

St Helena Island, grim past but a perfect day out - Brismania

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For the poor souls incarcerated on St Helena Island it was hell on earth, but a century later it's a picturesque destination with fascinating remnants of its past.

For 65 years, St Helena was the scene of some brutal business, but these days it's a historic national park (Queensland's first when it was declared in October 1979) that provides excellent motivation to take a trip into Moreton Bay.



A new jetty was built in 1988 to link up to the causeway built by prisoners more than a century earlier.

St Helena is a pleasant 30-minute cruise from Manly on the *Cat o' Nine Tails* tour which is the best way to see the island.

This is because access to most of the prison ruins is by guided tour only, and also, this team brings history to life, led by suitably attired “prisoners” and their “guard” Andre who has many a good yarn to tell about Brisbane history generally and St Helena specifically.

Almost immediately he sets the record straight. St Helena never was a place for convicts.

It opened in 1867 as Queensland's first penal establishment to house long-term, high-security male prisoners who were crowded into cells at Petrie Terrace and spilling into the hulk *Proserpine* moored in the Brisbane River.

Next, we learn that Captain Cook planned to name the bay after Lord Morton who had funded his trip, but inadvertently added an “E”. This was copied by Matthew Flinders three decades later, and it stuck.



A beautiful setting within view of the mainland where ruins are the only reminder of its grim past.

Flinders, the story goes, imaginatively named the first verdant Moreton Bay island he saw Green Island. He then proceeded to name the others in the group Green Island 2 and Green Island 3 (King Island).

Green Island 2 was renamed St Helena in 1827. And that is a story in itself.

Eulope, the Turrwan or chieftain of the Nunakal clan of the Quandamooka (Moreton Bay) people, had fought against the military when they arrived at his homeland at Amity Point on North Stradbroke.

Of similar stature to the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, he became known among the British as Napoleon.

Napoleon “borrowed” a steel axe in Dunwich and was exiled to Noogoon (“place of the flying fox” as the island was called by the Quandamooka people, or Green Island 2) for his crime.



Swimming pool to protect wardens from sharks was made from old tram tracks.

It took him only three days to build a canoe and escape, but it was long enough for the island to be named after St Helena, the island of Napoleon's imprisonment.

(Waterloo Bay, Wellington Point and King Island were named at the same time).

In 1866, a quarantine station was built on St Helena, but within a year, it was realised it would be much better use solving the problem of what to do with all the prisoners.

Now, back to the trip. The catamaran docks at a jetty built in 1988 to connect to a stone causeway built across the mudflat by prison labourers in the island's prison heyday.

At the tip of the original causeway is a "swimming pool". Prisoners placed steel tram tracks vertically into the water to make an enclosure for wardens to swim safely away from sharks.



Queensland's first tram was drawn from the stockade to the causeway, initially by convicts.

Tram tracks? Yes, St Helena had Queensland's first tram. It carried produce and people from the stockade and workshops at the top of the island to the causeway for export to Brisbane.

The tram was first hauled by prisoners and later by horse.

From the start, the island was also all about making money for the government using free prison labour. The irony was they produced Queensland Police uniforms at one stage.

Sugar cane was planted and a mill built in 1869. It wasn't entirely successful as it was thought escapees could easily hide in the cane.

When a prisoner cut off his finger on a knife while harvesting cane, he was given lighter duties. This led to a spate of similar "accidents" and the collection of St Helena fingers can now be seen at the [Commissariat Store](#) in William St.

Remnants of the sugar mill, like the lime kiln used to turn coral collected from the bay into a useful cement for building, can be seen within easy walk of the causeway.

There are some beautiful little shaded beaches and the water looks inviting.



Graves are marked with only a number so they will always be prisoners of St Helena.

Next, we arrive at the cemeteries – one for the children of the wardens and one for prisoners who even in death had numbers not names. It was said they would forever remain prisoners of St Helena. It is believed about 56 prisoners are buried here.

Many children were born and educated on St Helena and while the bodies of wardens were transferred to the mainland, their children were buried on the island. This was heartbreaking for mothers who were unable to visit their graves on a high-security prison island.

Stone ruins of the blacksmith shop where leg irons were removed, the stockade, cells, a museum and accommodation for warders dot the island, each with a story to tell.

And while this makes fascinating viewing for visitors it is also a reminder of a grim past, when prisoners were forbidden to speak and were flogged until skin became bone. It was a “silent island” and speaking was a serious offence.

The maximum was 50 lashes, but this usually had to be done in two sessions as 25 was enough to end at the infirmary. Floggings were always on a Tuesday, the day the surgeon visited.



The Cat O Nine Tails crew reenact a flogging as they describe the horrors of the punishment.

But even this was preferable to solitary confinement, sealed below ground in a metre-wide cell with only a dirt floor that turned to mud when it rained, for a bed. It was pitch black and silent and 28 days was enough for one prisoner to lose his mind.

And so the stories keep rolling out as we sit under the two big pine trees that are St Helena's landmark, to enjoy a delightful picnic lunch as part of the tour package.

The prison closed in 1932 when, during the great Depression, it simply became unviable to keep it open. Production had dropped away during World War I when prisoners had to return to the mainland to cover for young men shipped off to the European battlefields.

In addition, [Boggo Road](#), which had been used as HM Prison for Women, had also been taking male prisoners since 1903.

All up, 7500 hardy souls endured the hell of St Helena.



Up to 48 men were crammed into four cells in this block.

There were some grand plans for its future, including a golf course and rabbit hunting, but in the end, it was leased as a cattle farm, and was a dairy in the 1950s.

As the knowledgeable Andre explains: “It was forgotten and so it survived through the ’60s and ’70s. The Deen Brothers didn’t have a boat.”

The reference is to the Deen “all we leave behind is the memories” Brothers whose company was famous for the demolition of a number of heritage sites, such as the [Belle Vue hotel](#), for the Joh Bjelke Petersen government during the 1970s.

And finally, in 1979, St Helena was declared national park so we can all enjoy a day in the sun discovering our history less than hour from the Brisbane CBD.

There's a lot more to this story, but you'll have to set sail and [see it for yourself](#).