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A walk with the valiant



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Heroes at rest ... many Australian soldiers are buried at Pozieres. Photo: Getty Images

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IT'S 8 o'clock and the large crowd waits silently, as they do every evening, while the buglers take their positions. And the notes of the Last Post ring out, reminding us why we are here.

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In the Belgian city of Ypres in West Flanders stands the Menin Gate, unveiled in 1927 as a memorial to the soldiers of the British Empire who fell in the First World War and especially to the missing "who have no known grave". On the stone walls of the Menin Gate are inscribed the names of 6191 men of the Australian Imperial Force, many of whom were killed in the Third Battle of Ypres in September 1917.

Keeping the connection alive, the entry to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra is guarded by two restored lions, which before WWI stood either side of the gateway to the Menin Road.

No visitor to Ypres should miss the In Flanders Fields Museum in the Cloth Hall. This building, dating from the 13th century, lay ruined after German shelling in WWI but was rebuilt after the war.

The museum displays objects of war as well as newsreel footage. But what is most moving are the words, in poems and letters from soldiers or, most poignantly, in letters from home that were probably never received. In one:

"Dear Jack, We haven't heard from you for six weeks and even from a great distance that does seem slow. Aunt Effie asked after you since she'd heard you'd been unwell ..."

There is audio, too. A voice reads Wilfred Owen's poem *Dulce et Decorum Est*, which recalls the physical horror of the gassing victim: "The blood come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs."

This is not a museum that is easily forgotten.

A short drive from Ypres is Hill 60. This strategically important hill was where those who'd been miners at home turned their skills to tunnelling to create mineshafts under the German positions, fill them with explosives and blow it all up on June 7, 1917, as part of a new offensive, which all went to plan thanks to the First Australian Tunnelling Company.

Today it's a quiet spot with a memorial to the Australians, a ruined pillbox and, well, a lot of holes in the ground.

Close by, we see blood-red poppies by the roadside, evoking the words of that famous poem: "In Flanders fields, the poppies blow/ Between the crosses, row on row/ That mark our place ..."

In northern France, just west of Lille, is the Australian Memorial Park at Fromelles, also known as VC Corner. Here, in 1916, the Australians suffered massive losses trying to prevent the Germans sending reinforcements south to the Somme. There's a bronze sculpture titled

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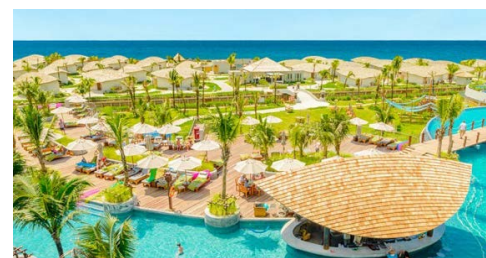
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Cobbers, which depicts one soldier carrying another to safety.

Heading south, visitors arrive in the area of the Somme, where some of the bloodiest battles of 1916 and 1917 were fought. The village of Peronne is a good place to begin; its Historial de la Grande Guerre museum is well worth a look, with its field kits and machine guns but also various items indicative of daily life for those at home.

Our next stop is at Pozieres for lunch at Tommy's Cafe, a place adorned with all things Australian - two models dressed in Aussie uniforms even stand guard outside the door. There's a trench out back set up as it would have been during the war.

All this isn't just commercialism, however. As we are leaving, my companion, Janet, asks the proprietor about buying an Aussie flag to put on a relative's grave, at which he hands her a flag and becomes quite emotional: "You are from Australia. You do not pay for your flag."

Also at Pozieres, just off the main road, stands an obelisk that is the First Australian Division Memorial.

This site was chosen as the scene of the first large-scale operation undertaken by the First Division in France and in memory of the gallantry displayed in capturing the town. The view stretches northward across the now peaceful fields that so long ago were covered in blood.

A kilometre along the road is the Pozieres British Cemetery, where many Australians are buried.

One site nearby worth visiting is the British memorial at Thiepval, which commemorates the massive loss of life there. It towers above the landscape. Then there are the many small cemeteries dotted about the Somme countryside. As for so many Australians, one of Janet's relatives lies buried here.

Her great-grandfather's brother, Lance-Corporal Adam Drylie Ramage, was killed in action on May 23, 1918, aged 23, and is at rest in a small cemetery at Aubigny, north of Villers-Bretonneux. She plants that little flag Tommy gave her in Pozieres.

A world away, back home, Adam's long-departed brother is at peace in the cemetery at Kurri Kurri, near Newcastle.

After Aubigny, our last battlefield stops are to the south.

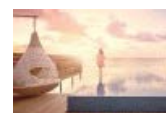
The city of Amiens, with its magnificent cathedral, was the target of the German offensive in April 1918. On the 24th, the Germans took Villers-Bretonneux and began pushing westward in the direction of the cathedral city. Something had to be done and quickly.

The job fell primarily to the Australian forces, with nearly 4000 men from five battalions launching a surprise night attack on two fronts to surround the enemy.

By the morning of April 25, the men of the AIF, with help from British units, had the town of Villers-Bretonneux under their control. For Australian visitors, the sight of the Australian National War Memorial at Villers-



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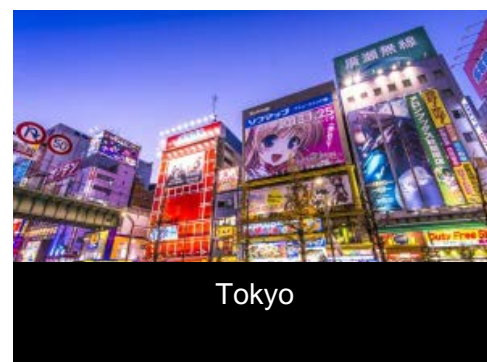
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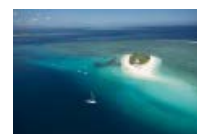
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Bretonneux is awe-inspiring.

Unveiled by King George VI in 1938, it features a tall, white tower, inside the top of which is a circular plaque with arrows pointing to the battlefields of the Western Front, as well as to Canberra. On the encompassing walls are engraved the names of the missing.

From this high vantage point, we look beyond the rows of graves below to the French fields basking in the summer sunshine.

After the war, as was the case for so many devastated villages, Villers-Bretonneux needed help to rebuild. And so it was that the little town in France was adopted by the City of Melbourne, which raised money for reconstruction, while donations from schoolchildren across Victoria helped to rebuild the local school.

That little school is a highlight of our visit. L'Ecole Victoria, as it is called, has a small museum upstairs paying tribute to the Australians and a hall adorned with carvings of the platypus and other Aussie icons.

But what reinforces the connection and brings a tear to the eye is the large sign on the side of the building facing the children's playground, which reads: "Do not forget Australia."

Trip notes

Getting there

From London, take the Eurostar to Lille. eurostar.com. From Paris, trains depart to Lille or Amiens. raileurope.com.au. You need to rent a car or take a tour to see the battlefield areas.

Touring there

Mat McLachlan Battlefield Tours offers three-day escorted tours with a leading war historian, from \$1297. battlefields.com.au.

Western Front Tours offers day tours from the town of Arras to seven different areas of the battlefields. Most day tours are €180 (\$237). westernfronttours.com.au.

France Tourism offers a two-night, two-day Somme and Flanders tour for \$670. francetourism.com.au/somme-and-flanders-ww1-2-days.



Bali

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