A trip to Australia isn’t just a visit to the land down under: it’s the modern home of an ancient people; the oldest living culture on Earth, in fact. Multi-faceted and imbued with ancient wisdom, Australia’s Aboriginal people are warm, welcoming and extremely generous of spirit; getting to know their approach to life may well be one of the richest travel experiences available.

Over the following pages, you’ll read of a carefully curated selection of Australia’s signature Aboriginal travel offerings: the Discover Aboriginal Experiences collective. Recognised not just by stringent official selection process but by peers, competitors and the industry at large, each member of this collection is considered world-class leaders in Aboriginal tourism, representing local Aboriginal culture with integrity and authenticity – a responsibility indeed.

Importantly, each of these experiences also involves the use of Aboriginal guides. For who better to show you around than a traditional custodian of the land? Aboriginal guides don’t just afford a unique means of bringing Australia’s landscapes to life. As the owners of the stories they share with you, they offer a means of connecting with Australian places and cultures quite unlike anything else you’ll find.

From adventure seekers and cultural enthusiasts to foodies and nature lovers, there really is something for everyone in this collective with over 130 experiences on offer. No matter where you choose to go, you’ll be sure to find a meaningful, memorable experience.

The Discover Aboriginal Experiences collective is part of Tourism Australia’s Signature Experiences of Australia program that promotes outstanding tourism experiences within a variety of special categories.

We look forward to welcoming you.

For further information

Nicole Mitchell
Tourism Australia
+61 (0) 410 499 525
nmitchell@tourism.australia.com
australia.com/aboriginal

Kooljaman at Cape Leveque, Western Australia

Maruku Arts, Northern Territory
DISCOVER ABORIGINAL EXPERIENCES
COLLECTIVE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

8 - 9  Discover Aboriginal Experiences Members
10 - 17 Finding your ultimate experience... what to expect - Thematic Journeys

STORY IDEAS

20 - 21  Meet the oldest living culture on Earth
22 - 23  New life for an ancient culture: The rise of Aboriginal tourism
24 - 25  Going on safari: Australia’s wildlife through an Indigenous lens
26 - 27  Hidden history: finding Australia’s ancient Aboriginal art
28 - 29  Going walkabout: an ancient means of transformational travel
30 - 31  From our family to yours: fun Aboriginal travel experiences that everyone will love
32 - 33  Culture in the city: Finding the ancient among Australia’s modern hubs
34 - 35  Sydney’s Indigenous side
36 - 37  Trend: The unstoppable rise of Australia’s phenomenal ancient cuisine

38 - 39  From lodges to glamp sites: exclusive Aboriginal accommodation like nothing else
40 - 41  Experiencing the six seasons
42 - 43  Celebrating the UNESCO International Year of Indigenous Languages
44 - 45  The special significance of an Aboriginal Smoking Ceremony
46 - 47  Understanding Aboriginal etiquette
48 - 49  Aboriginal adventure tourism is taking off big time
50 - 51  Seeing underwater through Aboriginal eyes
52 - 53  Gaining a different perspective of the outback

38 - 39  From lodges to glamp sites: exclusive Aboriginal accommodation like nothing else
40 - 41  Experiencing the six seasons
42 - 43  Celebrating the UNESCO International Year of Indigenous Languages
44 - 45  The special significance of an Aboriginal Smoking Ceremony
46 - 47  Understanding Aboriginal etiquette
48 - 49  Aboriginal adventure tourism is taking off big time
50 - 51  Seeing underwater through Aboriginal eyes
52 - 53  Gaining a different perspective of the outback

PRODUCT FEATURES

56 - 57  Go Cultural Aboriginal Tours & Experiences, Western Australia
58 - 59  Nitmiluk Tours, Northern Territory
60 - 61  Maruku Arts, Northern Territory
62 - 63  Walkabout Cultural Adventures, Queensland
64 - 65  wukalina Walk, Tasmania
66 - 67  Pudakul Aboriginal Cultural Tours, Northern Territory
68 - 69  Sand Dune Adventures, New South Wales
70 - 71  RT Tours Australia, Northern Territory
72 - 73  Adventure North Australia, Queensland

Tourism Australia provides this publication as information only and is correct at the time of printing. Please contact your preferred travel expert for bookings. Please note that the persons, vehicles, establishments, places, attractions and other features depicted or described may not be part of your actual tour depending on availability and circumstances. Printed October 2018.
DISCOVER ABORIGINAL EXPERIENCES MEMBERS

