



Batavia Shipwreck Ruins

Video Transcript

CHRIS TAYLOR:

Tourism's a funny business. We tell the world to chuck a shrimp on the barbie and they can't get enough of us. But when we ask, 'where the bloody hell are you', suddenly they all get offended by the use of the great Australian adjective.

Funnily enough, the very first tourists who actually arrived in Australia, landed here 150 years before James Cook did and I'm guessing their first words were probably, where the bloody hell are we?

The National Treasure they left behind is on West Wallabi Islands, just off Geraldton in Western Australia.

This ruin of a primitive fort which is on the National Heritage List is the oldest structure ever built by Europeans in Australia. How it came to be here on this barren, remote island is an incredible tale of mutiny and murder.

In 1629 the Dutch merchant ship, 'Batavia' was traveling the spice route to modern day Jakarta when she hit a reef and sank just off Beacon Island. Beacon is one of about 120 islands in the Houtman Abrolhos group. Now Abrolhos is Dutch for 'keep your eyes open' which clearly somebody wasn't doing.

Of the 332 people on board the Batavia, 280 made it to land, and one of them was a nasty piece of work.

Under merchant Jeronimus Cornelisz was an apothacary by trade, a bankrupt by law and a heretic by thought.

Jeronimus thought everything he did was inspired by God, so he was incapable of sin, which was pretty handy. When his plans for mutiny and steal the ship's valuable cargo is literally scuttled, God gave him more inspiration.

The ship's captain, Francisco Palsaert had already decided to sail their longboat 900 kilometres north to Batavia to fetch help.

He and about 40 others set off that way while another group of men led by a marine called Wiebbe Hayes came here to West Wallabi in search of water. They stayed and built this – Australia's first no star accommodation.

Back on Beacon, Cornelisz and his cronies planned to hijack any rescue ship which turned up. The remaining men, women and children weren't part of that plan, so the mutineers merrily slaughtered them.

Hayes's blokes on West Wallabi got wind of this bloody rampage.

The enemy camps fought two vicious battles here. Final score? West Wallabies 2, Mutineers nil. What's more the victors got to Francisco Pelsaert first when he returned a month or so later. Pelsaert tortured Cornelisz and the other mutineers, made them sign confessions, then chopped off their hands and hanged them. 332 people started the voyage, only 116 reached their final destination.

But the Batavia story has a 20th century postscript. The wreck was discovered in 1963 and ten years later part of the hull was raised and put on display here in the Western Australian Maritime Museum.

Doctor Jeremy Green is the Museum's head of Maritime Archeology.

Jeremy there's obviously a lot of shipwrecks in Australia, what makes the Batavia so unique?

DR JEREMY GREEN:

Batavia was a Dutch East India Company shipwreck and the Company had thousands of ships in the 17th and 18th century trading between Europe and Asia. This is the only one that has been archeologically excavated, raised, conserved, and put on display.

CHRIS TAYLOR:

And when it was first discovered it must have been very attractive for looters all hopeful of finding treasure and so forth.

DR JEREMY GREEN:

There was a lot of looting in the very early days and a lot of divers and general public became really concerned about this issue. And the government enacted the First Underwater Heritage Legislation anywhere in the world since 1963 so it's really –

CHRIS TAYLOR:

First in the world?

DR JEREMY GREEN:

Yeah.

CHRIS TAYLOR:

Despite their bloodthirsty antics, not all the mutineers were executed. Pelsaert marooned two of them on the mainland. They were told to 'Abrolhos' - keep their eyes open for a vessel in two years time. Australia's first two European residents were never heard of again.

The wreck of the Batavia convinced the Dutch East Indies Company to make accurate charts of this new coastline. Australia was finally on the western world's map. This fort is our first structure made by Europeans and that makes it a National Treasure.