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Life on the Rocks in Sydney, Australia

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By Steve Murray

Both wall hangings look great: an aboriginal image in brown, ochre and white and a silver ceramic of Ned Kelly's body armor. The young artist who made them is standing nearby as the clean scent of eucalyptus drifts up from the next booth. Which piece to choose?

This is The Rocks Market, near the waterfront in Sydney, Australia, and it comes to life on weekends under rows of canvas roofs that look like nuns' wimples. Visitors come for locally produced artwork, crafts, candies and other products set out in neat, closely spaced stalls. The colors and smells, however, contrast with the surrounding gray cobblestone streets, narrow stairways and brown brick houses. The district hints at an older, grittier past. In fact, this was home to the first Europeans on the continent. This is where the nation of Australia began.

The Rocks sits on dense sandstone hills that gave the district its name, its topography and many of its buildings. The district is located on the south shore of Sydney with one end of the Harbour Bridge planted at its feet. Sydney Opera House anchors the opposite side of Sydney Cove. A 20-minute walk from The Rocks, around the ferry boat piers of Circular Quay to the opera house, connects Australia's past with its energetic present.

Ships of the British First Fleet arrived here on Jan. 26, 1788, carrying almost 800 convicts, including some children. Landfall established Sydney as the farthest outpost (and penal colony) of the British Empire. Despite this somber beginning, Jan. 26 is now celebrated as Australia Day. The first free

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settlers came in 1793, and as the European population grew, they displaced the aboriginal Cadigal people who had lived here for thousands of years.

Stretched along the west of Sydney Cove to Circular Quay, The Rocks was the location of convict homes and military barracks, while government workers and civil society settled farther to the east and south. These were not ball-and-chain prisoners, though; many were craftsmen and businesspeople who brought their families to the colony. They worked for the government during the day but were free to work for themselves at other times. Convicts were essential to the development of Sydney (Francis Greenway, a convicted forger, became a premier architect in Australia), and many went on to become government and social leaders.

The excellent harbor attracted a shipping trade, but with it came crime and prostitution. The Rocks gained a reputation as a dangerous slum, the abode of gangs and violence, throughout most of the 19th century. With the outbreak of bubonic plague in 1900, the government began a program to demolish the already-decaying buildings in The Rocks. They made good progress until they were stopped by World War I. Demolition began again the 1920s, but this time work was halted for World War II. A third, very ambitious demolition program was attempted in the early 1970s, but this time it was pushed back by organized resistance from local residents and unions. Demolition lost to renovation.

Today many of these 19th century hotels and warehouses are occupied by modern businesses. Slanted cobblestone streets and stairs connect an assortment of local and international art, jewelry and clothing stores, punctuated by cafes and restaurants. The Rocks shows what can be accomplished by way of dedicated renewal.

The streets in The Rocks district are irregular and often narrow, so walking is the best way to explore. The Rocks Square is a good place to start because the Sydney Visitors Center and the major walking-tour companies are all located here.

Although guided tours can detail the unseen human stories of the district, a map and a sense of adventure can also yield plenty of historical insights. The tech-savvy visitor can even download audio files from the Internet to play back during a self-guided walk.

For the really independent traveler, a walk west from The Rocks Square to Observatory park (home to Australia's first observatory), east to Cadman's Cottage (Sydney's oldest surviving residence) near the quay, south toward the Big Dig Archaeology Education Center or – if it's a weekend – north to The Rocks market will launch a day of discovery about the people who built this first colony on the continent. Walkers are never far from a cafe and a chance to pause and look around. The narrow streets and high walls lend an intimacy to walking and shopping in

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The Rocks. Even when the streets are filled with pedestrians, there is little sense of crowding.

Occasionally streets open to reveal the white tops of the Sydney Opera House across the cove. In contrast, the Harbour Bridge – the other iconic symbol of Sydney – is almost never out of sight since the causeway leading to it runs over the center of the district. The Rocks gave a good part of itself to make the bridge a reality, as much as of the 1920s demolition was done to make room for its south-shore foundations.

Opened in 1932, the huge "coat hanger" pairs with the opera house to define the Sydney skyline. Climbing the top of the bridge is a defining experience for many visitors to Sydney, and walking in The Rocks is a perfect opportunity to check out what it's like. Look up to watch people making the climb or ask to sign up at the Bridge Climb entrance just west of The Rocks Market.

Some of the dwellings and shops of the early convicts have been converted into dining and shopping spaces today, but the history and stories of the early colony still show through in their walls. To walk in The Rocks is to walk through the beginnings of modern Australia, but it comes with some dilemmas – like which wall hanging to take home.

WHEN YOU GO

The Rocks can be reached from anywhere in Sydney via buses, ferries or trains that stop in the district or nearby at Circular Quay.

Information about walking tours of The Rocks can be found at www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/aboutsydney/visitorguidesinformation/historicalwalkingtours.asp. A self-guided walking tour, complete with audio accompaniment, can be downloaded at www.selfguidedwalkingtours.com/walks/therocks.php. Despite the old cobbled streets, much of The Rocks district is wheelchair accessible: www.selfguidedwalkingtours.com/walks/therocksaccessible.php.

The most evocative experience in this part of Sydney may be The Rocks Dreaming tour. This walking tour, created and conducted by aboriginal guides, shows the history of the district from the perspective of those who called this home for thousands of years before the British first set foot on the continent: www.therocks.com/sydney-things_to_do_rocks_dreaming.htm.

The Rocks Australia Day celebration is held each year on Jan. 26 with a multi-stage music festival. The Rocks Aroma Festival in July celebrates the kinds of cargo that came through the old Campbell Cove warehouses with sales of coffee, chocolate, spices and candles.

Steve Murray is a freelance writer. To read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.

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