NORTHERN TERRITORY
1. Davidson's Arnhemland Safaris
2. Intrepid Travel-Journey to East Arnhem Land
3. Kakadu Cultural Tours
4. Kakadu Tourism
5. Lord's Kakadu & Arnhemland Safaris
6. Maruku Arts
7. Nitmiluk Tours
8. Pudakul Aboriginal Cultural Tours
9. RT Tours Australia
10. SEIT Outback Australia
11. Top Didj Cultural Experience & Art Gallery
12. Venture North Safaris
13. Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia – Ayers Rock Resort

WESTERN AUSTRALIA
14. Go Cultural Aboriginal Tours and Experiences
15. Kooljaman at Cape Leveque
16. Koomaal Dreaming
17. Maalinup Aboriginal Gallery
18. Oonngkalkada Wilderness Camp
19. Poornarti Aboriginal Tours
20. Uptuyu Aboriginal Adventures
21. Wula Gura Nyinda Eco Cultural Adventures

QUEENSLAND
22. Adventure North Australia – Daintree Dreaming Tour
23. Flames of the Forest
24. Janbal Gallery
25. Rainforestation Nature Park – Pamagirri Aboriginal Experience
26. Spirits of the Red Sand
27. Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park
28. Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia – Mossman Gorge Centre
29. Walkabout Cultural Adventures

VICTORIA
30. Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne – Aboriginal Heritage Walk
31. Worn Gundidj Aboriginal Cooperative

TASMANIA
32. wukalina Walk

SOUTH AUSTRALIA
33. Wilpena Pound Resort

NEW SOUTH WALES
34. Australian Museum – First Australians Galleries
35. Dreamtime Southern X
36. Ngaran Ngaran Culture Awareness
37. The Royal Botanic Garden Sydney
38. Sand Dune Adventures

DISCOVER ABORIGINAL EXPERIENCES MEMBERS

NORTHERN TERRITORY
1. Davidson’s Arnhemland Safaris
2. Intrepid Travel-Journey to East Arnhem Land
3. Kakadu Cultural Tours
4. Kakadu Tourism
5. Lord’s Kakadu & Arnhemland Safaris
6. Maruku Arts
7. Nitmiluk Tours
8. Pudakul Aboriginal Cultural Tours
9. RT Tours Australia
10. SEIT Outback Australia
11. Top Didj Cultural Experience & Art Gallery
12. Venture North Safaris
13. Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia – Ayers Rock Resort

WESTERN AUSTRALIA
14. Go Cultural Aboriginal Tours and Experiences
15. Kooljaman at Cape Leveque
16. Koomaal Dreaming
17. Maalinup Aboriginal Gallery
18. Oonngkalkada Wilderness Camp
19. Poornarti Aboriginal Tours
20. Uptuyu Aboriginal Adventures
21. Wula Gura Nyinda Eco Cultural Adventures

QUEENSLAND
22. Adventure North Australia – Daintree Dreaming Tour
23. Flames of the Forest
24. Janbal Gallery
25. Rainforestation Nature Park – Pamagirri Aboriginal Experience
26. Spirits of the Red Sand
27. Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park
28. Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia – Mossman Gorge Centre
29. Walkabout Cultural Adventures

VICTORIA
30. Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne – Aboriginal Heritage Walk
31. Worn Gundidj Aboriginal Cooperative

TASMANIA
32. wukalina Walk

SOUTH AUSTRALIA
33. Wilpena Pound Resort

NEW SOUTH WALES
34. Australian Museum – First Australians Galleries
35. Dreamtime Southern X
36. Ngaran Ngaran Culture Awareness
37. The Royal Botanic Garden Sydney
38. Sand Dune Adventures
DISCOVER ABORIGINAL EXPERIENCES THEMATIC JOURNEYS

Walkabout Cultural Adventures, Queensland
From spa treatments using traditional healing methods to adventurous expeditions in six-star natural wilderness, a rich array of experiences is on offer in the Discover Aboriginal Experiences collection. While these themes preview the range of activities on offer, it is worth noting that all operators are able to cater to specific guest requirements, including tailor-made experiences and private tours.

