dark face of Van Diemen's Land and learn wisdom’. I think tourists do that now. They think that by going to the site they can look into the dark soul of humanity and learn something about our past.”

But beyond the shorthand of solitary confinement and flogging, transportation is, as he says, a very complicated story. Convicts had relatively high rates of literacy – they were more able to write a letter home than the people there would be likely to read it. They received good health care – as functioning

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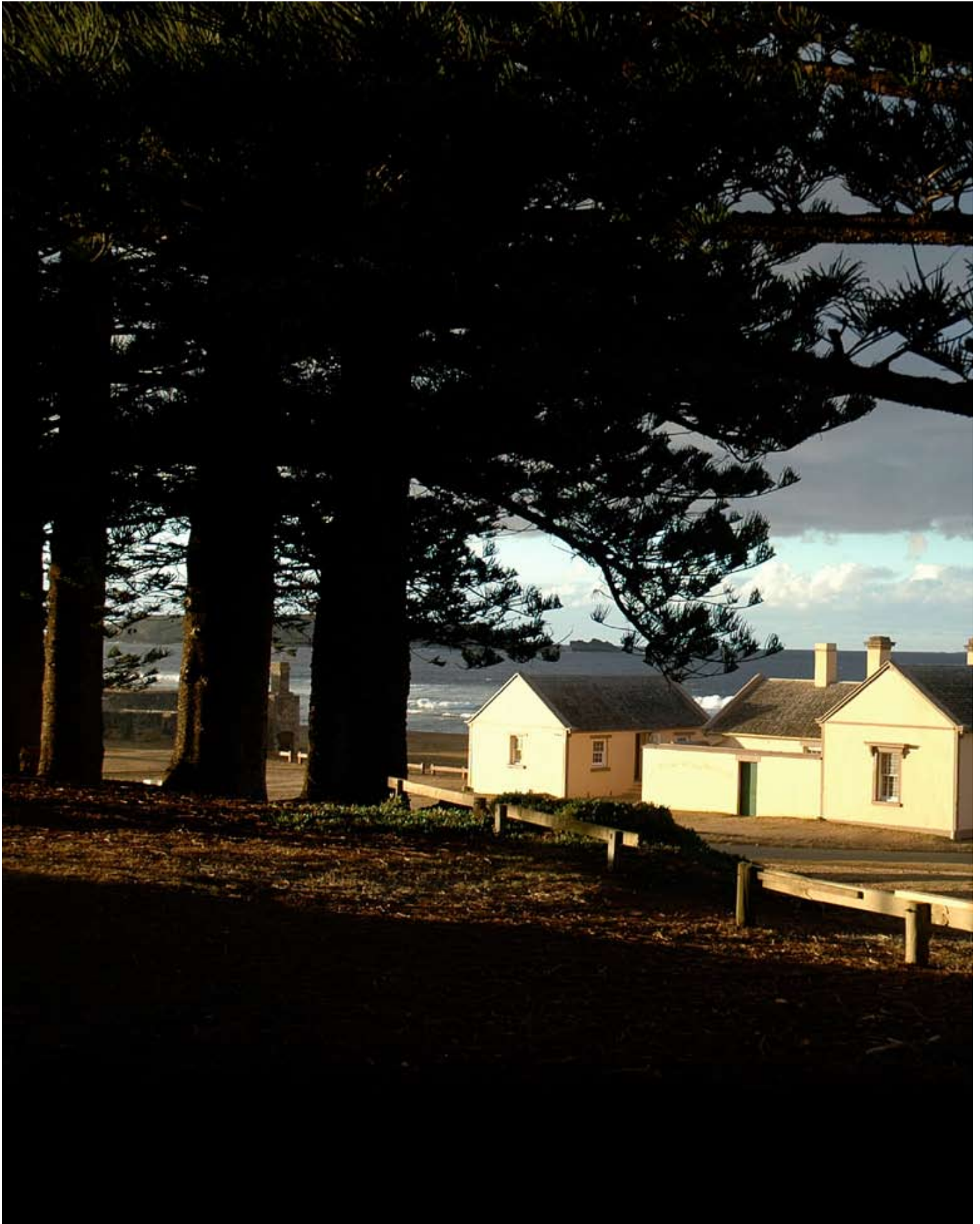


