



MARK DAPIN

It's all in the past

Travel can be inspired by the hope that history will come alive – and it's also history in the making

TOURS DE FORCE

Mat McLachlan Battlefield Tours offers four-day small-group Western Front Explorer tours from April to November. Two-day private Waterloo Tours are also available, and in 2027 the new Mat McLachlan History Cruises through the Netherlands and Belgium will feature a day at Waterloo.

I used to think I could be a tour guide to historic sites. After all, I'm a historian and a journalist so I already know everything. The only skills I'd need to master would be holding up a small flagpole and talking while walking backwards (which would inevitably lead to me being hit by a car or tumbling into a river). The historic site itself would do the rest of the work, by being old and interesting and relatively intact.

I've changed my thinking recently, in part because of experiences with excellent guides on Mat McLachlan's Battlefield Tours to Waterloo in Belgium and the Anzac battlefields of the Western Front. But I'll get to that later.

I often travel in the hope that history will somehow come alive around me, and I like it when people dress the part. The Colosseum in Rome used to be ringed by men wearing gladiator armour, who earned money by posing for selfies. This practice has died down, but I appreciated the effort that the gladiators had made – particularly in comparison with the world's dreariest street performers, the human statues with whom they shared the piazza.

Re-enactors crop up everywhere, from battlefields to Viking encampments. But on a tour of Port Arthur in Tasmania, the coach driver warned us to beware of people dressed as prisoners on the site – because there are no people dressed as prisoners on the site.

You're never far from a ghost in Tasmania. Ghost tours – which are basically tours of nothing, since (spoiler alert) there's no such thing as ghosts – are bafflingly popular. I was shown around the former Willow Court Asylum in New Norfolk by a lovely former inmate, Carleen Paul, who could not understand why a private company felt able to run ghost tours of the institution that was once her home. "I'm not dead!" she said.

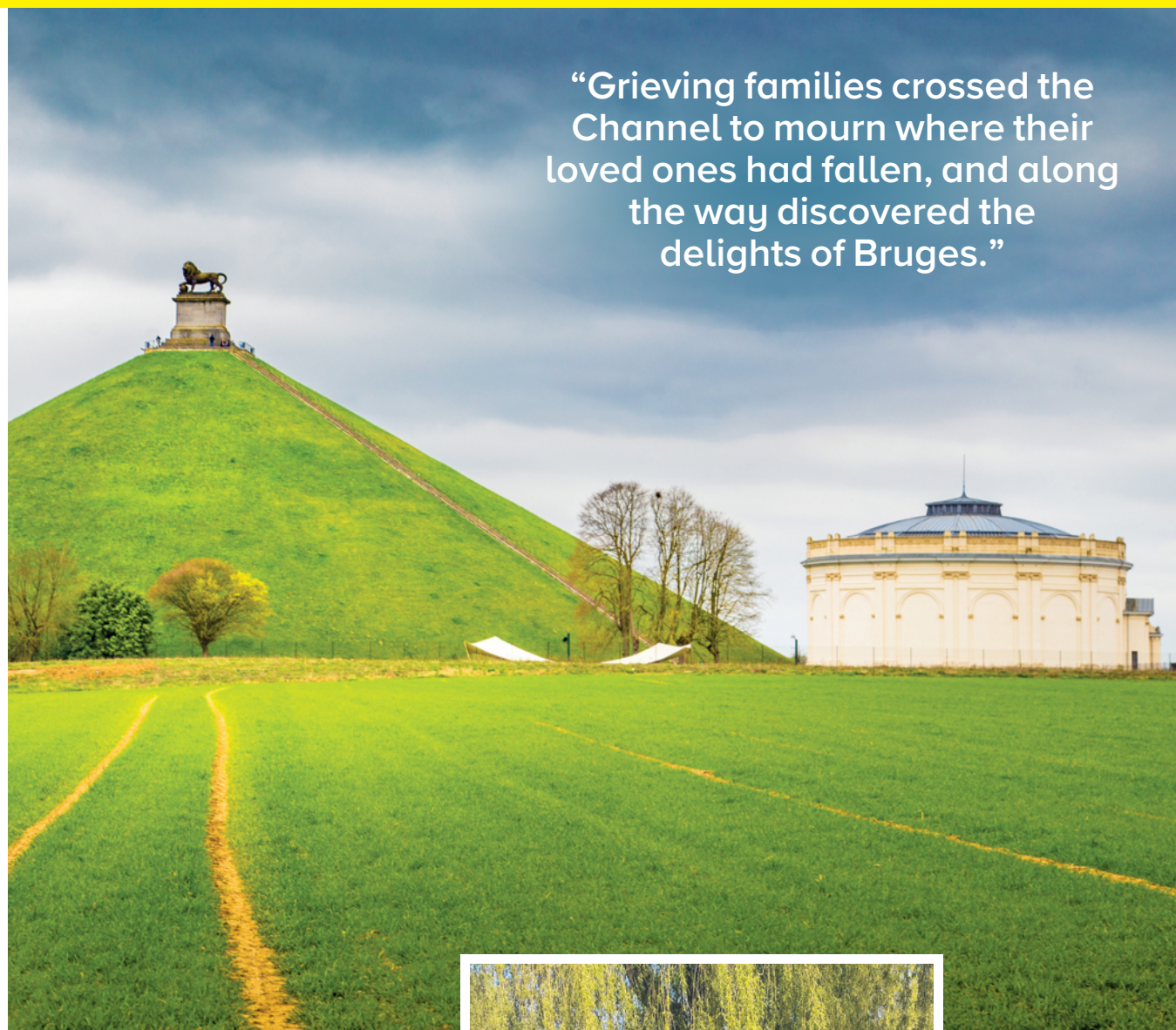
It's not the only time I've been privileged to visit a place with a person who has been a part of its history. I explored the site of the 1st Australian Task Force base at Nui Dat in Vietnam with Captain Sandy MacGregor, who served there in 1966. Nothing remains of the Australian military buildings, but MacGregor was determined to find a well the Diggers had used during the Vietnam War. When he finally came upon the spot, his eyes brimmed with tears. His memories were real.