**Finding your ultimate experience...**

**What to expect – Thematic Journeys**

Sample highlights:
- Near the Great Ocean Road in Victoria, you can take an Aboriginal-guided tour with Worn Gundidj@Tower Hill to discover a nature reserve inside a dormant volcano where kangaroos, wallabies, emus, koalas and echidnas and hundreds of bird species roam freely. Alternatively, explore lush, fertile wetlands in the heart of Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory with Djabulukgu Association – Kakadu Cultural Tours to see crocodiles and colourful birdlife and discover the traditional uses for plants and animals.

**Nature and Wildlife**

View Australia’s distinctive landscapes through different eyes, helping you gain a deeper appreciation of the unspoiled country and its unique wildlife – and enjoy great fishing!
DAE MEDIA KIT

Coastal and Aquatic

View Australia’s distinctive landscapes through different eyes, helping you gain a deeper appreciation of the unspoiled country and its unique wildlife – and enjoy great fishing!

Sample highlights:
- Go on a kayaking adventure with Wula Gura Nyinda Eco Cultural Adventures to explore Gutharraguda (the Aboriginal name for UNESCO World Heritage-listed Shark Bay in Western Australia) to learn how the country talks to you.
- Or hop on a quad bike with Sand Dune Adventures in Port Stephens, New South Wales, and dig for fresh water, discover Aboriginal midden shell sites and ride the Worimi sand dunes, the longest moving coastal sand dunes in the Southern Hemisphere.

Active Adventures

You’ll find a wide selection of exhilarating experiences on offer in Australia’s beautiful landscapes, from kayaking, quad-biking and hiking to 4WD adventures.

Sample highlights: Perhaps you’d care to enjoy an inspiring three-night, four-day Aboriginal-guided wukalina walk along the white sand beaches of larapuna (Bay of Fires) and wukalina (Mount William) in north-eastern Tasmania staying in domed huts inspired by the traditional homes of the palawa people. Or maybe you’ll take a tailor-made safari with Lords’ Kakadu and Arnhemland Safaris to explore some of the Northern Territory’s towering red escarpments, dramatic waterfalls and expansive wetlands, as well as discover remarkable rock art.

Exclusive Accommodation

When you want to immerse yourself fully in Australia’s remarkable and remote landscapes, unique Aboriginal-owned accommodations, including island wilderness retreats, safari tents and architecturally designed huts, make your experience all the more special.

Sample highlights:
- Located where the red earth meets the white sands and aquamarine waters of the Indian Ocean on the Dampier Peninsula in the northwestern tip of Western Australia is Kooljaman at Cape Leveque. This wonderful wilderness camp features diverse accommodation, including self-contained safari tents on stilts with panoramic ocean views and traditional palm frond shelters behind the beach. In the heart of the traditional homeland of the Adnyamathanha (Yura) people in the Ikara-Flinders Ranges National Park in South Australia, Wilpena Pound Resort is set inside an extraordinary 800 million-year-old natural amphitheatre and offers ‘glamping’ safari tents as well as hotel rooms.

Culinary Experiences

Guided bush tucker walks reveal the surprising fecundity of the Australian landscape, while outback dining, infused with the unique flavours of the Australian bush, offers a deliciously immersive experience. Alternatively, try your hand at traditional hunting.

Sample highlights: Aboriginal chef Bob Pernuka Taylor offers a Mbantua (the Arrente word for Alice Springs) lunch or dinner tour in the West MacDonnell Ranges of the Northern Territory. Go on a bush tucker walk and tasting, or spotlight for nocturnal animals under the constellations of the Southern sky and enjoy gourmet bush tucker-inspired meals in the heart of the Outback. Experience a locally prepared seven-course banquet accompanied with talks and performance art by the Kuku Yalanji people, who share their stories as you dine under the leafy canopy of a tropical rainforest. Or join an immersive exploration with Walkabout Cultural Tours in North Queensland, where a Kuku Yalanji guide – whose ancestors have lived in the region for thousands of years – will take you on a deeply personal tour, culminating in a shared meal using foods foraged over the course of your journey.

Active Adventures

You’ll find a wide selection of exhilarating experiences on offer in Australia’s beautiful landscapes, from kayaking, quad-biking and hiking to 4WD adventures.