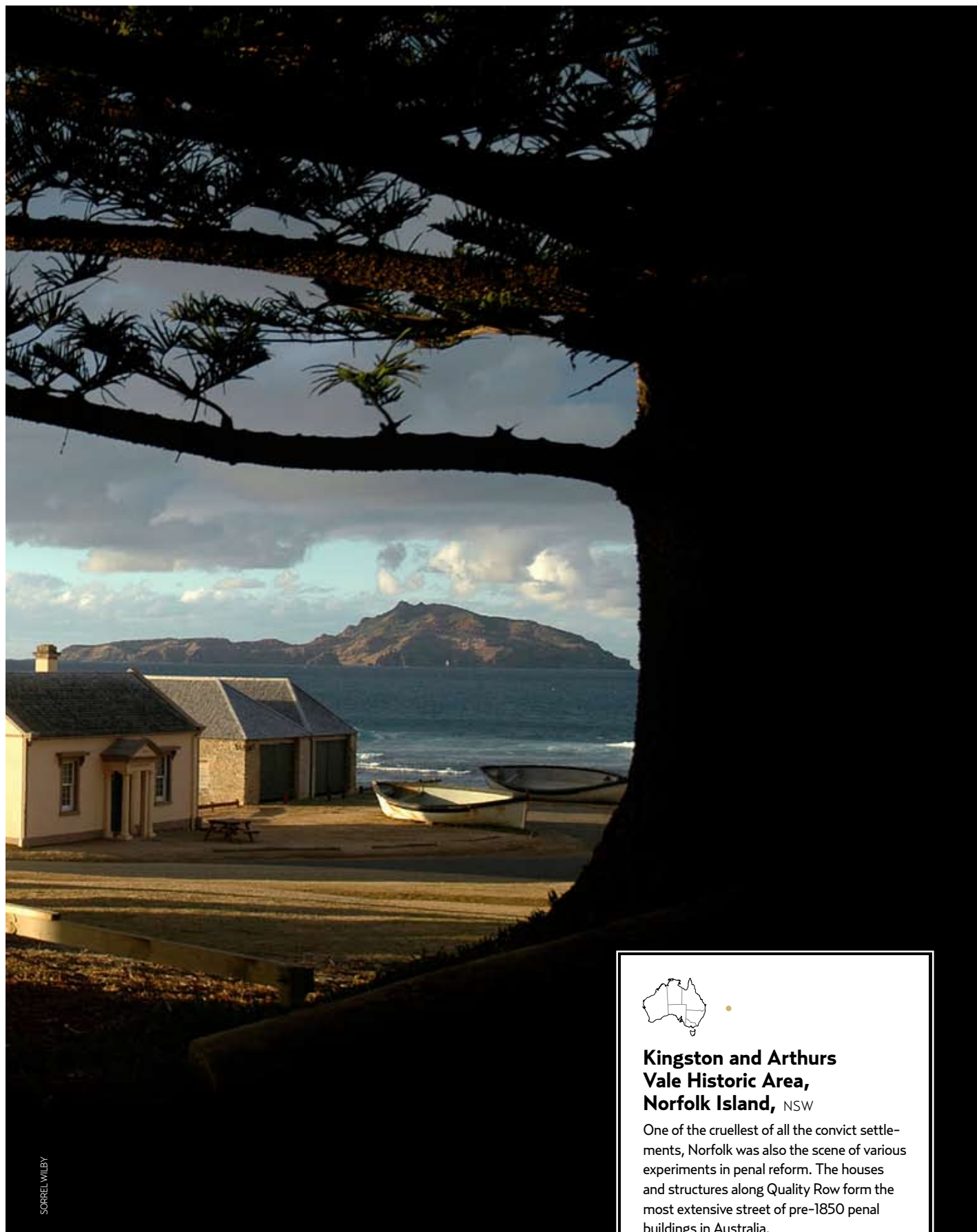


### **The Old Great North Road,** <sup>NSW</sup>

One of the most important engineering achievements of 19th-century Australia, the road was hewn by convicts from the surrounding Hawkesbury sandstone. The buttressed ramparts supporting Devines Hill, up to 12 m high in places, were completed in 1829.







