

Rottnest Island TUNNEL TOUR

A pleasant train ride from Rottnest Island settlement takes visitors to Oliver Hill, where remnants of Australia's military history provide a glimpse into the past, when Rottnest Island was not the holiday paradise we know today, but an integral component of a massive war effort. Volunteer tour guides are on hand to take visitors through the tunnels that service the island's 9.2-inch gun, which was installed as Western Australia's first line of defence, and provide insight into the island of yesteryear.

by Rhianna King



Located just 19 kilometres off the coast of Fremantle, Rottnest Island is one of Western Australia's favourite holiday destinations. Its stunning turquoise water plays host to a raft of water sports, its cycle and walk trails provide opportunities for visitors to fill their days exploring the island's natural values, and the laid-back atmosphere makes it the perfect holiday destination for the hundreds of thousands of visitors who travel there each year. But, rewind some 80 years, and Rottnest was an integral part of the Allies' defence against enemy advances during WWII.





● Rottnest Island

A JOURNEY BACK IN TIME

One way to journey up to Oliver Hill, which is located about four kilometres south-west of the settlement, is to catch the *Captain Hussey* train, named after the late Brigadier Frank Hussey, who managed the installation of the gun. The charming open-air train leaves from the settlement three times a day and bumps and rattles along the railway track that was built in 1935 to transport equipment from the Army Jetty to the battery at Oliver Hill. En route, the train passes the island's solar panel farm, which contributes 15 per cent of the island's power, and the airport, and travels alongside the lakes, which are a haven for waterbirds. It then travels through stands of tea trees that have limbs growing low and parallel to the ground – evidence of the harsh coastal environment. Then the train passes the Kingston Barracks, which provides a reminder of the island's military connection.

The barracks were built between 1936 and 1938 to accommodate 75 army and support personnel. In 1942 the number of military personnel stationed on the island

peaked at 2500. They were catered to at Kingston Barracks and other camps around the island. Nowadays, the barracks are a popular accommodation option for school, family and social groups.

Once at Oliver Hill, those who are booked on one of the 60-minute tours will be met by one of the island's 340 Rottnest Island Volunteer Guides. I joined one of these tours on a beautiful October day, and was led by volunteer Christine Pickard, whose passion for the island and its history was infectious.

Christine began our tour by explaining that planning for the Rottnest gun and its associated infrastructure began in the 1930s, when tensions were building in Europe. Rottnest Island formed an important component of the Indian Ocean defence system, which was based out of Fremantle and where 167 United Kingdom, United States and Dutch submarines were based. A 9.2-inch gun that was built in the United Kingdom in 1901 was brought to the island in 1937, after spending some time in Hong Kong, and assembled at Rottnest Island by the

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Main Visitors to Rottnest Island can tour the tunnels at Oliver Hill.

Photo – Tourism WA

Inset far left A wash-down station was used to avoid contamination from explosive materials.

Photo – DBCA

Inset left The tunnels were constructed in the 1930s and then covered over with sand and plants.

Photo – Australian War Memorial

Above The 9.2-inch gun was able to rotate 360 degrees.

Photo – Marie Lochman

Royal Australian Engineers Army. The gun, which had a barrel weight and length of 28 tonnes and 11 metres respectively, could rotate 360 degrees and fire shells up to 29 kilometres – roughly the distance from Oliver Hill to the Narrows Bridge – at a speed of 823 metres per second.

We walked around the back of the gun where Christine explained that the 'hills' we were standing among had actually been formed by civilians who



Follow the journey to Oliver Hill

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service's 'LANDSCOPE' playlist on YouTube.



Left The *Captain Hussey* train journeys to Oliver Hill.

Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

Below Volunteer tour guides are on hand to guide visitors through the attraction.

Photo – Tourism WA

worked there, armed only with shovels and spades. We also heard that, rather than 'digging' the tunnels, the personnel constructed them out of reinforced cement and then covered them over with sand and plants.

Then we started down a long flight of shallow, small steps, that were cut into the side of the hill and were designed to enable men to manoeuvre the 172-kilogram shells to the gun if the mechanics located inside the tunnels designed for transporting them failed – testament to the intricate planning that went into the construction of the site.

GOING UNDERGROUND

Once we crossed the threshold and entered the tunnel we passed the casualty clearing station – an alcove with a stretcher hanging on the wall and a reminder of the human cost of war. From there we followed the tunnel, guided by lights behind glass cases that were similar to those that would have showed the way to the soldiers who worked there. The smooth cold, damp walls are unadorned and have the kind of flaking and blemishes that you'd expect from being more than 80 years old. I wonder what they would say if they could talk.

We then entered the magazine, which includes the shell store and cordite room. A block and chain gantry was used to move the 172-kilogram shells and cordite cartridges from the storage area to the hoist for lifting to the gun pit above and eventually to the gun platform. There are tell-tale signs that planning for potential

disaster was at the fore of the minds of those who designed this space – a deeply corrugated steel roof was installed to minimise explosions by creating an implosion; a rubberised floor was there to minimise the risk of sparks igniting; and double glazing was installed around light fittings. And a changing station is located outside the room, where three army-issued hats hang to show where personnel would change from their clothes that may have had metal on them. A photo on the wall shows two men operating the hoist, who are shirtless save for a protective pad strapped to their chests. This points to the heat they must have endured and causes one to question how protected they'd actually be against an explosion.

From there we journeyed to the pump chamber, where power conversion occurred – from electrical energy to pneumatic (compressed air) and hydraulic (oil under pressure) energies. These energies powered the functions of the gun above. Then we moved to the engine room where a sound simulation experience demonstrates the insufferable conditions in which the men stationed there must have worked. In 1958 the original diesel engines were relocated to Corrigin and Pingelly to provide electricity then eventually sold for scrap metal.

From here we ventured back outside where we went into the gun pit, where the enormous base had the ability to rotate the gun 360 degrees. An ascent up onto the gun platform, which is situated 39 metres above sea level, took us to where

the personnel who received information from the nearby battery observation post would have orientated the gun to match the coordinates they were given.

The 9.2-inch Rottnest Island gun was never fired in anger, but its construction was a significant investment – more than \$8.9 million in today's terms. The island's wartime association did not start in the 1930s – it was used as a prisoner of war camp during WWI when it housed 989 Austrian and German prisoners. Thankfully in the more peaceful times we enjoy today these structures can be visited as a tourist attraction and hopefully also serve as a reminder of how lucky we are to enjoy freedom.

Do it yourself

Where is it: Rottnest Island is located 19 kilometres from Fremantle.

Tunnel and train tours: One-hour tunnel tours operate daily at 10am, 11am, 12 noon, 1pm and 2pm. Tickets are available at Oliver Hill and the Rottnest Island Visitor Centre.

The train departs daily from the Settlement Railway Station at 12:30pm, 1.30pm and 2:30pm. You can purchase tickets online (rotnnestisland.com) or from the Rottnest Island Visitor Centre or automatic kiosk located at the main bus stop.

Visit www.rotnnestisland.com for more information.