Sample highlights: Perhaps you’d care to enjoy an inspiring three-night, four-day Aboriginal-guided wukalina walk along the white sand beaches of larapuna (Bay of Fires) and wukalina (Mount William) in north-eastern Tasmania staying in domed huts inspired by the traditional homes of the palawa people. Or maybe you’ll take a tailor-made safari with Lords’ Kakadu and Arnhemland Safaris to explore some of the Northern Territory’s towering red escarpments, dramatic waterfalls and expansive wetlands, as well as discover remarkable rock art.

Exclusive Accommodation

When you want to immerse yourself fully in Australia’s remarkable and remote landscapes, unique Aboriginal-owned accommodations, including island wilderness retreats, safari tents and architecturally designed huts, make your experience all the more special.

Sample highlights:
- Located where the red earth meets the white sands and aquamarine waters of the Indian Ocean on the Dampier Peninsula in the northwestern tip of Western Australia is Kooljaman at Cape Leveque. This wonderful wilderness camp features diverse accommodation, including self-contained safari tents on stilts with panoramic ocean views and traditional palm frond shelters behind the beach. In the heart of the traditional homeland of the Adnyamathanha (Yura) people in the Ikara-Flinders Ranges National Park in South Australia, Wilpena Pound Resort is set inside an extraordinary 800 million-year-old natural amphitheatre and offers ‘glamping’ safari tents as well as hotel rooms.

Culinary Experiences

Guided bush tucker walks reveal the surprising fecundity of the Australian landscape, while outback dining, infused with the unique flavours of the Australian bush, offers a deliciously immersive experience. Alternatively, try your hand at traditional hunting.

Sample highlights: Aboriginal chef Bob Pernuka Taylor offers a Mbantua (the Arrente word for Alice Springs) lunch or dinner tour in the West MacDonnell Ranges of the Northern Territory. Go on a bush tucker walk and tasting, or spotlight for nocturnal animals under the constellations of the Southern sky and enjoy gourmet bush tucker-inspired meals in the heart of the Outback. Experience a locally prepared seven-course banquet accompanied with talks and performance art by the Kuku Yalanji people, who share their stories as you dine under the leafy canopy of a tropical rainforest. Or join an immersive exploration with Walkabout Cultural Tours in North Queensland, where a Kuku Yalanji guide – whose ancestors have lived in the region for thousands of years – will take you on a deeply personal tour, culminating in a shared meal using foods foraged over the course of your journey.
Immersive Journeys

Go off the beaten track and you’ll soon learn that there is not one, but many Aboriginal cultures, each with its own language, belief system and powerful connection to place. On an immersive journey, you’ll gain both insight into the world’s oldest living cultures and understanding of Aboriginal spirituality and connection to country.

Sample highlights:

At Oongkalkada Wilderness Camp at Uzilla Springs on the Fitzroy River in Western Australia, you can stay with the Nyikina-Mangala traditional owners and immerse yourselves in a remote, pristine Kimberley locale which is home to a remarkable array of flora and fauna. Alternatively, make a deep connection with the Yuin people of the South Coast of New South Wales, through Ngaran Ngaran Culture Awareness, which shares sacred ceremonies, ancient stories and traditional dancing.

Urban Culture

Aboriginal culture is alive and well in Australia’s urban centres, with easily accessible walking tours as well as museums, galleries and cultural centres to explore.

Sample highlights: Enjoy an Aboriginal Heritage Walk in Melbourne’s Royal Botanic Gardens, stroll the length of Perth’s Elizabeth Quay with Go Cultural Aboriginal Tours and Experiences, or explore the fascinating First Australians galleries at the Australian Museum in Sydney. You may also wish to embark on a coastal journey with Dreamtime Southern X, where the spiritual significance of Sydney’s famous harbour is revealed on a stunningly intimate walking tour.

Bush & Outback

The Australian Outback is a wild, ancient place. With an Aboriginal guide, explore working cattle stations, outback gorges, ancient rock art galleries and waterholes, and learn about the bounties a seemingly barren desert can provide.

Sample highlights: Discover the spectacular red rock Kimberley Gorges with Nyikina-Mangala man Neville Poelina, owner of Uptyyu Aboriginal Adventures, who has a deep knowledge of bush lore, local culture, traditional medicines and bush tucker. Alternatively, after you’ve explored the famous sites at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park go deep into the heart of the Red Centre with SEIT Outback Australia to visit places like Cave Hill, site of the Seven Sisters creation stories, which is possibly the most significant art site in Central Australia.