SORREL WILBY



**Kingston and Arthurs  
Vale Historic Area,  
Norfolk Island, <sup>NSW</sup>**

One of the cruellest of all the convict settlements, Norfolk was also the scene of various experiments in penal reform. The houses and structures along Quality Row form the most extensive street of pre-1850 penal buildings in Australia.





### **Fremantle Prison, WA**

WA was founded as a free settlement, but in 1850, pastoralists began lobbying for convicts to solve a labour shortage. About 10,000 were sent to and incarcerated in the Fremantle prison complex. It is the most intact of the penal sites, largely because it continued to operate as a prison until 1991.



property of a system that needed all the labour it could get, there was an incentive to keep them alive. There's evidence that transportation may have increased life span. Some transgressed with the sole intention of being transported – one even curtsied and thanked the judge on hearing her sentence.

Still, the more dreadful ideas of what being a convict involved are not “entirely misplaced”, says Hamish. “The populations labouring in gangs in places like Port Arthur, Norfolk Island and Macquarie Harbour did poorly. But for the vast majority of convicts, particularly those assigned to rural properties, the records suggest the experience was probably better than staying in Britain. Of course, that only tells you about the biological experience, not the psychological experience of being ripped away from your family. But the bottom line is that a pound of fresh meat each day, medical care and free clothing outweighed the lash and the leg-irons and all the coercion – except for the convicts who went through penal stations.”

It's one reason why the inclusion of sites like Brickendon and Woolmers mattered to the World Heritage nomination. “Heritage is about material things,” says historian Grace Karskens, whose book *The Colony* won the 2010 Prime Minister's Award. “Often the things that survived are the big, heavy structures that represent power. That means the lighter signatures of people's experience are erased and you're left with all the hard bits, which obscure the amazingly brave and rough and picaresque things that convicts actually achieved.” It's about the more mundane things too, like building the graceful homes of rural properties, or working their land at an agricultural or domestic level.

It is, as Hamish says, a complicated story, and one of the attractions of these 11 sites is the way they allow you to navigate almost 100 years of Australian history through slivers of space that each reveal a little more. Norfolk's first settlement reminds you of Sydney's failure to grow its own food; its second, of the need for a supposedly inescapable island. Cockatoo Island reminds you that Sydney, just decades beyond its own settlement, no longer wanted convicts in its midst. If nothing else, they demonstrate the changing architecture of institutions, from Sydney's first jail – Hyde Park Barracks – built 30 years after settlement, to Norfolk's pentagonal panopticon (a prison where the guards can see into every cell from a central point) and the claustrophobic solitary confinement cells at Port Arthur. “Across 80 years from 1788, there's this back-and-forward argument about the purpose of transportation – to punish, or to reform,” says Bruce. “Of course it's never entirely one or the other, and the sites reflect these changes and debates.”

“They chose their landscapes very wisely,” says Jody Steele, heritage programs manager for the two sites on the Tasman Peninsula. “And in part they chose them for what was available. The Tasman Peninsula could be cut off, a jail in itself, and Port Arthur had magnificent stands of timber to fell. Then they found coal, which meant no longer having to ship it in from New South Wales; coal mining is a very arduous task to set your convicts. So it's two birds with one stone – you've got a natural resource, and a great way to punish the worst of the worst.”

Standing on the water's edge at Slaughter Bay, Norfolk Island, Bruce (below) gestures towards the reef that claimed the First Fleet's flagship, *Sirius*, in 1790, and a row of stones below the water. “The story goes that that causeway was built to recover items from the *Sirius*,” he says, squinting into the sun. “If that's right, then that's Australia's oldest extant colonial structure, right there.” In the Pier Store, behind him, sits a selection of the ship's artefacts recovered during the late 1980s – one of the *Sirius*'s bower anchors, two of its carronades, and everything else from ammunition and sheathing nails to spigots, ceramics, and surgeons' supplies.



