

*Michael Nelson Jagamara's work
known as Possum Wallaby Dreaming
makes up the Forecourt mosaic at
Parliament House.*

ACCESS ALL AREAS

An EXCLUSIVE tour of Parliament House *CAPTURES* the
PULSE of this CULTURAL icon, writes Rachel Lees.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *The Marble Foyer* evokes the muted pinks and greens of the Australian landscape; Discover the Great Hall Tapestry by Australian artist Arthur Boyd; The Members' Hall at the centre of Parliament House; View the Parliament House Art Collection by celebrated Indigenous artists.



AUSSIE TRAVELLERS TRADITIONALLY make a beeline for the White House when they head to Washington D.C. But our interest in visiting our own version of the People's House, Parliament House in Canberra, is often less enthusiastic. Yet something remarkable happens once schoolchildren hauled there on buses for class excursions are inside the building; their interest piques when a chance sighting of the Prime Minister is suddenly possible. And I must admit, I have a similar reaction when I enter the building's Marble Foyer one cool April morning.

Mention Parliament House, and talk of politics and headline-dominating scandals ensues; along with an utterance of that old cliché: 'If those walls could talk...' But if those walls *could* talk, they might share some unexpected stories. Like the one about Italian architect Romaldo Giurgola, who predicted he'd build a landmark in Canberra when he was still a student in Rome, years before he won the international competition that would see him move across the world to design Parliament House. Then there's Shawn the Prawn, the 345-million-year-old coral fossil visibly embedded in the foyer's black limestone floor.

Anyone who has visited on a school excursion or guided tour – which are themed around everything from architecture to paintings by First Nations artists – is probably familiar with these stories and the building's well-trodden public areas. But you'll have to step around the signs saying 'Staff only past this point' for a more exclusive look at the daily goings-on in the heart of Australian democracy.

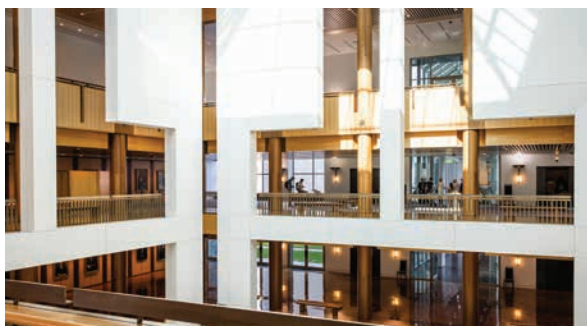
Mercifully, you don't need to take up a career in politics to gain this kind of access. Cultural Attractions of Australia now leads premium, behind-the-scenes tours of Parliament House, along with 16 other iconic institutions that exemplify the Australian way of life; from museums and galleries to sporting grounds and

historic sites, such as the Sydney Opera House, Port Arthur and the MCG. This is precisely how I end up breezing past that 'staff only' sign like a member of the Senate – or one of the 5000-or-so people who work in the building, from caterers and upholsterers to childcare workers.

As our small group spills into a corridor filled with artwork that members of the public don't usually get to see, my inner schoolkid suddenly bubbles up. "Is the PM here?" I ask our expert guide, Rosemary Bruce. "We'll know if he's here if his vehicle is in the courtyard," she offers graciously, despite having been asked this exact question – daily – during the decades she's led tours of Parliament House.

We marvel at a large untitled painting of a eucalypt forest by legendary expressionist artist Arthur Boyd – the artwork formed the basis of the *Great Hall Tapestry*, one of the largest tapestries in the world (20 metres by nine metres), which members of the public can view for free in the Great Hall. And we gather around Danie Mellor's *My Bloody Oath*, a gold-mosaic-and-taxidermy kangaroo that tackles the topic of cultural identity. As Rosemary explains, Mellor is a descendant of the Mamu, Ngagen and Ngajan peoples of Queensland's Atherton Tablelands, and also has Scottish heritage.

Rosemary admits she often loses tour group members to the extensive art collection, which encompasses about 6500 pieces, most of which are packed away in storage – each new Prime Minister signs off on the works displayed throughout the building. Rosemary ushers us along the corridor to the Member's Hall, where she points out interesting architectural features such as the reflection pool. "It marks the centre of the building and is designed to reflect the flag that flies above it," Rosemary says. "The sound of the water deliberately masks voices so you can't hear conversations." →





We file through courtyard gardens (there are more voice-muffling water features here), past members' offices and party rooms, before hopping in a lift down to the basement. The place is a maze. There are more than 4500 rooms interspersed with 22 kilometres of corridors, with the basement the area politicians and staffers are most likely to get lost.

"Originally, they painted murals on the walls to help people navigate but it didn't work, so signs were introduced," says Rosemary. The concrete floor is painted with unbroken lines in a deep earthy pink (denoting the Senate) and eucalyptus green (for the House of Representatives), which show members the way to their respective chambers. If a vote is happening, bells sound and lights flash red or green, and members have precisely four minutes to get there before the doors are locked. "They're allowed to run," says Rosemary.

Alas, it isn't a sitting day – and Prime Minister Anthony 'Albo' Albanese is in Sydney/Warrane – so we don't see any polities sprinting through the corridors. But there's more than enough to hold our interest regardless. We spot political correspondent and former editor of *The Canberra Times*, Michelle Grattan, working at her desk, and Member for Bean, David Smith, addressing a group of primary school students. We also nose through the ABC-TV studios and take selfies in the Senate and House of Representatives – Rosemary 'spilling the tea' along the way.

Finally, we stop for an actual cuppa and then some; a lavish high tea worthy of a visiting dignitary is served in the cafe as part of the tour. The honey? It comes from the beehives kept on the grounds of Parliament House. If these walls could talk, they'd have stories for days, with nary a mention of politics or scandal. **AT**

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *The House of Representatives is furnished in eucalyptus green; The Hall of Memory's distinctive dome roof at the Australian War Memorial; Enjoy a decadent high tea at Parliament House; The large mural Six River Odyssey by Graham Oldroyd and Michael Ramsden hangs in the Members Hall of Parliament House.*



A traveller's checklist

The Signature Tour of Parliament House is available exclusively through **CULTURAL ATTRACTIONS OF AUSTRALIA**. Prices begin at \$330 per person, including a sit-down high tea service. culturalattractionsofaustralia.com



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: *The National Gallery of Australia (NGA) is a Brutalist beauty; The Australian War Memorial combines a shrine, museum and archive; Cultural Attractions of Australia curates exclusive tours of the NGA, which includes insights into artworks such as Alhalkere Suite by Emily Kam Ngwararray.*



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