Art and Museums

Explore ancient rock art sites offering profound insights into Dreamtime stories or take part in artist-led workshops in contemporary art practice, helping you understand the fundamental role of art in the transmission of culture.

Sample highlights: Join a Maruku Arts dot-painting workshop at Ayers Rock Resort to learn about the Tjurkurpa creation symbols and then paint your own creation story. Learn basket weaving with Pudakul Aboriginal Cultural Tours and visit some of the finest rock art galleries in the world with Davidson’s Arnhemland Safaris in the Northern Territory. Or explore Maalinup Aboriginal Gallery, an Indigenous-owned art space and cultural centre just outside Perth, where visitors can immerse themselves in several aspects of Aboriginal life, from art and food to storytelling and performance.
STORY IDEAS

Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia, Mossman Gorge Centre, Queensland
Australia is often thought of as a young country. After all, it was colonised by the British as recently as 1788. But consider this: Aboriginal culture is older than Roman ruins. It predates the Pyramids and existed long before Stonehenge; estimated to stretch back at least 60,000 years, it is the oldest continuous living culture in the world.

Yet you won’t find grand monuments dotted around Australia’s vast outback. What you’ll discover is a rich culture that has always lived softly. Deeply connected to nature, its historical footprint exists through rock paintings that date back tens of thousands of years; through dancing grounds used for generations; and through stories laden with acute wisdom, which continue to be told today.

While the term Aboriginal is used as a collective for the civilisation, at the time of colonisation there were more than 300 different Aboriginal ‘nations’ within Australia, with at least as many languages – most of which are now highly endangered.

The skill and sophistication of these societies is still being recognised. The invention of baking, for example, is often attributed to the Egyptians, but there’s evidence of seed grinding by Aboriginal people some 30,000 years ago. Earlier still, stone wall fish traps remain in place as perhaps the oldest human-made structures on Earth. Meanwhile, Aboriginal people were developing complex farming practices about 6000 years ago and became masters of leveraging fire for land management. They are also regarded as the world’s first astronomers, using the stars to predict seasonal change and food sources. One way to garner insight into the complexity of Aboriginal culture is to join a personalised tour of the Australian Museum’s First Australians galleries, which mixes boomerang displays and didgeridoo performances with the largest natural history and cultural collection in the country.

As they represent less than four per cent of Australia’s current population, an everyday interaction with Australia’s First Peoples is not a given for most visitors. Entering their world, sharing their culture and seeing the land through their eyes is a rare privilege. That is why the Discover Aboriginal Experiences (DAE) collection has been created: to enable you to learn from Koomal Dreaming’s Josh Whiteland about the six seasons used to guide bush hunting and gathering; to experience a traditional welcome ceremony inside an 800-million-year-old natural amphitheatre at the Adnyamathanha people’s Wilpena Pound Resort; and to understand connection to country while walking in sight of skyscrapers in the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne.

The initiative, part of Tourism Australia’s Signature Experiences of Australia, highlights Aboriginal businesses that are owned by, or strongly connected to Aboriginal communities. In supporting these ventures, we contribute to the culture’s survival by supporting employment in their often-isolated traditional lands, ensuring their vital roots, sacred laws and kinship ties remain unbroken.
Aboriginal people have an undeniable talent for storytelling. Without a written language, the sharing of knowledge is tied to their linguistic powers. Tales that unravel quietly, slowly and deliberately teach the audience the skill of listening; sit down with an Aboriginal person and you’ll find yourself hanging on every word.

This master storytelling ability is one of the drivers behind accelerating demand for authentic Aboriginal experiences with Indigenous guides. Who better to introduce you to Australia’s vast wilderness areas and peel back its pulsing urban centres than those who know 60,000 years’ worth of the country’s backstory?

The state of New South Wales – Australia’s biggest state economy and home of the city of Sydney – offers a compelling success story. Here, the trend has seen Aboriginal tourism businesses jump more than 60 per cent in international visitor participation in the 12 months to July 2017. The number of overseas travellers seeking Aboriginal cultural experiences in NSW now tops 330,000 annually, with further growth expected. The same story is being replicated around Australia.