“There's this back-and-forward argument about the purpose of transportation – to punish, or to reform.”

These relics have a power as tangible as Port Arthur's grand ruins or Fremantle's imposing gatehouse: it's simply that they exist, that they're extant. The same power shimmers in road gangs' graffiti on the Old Great North Road, the photographs of some of Port Arthur's prisoners, shockingly modern looking, and the few possessions of Governor Macquarie still held in Old Government House – a plate, a letter-writing chest, a bed.

WHAT WILL WORLD HERITAGE listing mean for these 11 properties? Will it change how people see them, and what happens in their space? For the smaller sites, says Jody, “like the coal mines, Maria Island, and Brickendon–Woolmers, you hope it'll push them into the public's imagination – give them that extra bit of attention”. Bruce hopes it will formalise the cooperation between the sites that took place during the long nomination process – and encourage new research on each. The World Heritage citation emphasises continuing scholarship. “We've preserved the book,” he says of the properties. “Now we have to teach people to read it.”

It's where Hamish Maxwell-Stewart's work comes into play: for several years now, he's been assembling extensive information about convicts – where they were born, where they moved to and committed their crimes, and how they were transported and spent time in the Australian colonies, particularly Tasmania. “We can trace about 40,000 people from cradle to grave,” he says. “And we can do it because the records are fabulous. We know the colour of the eyes of the people who built colonial Australia.” What this means, he says, is that it's possible to repopulate the convict sites in a completely unique way.

Turn quickly and the past impersonates a complete story, inevitable and seamless. But approach through the prisms of history, archaeology, or heritage, and it's an accreted and evolving thing, its bits and pieces always resurfacing.

On the Old Great North Road, on that hot summer's day, I felt neither pain nor exhaustion, labour nor loneliness. But in the time it took to climb Devines Hill and come down the other side, there was the space to imagine some small parts of the many things that have happened here before now, and to wonder about their people, their stories and how they form part of who we are today.

AG

Author and journalist **Ashley Hay** lives in Brisbane. Her novel *The Body in the Clouds* was shortlisted for best first novel in the South-East Asia and Pacific region of the 2011 Commonwealth Writers' Prize.



# WORLD CLASS

Thirty years ago, three Australian wonders were inscribed on the World Heritage list. They've since been joined by 15 others and stand alongside nearly 900 worldwide.

STORY BY EMMA YOUNG

**T**HE WORLD HERITAGE Convention was born in 1972, in the wake of a series of successful UNESCO campaigns to save irreplaceable treasures, including the Abu Simbel temples in Egypt, and Venice and its Lagoon in Italy. In 1978, 12 sites were inscribed on the original list, and Australia's first entries were added just three years later, in 1981.

"Australia was one of the earliest signatories of the World Heritage Convention," says protected-areas expert Associate Professor Peter Valentine, from James Cook University, Townsville. "The government wanted to very quickly make a mark by getting some of our obvious sites on the list."

The Great Barrier Reef was an obvious natural choice, while Kakadu National Park and the Willandra Lakes Region, home to Australia's oldest human remains, were recognised both for their natural and cultural significance. Our latest addition to the World Heritage list, Australian Convict Sites, were inscribed in 2010. These 11 locations closely connected to our convict past were listed solely for their cultural values, as were two other Australian World Heritage areas (WHA).

"World Heritage listing provides two important and related benefits: protection and promotion," says Eleanor Casella, an archaeologist at the University of Manchester, UK, who has worked at the convict sites. In Kakadu, for example, it helped halt mining projects – and while State governments have control over their environment and natural resources, the Federal Government can use its legal powers under the World Heritage Convention, to step in.

Australia remains unusual in having World Heritage listing enshrined in an act of law – and it has been useful on more

than one occasion. In the late '80s, the Queensland government opposed the nomination of the Wet Tropics as a WHA, because it wanted logging to continue.

