

Herald Sun

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Ex-stream adventure below Sydney's streets as Tank Stream opens to public

- by: *Melissa Matheson*
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Sydney's Tank Stream is open to the public twice a year. Picture: Simon Bullard

Source: The Daily Telegraph

A SIMPLE white line marks the spot above ground but below lies centuries of history - and people queue by the thousands to go down there.

The Tank Stream tour is Sydney's hottest ticket.

Our first major water source is now a working stormwater drain and living museum but it's only open to the public twice a year - and 6000 people enter the ballot for the 320 tickets on offer.

It's dark but warm inside the Tank Stream, there's not enough room to stand upright, except for the odd cavity. Water from the street above flows into a stream of surprisingly clear water, and there's an earthy smell.

Cockroaches scurry on the walls and grasshoppers hang from the ceiling. Cement used to patch up the tunnel holds footprints of rats who ventured out before it was dry.

Letters and simple shapes etched into the stone hark of days when workers had to mark how far they had progressed during their shift.



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When Captain Arthur Phillip identified the Tank Stream as an ideal fresh water supply in 1788, it flowed from Hyde Park to Circular Quay surrounded by woods and dropping 30m through waterfalls into what is now Bridge St.

Within 38 years of settlement, the water was too polluted to drink and the Tank Stream became a sewage drain. Outbreaks of water-borne diseases, such as cholera, forced authorities to cover it up, and in the 1930s the sewage was separated and the stream became a stormwater drain.

Today, Australia Square sits on top of the Tank Stream and only 50m of the waterway is accessible for tours. Sydney Water heritage adviser Yvonne Kaiser-Glass said some "heritage tragics" have been waiting on the ballot list for 10 years to tour the site.

"There's different marks on the walls ... and we've come to learn a lot about where you can straighten up; initially we thought that was accidental but that is actually a design feature," she said.

"The fact that you can read people's fingerprints based on the peggings of the sandstone bedrock and the makers' marks really brings it alive."

While Ms Kaiser-Glass's favourite era of the stream's history is the way the Aboriginal inhabitants used the water sustainably, she said Sydney would have been buzzing in the 1850s during the construction of the Tank Stream arch.

"The 1850s was the beginning of the gold rush. There would have been a big infiltration of people and a lot of public works going on all around the city," she said.

"It would have been alive, it would have been thriving and they wouldn't have gone to the effort of arching over that system and coming up with other systems unless they realised Sydney had a brilliant future."

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