

A QUIET ADVENTURE IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS – By Stephanie Jackson

Exploring the recreated gold mining village of Old Mogo Town near Bateman's Bay, NSW, Australia

Text as published in On The Road magazine, Australia

Copyright Stephanie Jackson

This article cannot be used in any form, in its entirety or in part, without the written permission of the author

If you mutter every now and then that times are tough, and feel a twinge of nostalgia for an era when life was less complicated and less stressful than it is today, then it's time to step into a world that existed in the 1850s, a world in which you'll soon discover that life in 'the good old days' was, in reality, not particularly good at all.

At Old Mogo Town, a recreated settlement near the NSW village of Mogo, you can join a guided tour that will introduce you to the colourful characters of the goldfields, or explore the village on your own. And as you wander along its narrow streets and into its maze of buildings, imagine what life would have been like if you had been one of the 30,000 men who, infected with gold fever, had flocked to the



Mogo goldfields. You'll soon realize that life was definitely not meant to be easy.

Soon after arrival, you would have headed to the creek to spend every daylight hour panning for gold. A guide will show you how to maximise your chances of discovering every glittering fleck of treasure, and you can spend as long as you like washing soil from the creek, but when your hands

are cold, your back aching, your eyes tired of straining to see any minute specks of gold, and your patience exhausted, you'll be experiencing a little of the hardship faced by those for whom such agonies were part of the daily ritual.

The repetitious sound of the water wheel that delivers water to the gold panning area, the chatter of ducks on the pond, and the calls of peacocks that display their finest plumage in the shadows of history have replaced the harsh sounds of the past. But if you listen, with a hint of imagination, as stones rattle in your pan, you may hear the shouts of excitement that filled the air when Lady Luck was in evidence, and the groans of abject despair when she was absent.

Other sounds rang through the goldfields too as picks and shovels met hard ground and shattered rocks, for if you failed to strike it rich along the banks of the creek, your only option, if still wracked with gold fever, would have been to take your chances underground. Long days spent in dark and musty tunnels that speared into the hillside, hours of digging in low caverns with your back perpetually bent, and the strain of lifting each rock gouged from the earth into a skip that, with its one ton load, you would ultimately have to push to the mine's exit and then to the ore crushing works, ensured that your life would not have been one to be envied.

The taste of fresh air as you emerge from the tunnel of the recreated mine may come with a gasp of relief, but for miners, any brief moment of pleasure would have been extinguished as the task of extracting the gold from the ore began.

When the great stamper that was once operated by steam, now, with the push of an electrical switch, rumbles into deafening action to smash rocks into dust, you'll shudder as the guide relates tales of the dangers miners faced – knowing that the best that they could hope for was to retrieve three ounces of gold from a ton of ore.



The dust spat out by the stamper was channelled into a tray containing a deadly blend of cyanide and mercury. The toxic sludge was scraped up into a chamois bag that calloused, grime encrusted hands squeezed to force the ooze of mercury, with which gold dust had amalgamated, out into an iron pot. Finally, the slurry would be heated until the mercury vaporised, leaving a smudge of gold glittering in the bottom of the container.

With your gold in your pocket, and relieved that, with the day's work finally done, you could temporarily escape from the dangers of dust, toxic fumes, ear shattering noise, and flying shards of rock, you might have headed to the barber's shop for a shave. The red and white striped pole that stood beside the door symbolised the red of blood and the white of bandages, for the barber was a surgeon, apothecary, and undertaker too. He would give you a shave and have a friendly yarn while removing lathered stubble, but he was equally adept at removing a damaged limb in an era when the only anaesthetic he could administer was laudanum (an opiate) and a shot of whisky as his saw sliced through flesh and bone.

Enter Old Mogo Town's barber's shop, and you'll be met by the dark eyes and cold stare of a 19th century villain, whose life, like that of others of his time, had come to a premature end on the gallows. But he, like others who paid a hefty price for their bad deeds, was given a taste of immortality, for after execution, a cast was made of the deceased's head, with the gruesomely realistic replica put on public display. Today that villain, with his rigid gaze of death, stares from a dusty shelf crowded with the jars of the apothecary's trade, for those who sat in the barber's chair on the Mogo goldfields had come face to face with the grim reality that they too would meet the hangman if they followed his example and pursued a life of crime.



Your next stop as night fell might have been the blacksmith's shop where your worn tools could be repaired. Then it would be time for relaxation, and the inn was the place to which you might have gravitated, to socialise and to drink yourself into oblivion to obliterate the pain and despair of a hard life.

With more than 37 inns and sly grog shanties on the Mogo goldfields, life was tough for publicans too, and some, to boost their profits, watered down the rum that was the miners' favourite tippie. But with tobacco leaves or even boot polish added to ensure that the drink still had the punch miners expected from their grog, the men were often none the wiser.



Too inebriated to make your way home, you might have spent a night in the Mogo Inn's 'luxurious' accommodation where you could soak away your aches and pains in the bath tub, although there was no guarantee that the water would be particularly clean. With every drop having to be carted up from the stream, it was changed only after 10 men had used the tub, with a premium price demanded if hot water was required. Beds were shared too, although the inn's regulations stipulated that no more than five people could sleep in each of the hessian stretchers. But a little discomfort was something to which miners were accustomed, and sharing a bed ensured that each man would have more money to spend on other pleasures of the night, on grog, or on the wild women who made

their own fortunes at the goldfield's music hall.

If, at day's end, you had decided to spend a quiet night at home, you might have called into the butcher's shop that, on the goldfields, was usually nothing more than a chopping block and a meat hook tied to a tree. In summer months, the meat rapidly became fly blown and coated in maggots. But miners, with meat being a scarce commodity, would take whatever they could get, and with a hefty dose of salt and any spices that were available to camouflage the rancid flavour, would prepare their favourite dish - pot luck stew. No one other than the cook knew exactly what was in it, and that routinely included additional protein in the form of maggots.



If you had been struggling to eek out a living on the goldfields, home would have been nothing more than a frame of saplings covered with bark or canvas. But if Lady Luck had smiled on you, life would have been comfortable, at least by the standards of the day.

A single roomed cottage with slab timber or wattle and daub walls topped with a bark roof was a sign of affluence. And

if you had struck it rich, you might have considered making life a little easier with the purchase of a cast iron stove. Acquiring such a luxury required not only a hefty sum of money, but also a great deal of patience, for the primitive transport and communications of the day meant a waiting time of around three years before it would arrive from England.

As you stroll through Old Mogo Town the stories of the goldfields and of the colourful characters who appear to have populated the village only moments ago will come to life in an entertaining way. The flecks of gold you might discover as you shake and wash rubble and silt in a pan, will not make you rich beyond your wildest dreams, but a quiet adventure at Old Mogo Town will leave you with golden memories of a brief journey into the past, and valuable reminders of the good fortune of living in an era when, by comparison, life is really not too bad at all.