"This was a very tense period, with the government of Queensland aggressively chasing the last few old-growth trees," says Peter Valentine. The State then took the federal government to court, challenging its move to halt the logging under the 1983 Act, but lost the case.

World Heritage listing has also protected the Great Barrier Reef, the Wet Tropics area and others from exploitation. "The traditional owners of the Jabiluka mine project area, the Mirarr people, sent a delegation to UNESCO in 1998 and were instrumental in drawing national and international attention to their concerns," says Imelda Dover, tourism manager at Kakadu NP. "They successfully used the World Heritage listing as a tool to assist their struggle to prevent mining at Jabiluka."

"One of the reasons conservation groups like World Heritage listings is that if a developer wants to build something massive inside a national park – which they try all the time – then if the State government rolls over, if it's also World Heritage listed, then those conservation groups can appeal to the federal government," says Professor Ralf Buckley, who researches ecotourism at Griffith University on the Gold Coast.

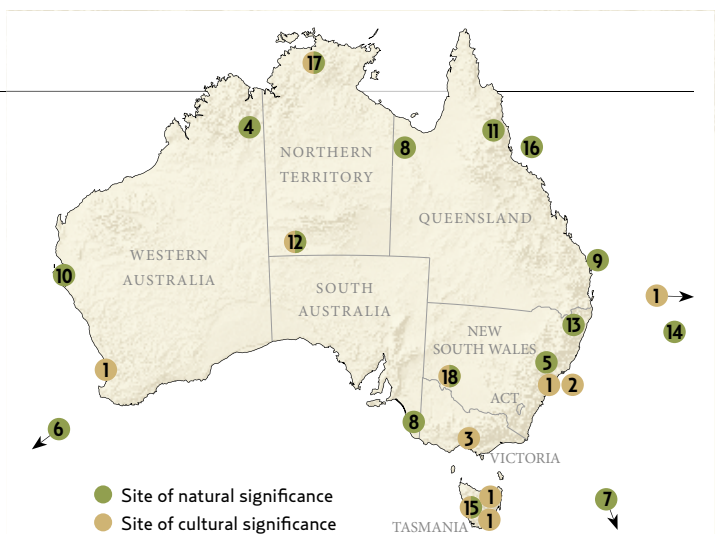
And while World Heritage listing can impede some people, it can provide new opportunities for others. In the Wet Tropics, for example, while unsustainable logging was halted, tourism soared. "Within a year or two of the World Heritage listing in 1988, the tourism industry was worth seven times as much per year as the logging industry had been previously," Ralf says. **AG**