That the world can still interact with members of this ancient culture is an extraordinary privilege. Aboriginal society is based on a structure of sharing, and this giving nature is extended to those wanting to witness cultural ceremonies, visit select sacred sites and gain insights into the Aboriginal way of life. Take Adventure North Australia’s Daintree Dreaming Tour, where Kubirri-Warra brothers Linc and Brandon Walker splash you through their saltwater homeland to spear crabs that are later cooked up in their mother’s house and eaten at a shared table. Or Pudakul Aboriginal Cultural Tours, a family-run business beside a billabong in the Northern Territory, where two elders and their daughters serve homemade damper and local knowledge between crocodile spotting and collaborative painting. Increasingly, travellers are taking advantage of these genuine windows into the world’s oldest culture.

In NSW, Sand Dune Adventures’ creative marrying of quad-bike adventuring with Worimi history has struck a chord—the growth it has recorded since joining the Discover Aboriginal Experiences collective has been exponential. Motivated by booming interest, more Aboriginal tourism businesses are opening every year. A report released in March 2018 points to an annual growth of about 600 net new Aboriginal enterprises, across all business sectors. Not only do these businesses employ Aboriginal people and reinvest in their communities, they actively strengthen the connection to culture.

Crucially, the boost in Indigenous tourism is enabling Aboriginal people to see a bright future, one where maintaining culture, revitalising language and keeping family together – on ancestral country – is no longer a struggle.
GOING ON SAFARI: AUSTRALIA’S WILDLIFE THROUGH AN INDIGENOUS LENS

Koalas. Kangaroos. Echidnas. Wombats. Without an Aboriginal guide, they’re fascinating creatures only found in Australia. With one, they become cultural totems, food sources, the bearers of wisdom and guides to the seasons.

Australia’s unique wildlife and stunning natural attractions draw almost 70 per cent of the nation’s visitors, or about five million people each year, according to research, and nature is named as the most influential trip-planning factor for almost 40 per cent of inbound visitors. Experiencing both through the lens of an Aboriginal guide adds a layer of understanding that’s unobtainable in any other way.

In the tri-coloured, World Heritage-listed landscape of Shark Bay, Wula Gura Nyinda Eco Cultural Adventures provides a unique take on the dugongs, whales, dolphins and, yes, sharks clustering below the West Australian waterline. As the red earth merges with bone-hued sand and turquoise ocean, guide Darren Capewell leads skimming kayaks or stand-up paddleboards across bountiful waters, sharing his people’s unbreakable spiritual connection to the ecosystem that has long provided their life source. His purpose is to get you to feel the country, rather than just see it.

Local guides enhance Kakadu Tourism’s Yellow Water cruises with their passed-down knowledge of the life cycles of the fauna living in the spectacular wetlands. They share stories as saltwater crocodiles emerge from motionless water in golden dawn light to the cackle of some of the 60 species of native birds.

Meanwhile, the guided walk through a rehabilitated wildlife reserve at Worn Gundidj@Tower Hill in Victoria allows for up-close encounters with iconic Australian animals such as kangaroos, emus, koalas and wallabies. As they roam freely, you learn about bush foods and handle Aboriginal tools that were once a part of daily life in the dormant volcano surrounds. Further north, in the Queensland rainforest, a traditional dance performed in the Pamagirri Aboriginal Experience at Rainforestation Nature Park reveals key information about food gathering and hunting, while at the park you can hold a koala or feed a kangaroo.
Aboriginal art is much more than dot paintings on canvas. Hidden ochre depictions of spirits, animals, European explorers and masted ships coat rocky surfaces in the lodge grounds of Davidson’s Arnhemland Safaris on the sacred Mt Borradaile ranges. To the west, in the Kimberley’s gorges and caverns, thin, angular Gwion Gwion (or Bradshaw) figures mark a path across the ancient landscape. The origin of their forms, so different from the saucer-eyed Wandjina spirit art also found in the enormous region, is still a subject of debate among historians and Aboriginal groups. Invisible to the untrained eye, they can be revealed by guides from Oongkalkada Wilderness Camp’s partner, Uptuyu Adventures. UNESCO World Heritage-listed Kakadu National Park is another rock art hotspot, with some 5000 sites recorded and some 10,000 more believed to exist, with works dated at up to 20,000 years old. Must-see paintings include the Lightning Man at Nourlangie and those depicting X-ray fish, a now-extinct Tasmanian tiger, a white fella hunter and the rainbow serpent creation ancestor in the outdoor galleries at Ubirr. Beyond, an Arnhemlander Cultural and Heritage Tour with Kakadu Cultural Tours reveals hard-to-access rock art atop an outback hill before introducing you to today’s Aboriginal artists – basket weavers, painters, carvers, jewellery makers and more – inside the Injalak Arts centre. There are even art sites in Australia’s major cities: ochre hand stencils and engravings can be seen at locations such as the Aboriginal Heritage walk in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, north of Sydney.

