



# The battlefield buzz

As people head to Gallipoli and the Western Front for Anzac Day dawn services, DIANA PLATER discovers a growth area in war tourism.

**I**T STARTED with Gallipoli, then came the Kokoda Track, followed by the Western Front . . . and Vietnam's next.

From school kids to baby boomers, Australians are heading to former war zones to discover more about our military history.

Mat McLachlan's tours of the battlefields of the Western Front in France have grown tenfold in just two years.

"We did the first tour in 2008 and had 34 passengers and then 50 in 2009, which we were pretty happy with and then we've got 160 for Anzac Day this year," Mr McLachlan said.

"We're going to take 500 passengers between now and September to various battlefields."

Many do the tours as part of a longer trip to Europe.

For example, one of the tours visits the Somme and Ypres and includes the Anzac Day Dawn Service at Villers-Bretonneux.

These places are about 100 kilometres, or an hour and a half train or car trip north of Paris, either in France or just across the Belgium border.

"A lot of people have family connections," Mr McLachlan said.

"A lot of people are following in the footsteps of a relative, a great uncle or a grandfather or a great grandfather . . . I call remembering war dead our secular

religion."

The tours enable people to link up with soldier ancestors by helping them with their research through the National Archives website and other sites.

If their ancestor's grave is within the tour area they do their best to visit it.

They also print out soldiers' dossiers and suggest people follow in the footsteps of one of them.

"War is very much about the loss of individuality . . . especially wars like World War I where there were so many men fighting. It's all about divisions, wars and armies and battalions of 1000 men.

"Men became one tiny part of the massive machine. It's the same when you visit the battlefields . . . what we try to do is really drill down and find the individual stories of the men on the ground."

Mr McLachlan, a journalist, comes from a family company, which among other things publishes travel magazines.

"But this is my passion — the battlefield stuff," he said.

"For about 10 years I've been going and visiting battlefields and what I've found when I went there, especially to the Western Front which is my real area of interest, you'd stand in a field with wheat growing in it and in the middle of the field there's a cemetery so you know it was a battlefield but you don't know what went on there.



“So I’d visit battlefields and then I’d come home and read more about it. And then I’d discover that right where I was standing some amazing action happened.”

So he launched a website giving people advice on tours that could be done around the battlefields. This developed into his book, *Walking with the Anzacs, A Guide to Australian Battlefields on the Western Front*, which showcases 13 tours.

In 2008 he then launched Battlefield Tours to take people to those places.

His latest book — just released — is *Gallipoli, The Battlefield Guide*, and they’re also running tours there.

“Gallipoli is the start and end of the story for a lot of people. (but) we lost 8000 men at Gallipoli and 48,000 on the Western Front.

“On the first two battles on the Western Front (Fromelles and Pozieres) over a couple of days in July 1916 we lost more men than we did in eight months in Gallipoli.”

But he says there’s a lot of

misconceptions about Gallipoli, which he tried to answer in his new book.

“The truth is actually a lot more interesting than the myth. The myth over-simplifies things and makes everything two-dimensional. If you delve just a little more deeply they’re more interesting and heroic than the sound bites we normally hear about Gallipoli.”

However, he thinks visiting the Western Front on Anzac Day is a better option than Gallipoli, where it can be very crowded with up to 10,000 people and you lose “that sense of solitude they may have at other times of the year”.

“The Western Front is the opposite. I think Anzac Day is the best time to go there. It’s a lovely time of year, it’s spring.”

He says Australian tourists are normally warmly welcomed by the locals.

“The locals have always been very appreciative of the sacrifice that has been made.”

## IF YOU GO:

### THE TOURS:

As well as the Anzac tours, the company provides private tours, including ones to Waterloo, the D-Day beaches at Normandy and Gallipoli as well as a Somme Mud Tour, in the footsteps of Private Lynch. They do school group tours, too.

They can also organise tours to Waterloo in Belgium where the Duke of Wellington defeated Napoleon’s army in the epic 1815 battle.

In August they are planning their first eight-day tour of the Australian battlefields of Vietnam.

Private tours there can also be organised.

For Battlefield Tours 2010: visit: [www.battlefields.com.au](http://www.battlefields.com.au)

### THE BOOK:

*Gallipoli: The Battlefield Guide* by Mat McLachlan.

Hachette Australia. RRP: \$29.95.



TOP: Anzac Cove, Gallipoli, as landing troops would have seen it on arrival.  
ABOVE: Australian visitors pay tribute to the fallen at the Lone Pine Australian memorial where the first battle of the Gallipoli campaign was fought.