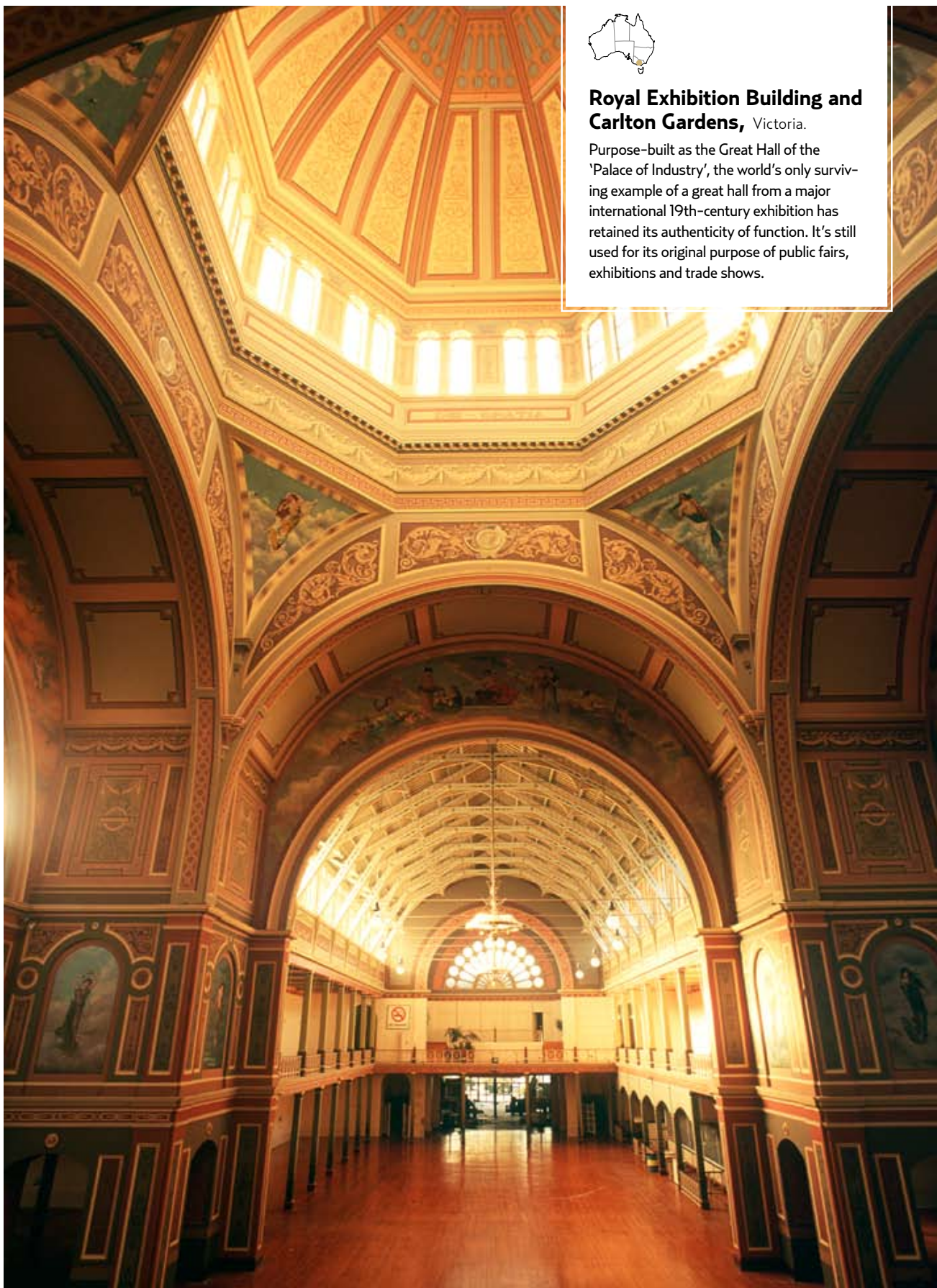
## Australia's World Heritage

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| 1. Australian Convict Sites                                | 10. Shark Bay                         |
| 2. Sydney Opera House                                      | 11. Wet Tropics of Queensland         |
| 3. Royal Exhibition Building and Carlton Gardens           | 12. Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park    |
| 4. Purnululu National Park                                 | 13. Gondwana rainforests of Australia |
| 5. Greater Blue Mountains Area                             | 14. Lord Howe Island group            |
| 6. Heard and McDonald islands                              | 15. Tasmanian Wilderness              |
| 7. Macquarie Island  | 16. Great Barrier Reef                |
| 8. Australian Fossil Mammal Sites (Riversleigh/Naracoorte) | 17. Kakadu National Park              |
| 9. Fraser Island   | 18. Willandra Lakes Region            |



**SEE** Australia's World Heritage areas – including the newly listed convict sites – in more detail on our poster map, free to subscribers with this issue.





