

Queensland: St Helena Island



In many ways, Queensland's most historic island is Australia's version of Alcatraz. For more than 60 years St Helena Island was home to hundred's of society's outcasts, for here stood colonial Queensland's foremost maximum security prison for men. This beautiful National Park, located four kilometres from the mouth of the Brisbane River, is rich in history and has a fascinating and colourful past.

Located in Moreton Bay approximately 8 km north-east of the Brisbane suburb of Manly, St Helena Island is Queensland's first 'Historic Site' National Park. The island has open, grass covered slopes, a steep eastern escarpment leading to an extensive mangrove forest, a limited beach area adjacent to spreading mudflats on the southern shore, and the ruins of a prison built in the last century.

St Helena Island ruins 2 Human use of the island's resources has varied dramatically over the years. One story of the long-term use of Noogoon (St Helena) by the aboriginal people is buried in a major midden. The flying fox that once inhabited the island evokes the image of an island covered in a dense forest while today it is visually reminiscent of English countryside. In many ways the environmental and social history of the island reflects that of the Australian continent, making it an excellent site for the consideration of such issues as human impact on the environment and changes in social attitudes.

The "St Helena Island Penal Establishment" operated from 1867 to 1932, beginning just 25 years after the convict era. During this 65 year period, the island was sequentially, an expanding colonial penal establishment, a maximum security gaol for men and an aging prison and prison farm. Although most remaining structures on the island were built by prison labour, the site also contains the remains of a much wider range of historically significant buildings, landscapes and artefacts. One remaining wooden building has been carefully restored and now houses a museum. Together these structures and landscapes allow imaginative reconstruction of the life and atmosphere on the island during the prison days.

The St. Helena tramway is considered to have been a most significant component of the prison establishment; it operated between 1885 and 1932 and provided the first passenger tramcar service in Queensland. Remaining evidence includes the tramway embankments, the distinguishable rights of way, the docking bay in the Stores building, the 'Kangaroo' car and the trolley wheels.

Today, the waters surrounding St Helena Island are popular for fishing and crabbing. The grassed flats in the unrestricted zone are ideal for picnicking and ball games. The mud flats to

the south-east at low tide expose a wealth of surprises for the beachcomber. Guided tours of the ruins give an insight to the penal and social aspects of the mid 1800's to early 1900's.

St Helena Island is 7km north-east of Manly, a suburb of Brisbane, and 45 minutes by boat. Regular ferry services depart from Manly and New Farm. Private boats may be moored off the island. Consider the tides when anchoring in shallow water. The southern corner of the island is open to the public without a tour guide. The rest of the island, including the prison ruins, is a restricted access area and entry is by guided tour only.



About Moreton Bay

Moreton Bay, to the east of the city of Brisbane and its suburbs, is very much the city's playground, a wide expanse of relatively calm water dotted with many surprisingly unspoilt islands of different sizes and varying character. The bay extends some 160 km from Caloundra in the north almost to Surfers Paradise in the south.

The bay's southern navigation entrance is the Gold Coast Seaway. It is a haven for wildlife - spotting dolphins, whales, turtles and manta rays, and its vast array of birdlife is a popular pass time. The bay's heritage protected wetlands, mudflats, and waterways are some of the healthiest in the region, supporting seasonally up to 25 percent of Australia's bird species. Moreton Bay is also a popular destination for recreational anglers and is used by commercial operators who provide seafood to market. A number of ferry and water-taxi services travel over the bay either to and from islands or on day and half-day sightseeing and fishing tours.