

Solving the puzzle of The Rocks

TRAVEL

Exploring the streets of Sydney's colourful and historic Rocks area can see you handcuffed in a bunker one minute and drinking espresso martinis in a trendy industrial-style bar the next.



Espresso Martinis at The Tuxedo, housed in the former Cadbury Chocolate Factory in The Rocks.

There's an audible click as the door shuts behind us, plunging us into total darkness. We fumble around, moving our hands across the walls for clues. The smell of fear is thick in the air.

Paniq Room first opened its doors in Budapest in 2012, and has since taken off in the US and Australia. It's an unusual way to spend an evening: trapped in a themed room with a group of friends, struggling to get out within the hour.

Sydney's Paniq Room contains three separate scenarios, including the Bunker, a wartime head-scratcher and the easiest course on offer, and Supercell 117, where handcuffed and blindfolded participants must help each other escape from a prison.

The theme of our panic room – SEN3ES – is senses. We're to use all of ours to escape a magician's house. All except taste: "No licking the walls, guys," we're told by Rhys, our minder. "Or each other."

Presumably there's been trouble before.

The magician's room is made up of three separate chambers, each filled with a variety of sensuous puzzles. We run our hands over clues in braille, we breathe deeply from some strongly-scented herbs to crack a code, we listen for secrets from a Walkman, and our sight comes and goes with the lights.

The clock is constantly ticking down as we race to solve one puzzle after another.

We emerge from the room with a minute to spare. "Well done, guys!" says Rhys, who seems very exuberant given he spends all day locking people up. "You're in the 40 per cent of people who actually make it out. Not bad for your first time!"

We leave – or escape – feeling jubilant, and head out into the quiet, night-time back streets of the Rocks.

Once again, there's an audible click as the door shuts behind us. There's the smell of a quick rain evaporating off hot pavement. The sound of the city is distant, strange given we're right in the heart of it.

That's the Rocks – a bit of a puzzle itself.

This area is the oldest part of Sydney, being the first settlement in Australia after it was established by Captain Arthur Phillip of England in 1788 as a penal colony.

Like the panic rooms that lay within its confines, its past is a little dark – it was home to the Suez Canal, once the most crime-ridden and dangerous street in Sydney. The Rocks' proximity to the docks of Sydney Harbour, and abundance of pubs, meant the area was a petri dish of scumbags and streetwalkers.



now houses Thai restaurant Wild Ginger.

Close to where we're standing was one of the Sydney colony's first burial grounds. Deep beneath these streets are convicts and settlers who'll never escape.

There is little evidence of that today, but the area does capitalise on its history.

It's early evening, so the former Cadbury Chocolate factory in Gloucester Street is dressed to the nines. A cafe by day, the Tuxedo Bar is Sydney's first venue dedicated to espresso martinis. Huge steel girders and coarse, exposed bricks are a contrasting backdrop to the smooth, rich blend of coffee and liquor.

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It's the perfect aperitif to our fragrant dinner at Wild Ginger Dining and Bar on George Street. Before us are betel leaf with smoked snowy mountain trout and flying fish roe, and fresh fine banana blossom dressed with grilled scallop. The food looks stunning and colourful in the raw sandstone surrounds of the room.

In Sydney's early days our dining room was the Sailor's Home, where seafarers slept in their bunks on their rare nights off. The sound of clinking glasses and the cheery chatter of the diners that echo around the room are a far cry from foghorns and restless sleep-talk of salty sea-dogs trying to sleep off a big night.

Speaking of big nights, the Endeavour Tap Rooms has seen a fair few of them. Located within the building that once housed Sydney's longest-running colonial hotel, the pub now contains its own brewery and produces ales using seasonally-harvested ingredients.

The barman plonks a large, dark glass of hoppy amber ale on the solid, wooden counter. Its warm, caramel flavour soothes as we ponder where to go next. Australia's first village is on our doorstep, with its maze-like cobbled streets and stone steps.

It's a puzzle we're in no hurry to solve.

The writers were guests of the NSW Government and Paniq Room.

-AAP

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