## Royal Exhibition Building and Carlton Gardens, Victoria.

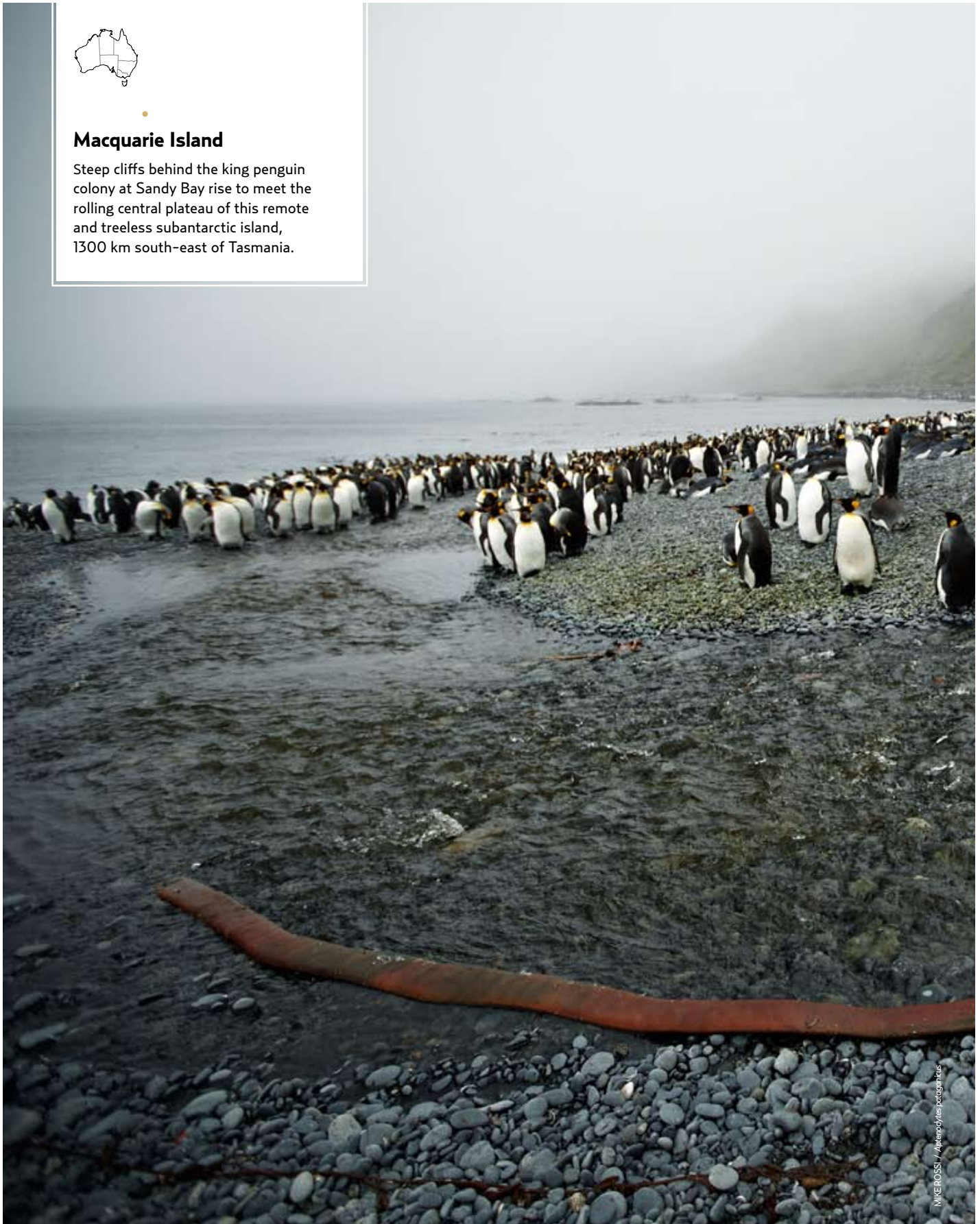
Purpose-built as the Great Hall of the 'Palace of Industry', the world's only surviving example of a great hall from a major international 19th-century exhibition has retained its authenticity of function. It's still used for its original purpose of public fairs, exhibitions and trade shows.





## Macquarie Island

Steep cliffs behind the king penguin colony at Sandy Bay rise to meet the rolling central plateau of this remote and treeless subantarctic island, 1300 km south-east of Tasmania.