I've toured what remains of Pentridge Prison with former prisoners such as serial escapee John Killick and one-time Painter and Docker Ron Isherwood. The history was still there for them – not only in the bluestone walls and towers, but in their own hearts and heads. Isherwood later told me it made him feel physically sick to stand again in the yard.

I also experienced a heartbreaking walk through Ground Zero in New York, where our party was accompanied by volunteer Dina LaFond, whose youngest daughter had been killed in the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers.

These visits helped me to understand what had happened. But more than that, they gave me an insight into the effects that events continue to have on living people. That said, I was taken around Maitland Gaol in New South Wales by a retired prison officer, whose violent and alarming stories of prison life in the 1970s turned out to have been almost entirely invented.

The least historically engaging tour I've ever joined was the Uncomfortable Oxford Tour, which was uncomfortable largely because it was boring. The tour was run by radical Oxford University students to try to explain why certain



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From above: Overlooking the battlefield, the Lion's Mound at Belgium's Braine-l'Alleud, commemorates the Allies' victory at Waterloo; guide Rob Brike of Mat McLachlan Battlefield Tours at Waterloo; a tour at Melbourne's Pentridge Prison.

monuments to Oxford's dark past (such as the statue of notorious imperialist Cecil Rhodes) should be removed from public view.

Although I sympathise with the idea that we shouldn't have to put up with bad statues of bad men, the tour's message seemed to be that all the world's problems would be solved if we just got rid of the British Empire – which, as luck would have it, dissolved itself in the previous millennium.

But back to battlefields, which are generally vast cemeteries with nothing much to see but the graves of soldiers. What I learnt from McLachlan's tour guides was that visitors make history, too. Guide Rob Brike explained to me that there was no British tourism to Belgium before the Battle of Waterloo. The whole idea began when grieving families crossed the English Channel to mourn at the spot where their loved ones had fallen, and discovered along the way cheap hotels, decent food and the delights of Bruges.

At the Menin Gate in Ypres, where the names of more than 54,000 missing Allied soldiers are carved into a memorial arch, guide Peter Smith described how former soldiers returned to the Somme as soon as the war had ended. They slept under tarpaulins in craters and trenches, and searched for their mates and their memories.

"You are now a part of that history," Smith told our tour group, "the history of pilgrimage. Next week, you will be a part of my talk."

I couldn't have put that better myself, so I've given up my plans to become a guide.

Dr Mark Dapin is a historian and journalist. Kendall Hill returns next week.

