Kids dig The Rocks

by Marian McGuinness

There’s something fabulous happening at The Rocks, in Sydney. At the newly opened The Big Dig Archaeology Education Centre (part of the Sydney Harbour YHA complex), children as young as six are sifting for artefacts in a simulated dig site, brush in one hand, magnifying glass in the other. There’s a eureka moment when one young lad holds up a bone and declares in from a mammoth!

In The Big Dig’s first two months of operation this year, over 2000 school children have explored, analysed and interpreted the excavated site of 30 colonial dwellings and workplaces, including that of the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker. Many interesting insights have been gleaned such as how the baker used to cook the local families’ Sunday roasts in his ovens.

According to Alison Frappell, Education and Interpretation Officer, ‘archaeology and history are working side by side. History is about real people, real artefacts; it’s the handing down of knowledge.’

As I watch, the students are busy at their discovery desks in the two open classrooms facing the dig site. Archaeology is Rubbish blares from the big screen. The students fossick through trays in front of them. Broken crockery, medicine bottles, baby shoes, teeth. Questions fly; discussions buzz around the desks. Some of the students are outside looking over the dig site and listening to the story of George Cribbs and the strange things found in his well.
The Big Dig’s educational programme was developed by Macquarie University Lecturer in History Education, Louise Zarmati. The curriculum-based programmes are ‘designed to maximise students’ learning experiences beyond the classroom and to meet the needs of the forthcoming National Curriculum in History. Higher order thinking skills such as lateral thinking encourage even the little kids to come up with ideas and answers.’

The Big Dig offers three interactive programmes for Primary students and two for Secondary students.

**Little Diggers** – Year 1 and 2 students ‘become’ archaeologists and excavate and interpret artefacts relating to children who lived on the site in the 1800s.

**Dirt Detectives** – Year 3 and 4 students use their skills on a Dig to discover what life was really like for convicts.

**Pieces of the Past** – Year 5 and 6 students handle and analyse artefacts dating back to the 1800s. What was found under the floorboards in the colonial houses?

**Cesspits and Old Rubbish** – Year 7 to 10 students explore ‘the science of rubbish’ by looking at artefacts recovered from wells, ‘dunnies’, cisterns, cellars and backyards.

**Groundwork: Archaeology at The Big Dig** – Year 11 Ancient History students work on an authentic dig site to study the methods used by historians and archaeologists to interpret the past, and explore the ethical issues involved in the excavation, conservation, interpretation and presentation of this site to the public.

Once teachers have booked a programme, a comprehensive resource pack can be downloaded with background information, syllabus links, worksheets, maps, timetables and pre and post-excursion teaching strategies.
As well as The Big Dig, The Rocks offers a smorgasbord of enrichment experiences: The Observatory, Susannah Place Museum, The Rocks Discovery Museum, the Pylon Lookout.

For The Rocks to become the focus of a study trip, or for schools from intrastate, the Sydney Harbour state-of-the-art, eco-friendly YHA can package accommodation, where students actually sleep above Australian history, meals and education programmes, all on the same invoice.


Also see: www.thebigdig.com.au/education

A Teachers’ Open Day will be held at the The Big Dig Archaeology Education Centre, 110 Cumberland St, The Rocks, on Saturday, 11 September from noon until 6pm.