MIKE BOSSI / ALAMY.COM



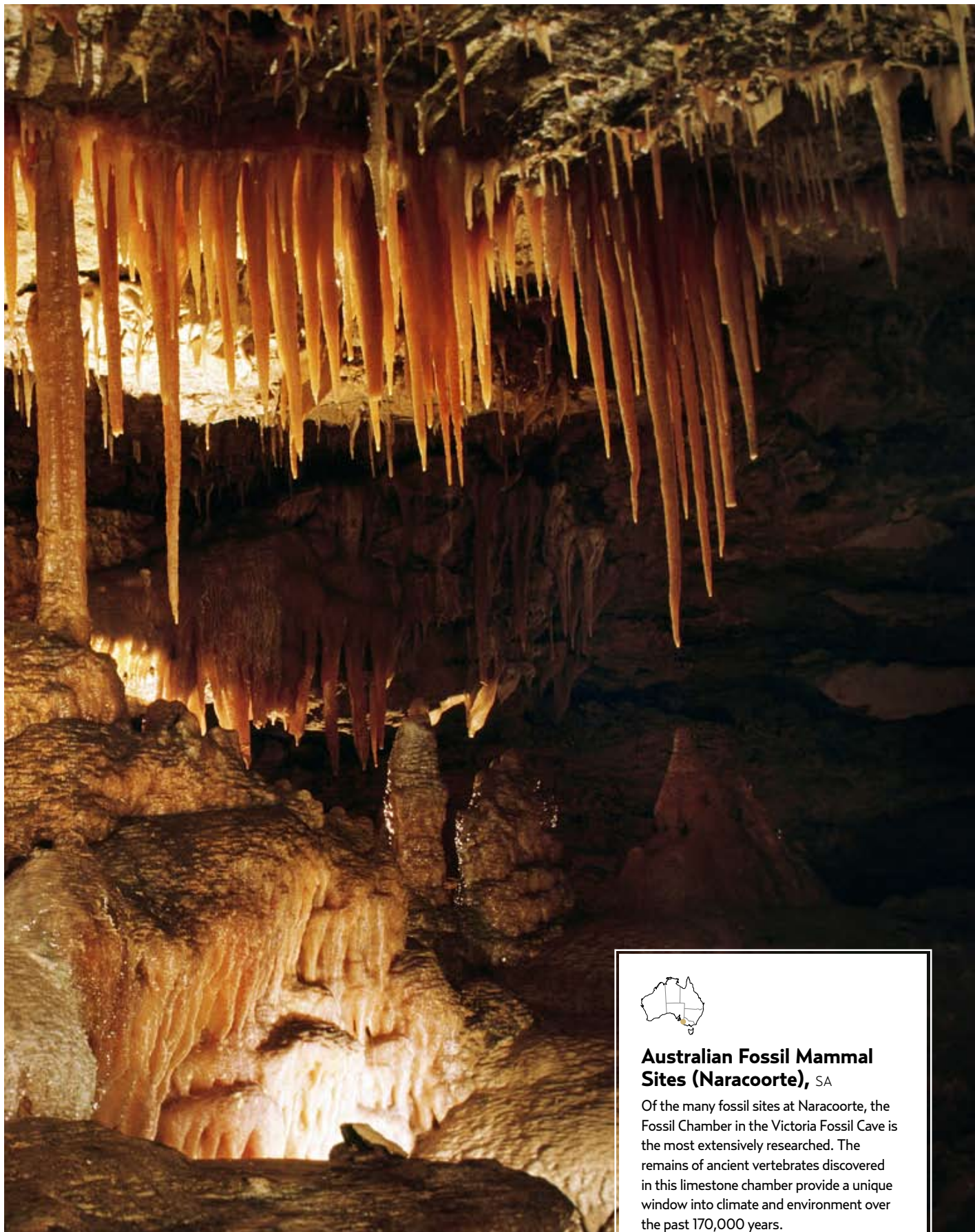






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### **Australian Fossil Mammal Sites (Naracoorte), SA**

Of the many fossil sites at Naracoorte, the Fossil Chamber in the Victoria Fossil Cave is the most extensively researched. The remains of ancient vertebrates discovered in this limestone chamber provide a unique window into climate and environment over the past 170,000 years.