For Aboriginal people, art is an expression of cultural identity and reflects their connection to country, but it’s often the act of creating art that holds equal or greater importance than the finished piece. (This is why in the past rock art works have been painted over without causing upset – a fascinating nugget of information usually misunderstood without the insight of an Aboriginal guide.) The interpretations offered by guides connect the viewer to the history behind the work and the story it is telling – something you won’t deduce on your own or with a history book. Trying your hand at producing your own piece of Aboriginal art is another way to deepen your appreciation for it. Give it your best shot on a Top Didj Cultural Experience in Katherine, or take a hands-on workshop with the Anangu people – the traditional owners of Uluru – where you’ll create desert dot paintings and wood carvings at Maruku Arts, a corporation representing some 900 artists from over 20 desert communities. You may also wish to venture into the desert landscape of Uluru with SEIT Outback Australia, where a day trip to Cave Hill offers a spectacular opportunity to discover a series of artworks relating to the legend of Seven Sisters and wicked Wati Nyiru. Conversely, the works at Janbal Gallery in Queensland are understandably hooked in reef and rainforest culture; here, paint a boomerang or canvas, share stories with artists and observe the many works.
GOING WALKABOUT: AN ANCIENT MEANS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL TRAVEL

Going walkabout is the Aboriginal version of mindfulness: you leave your everyday worries and responsibilities behind in order to reconnect with country and culture, returning to the basics and becoming centred as you travel lightly through Australia’s diverse landscapes. The practice has been used for tens of thousands of years, traditionally as a rite of passage for young men who journey alone – on foot and guided by spirits – for extended periods of time, but also by those travelling to ceremonies and family obligations.

Walkabouts often trace ancient paths known as Songlines, a network of orally shared routes marked out by the stars and set by creation ancestors during the Dreaming. Interestingly, many Songlines have ended up forming major transport highways across post-settlement Australia.

Today’s walkabouts tap in to the trend of transformational travel, creating immersive, perspective-shifting experiences which are both challenging and enriching.

Tasmania’s wukalina Walk involves a conscious setting aside of time to deeply engage with the stunning Bay of Fires and the island-faring palawa people – the only culture to evolve in isolation for more than 10,000 years. You’ll also follow in the footsteps of ancestors of the Kuku Yalanji Rainforest Aboriginal people with Walkabout Cultural Adventures where, pattering through the Daintree, you’ll see directional markers subtly crafted into tree branches by hunters and discover bush medicine growing under your nose.

Take the multi-award-winning Dreamtime Walk through Mossman Gorge for another perspective on Kuku Yalanji culture; your Aboriginal guide will walk you through local lore concerning bush foods, sacred ceremonies and connection to the land.

Near Sydney, Ngaran Ngaran Cultural Awareness’ two-night Creation tour asks guests to walk in country with their lead guide, reflecting on Indigenous wisdom at several important places.

Extend the transformation with other multi-day journeys, such as Venture North Safaris’ wildlife, rock-art and remote-culture expeditions through Kakadu, Arnhem Land and the Cobourg Peninsula. Additionally, Intrepid Travel’s Journey into East Arnhem Land is a mind-expanding, seven-day adventure into Yolngu country, where Aboriginal culture pulses strongly through the veins of its people. Luxury-focused explorations are the specialty of award-winning Lords Kakadu and Arnhemland Safaris, tailor-made multi-day experiences are run by long-time local character and guide Sab Lord, who has the blessing of local Aboriginal people to take these private charters on otherwise restricted cultural lands.
Few and far between are the cultural experiences that make the grade for kids; the toughest critics of all when it comes to educational excursions. But in Australia, guides bring an ancient culture to life amid outdoor adventures, wildlife safaris and interactive lessons the whole family will remember for a lifetime.

In tropical Far North Queensland, be introduced to the Kuku Yalanji people and remarkable World Heritage-listed tropical rainforest during a candlelit open-air dinner at Flames of the Forest. Under a silk canopy dotted with hand-made chandeliers, be served a seven-dish banquet dinner as storytelling, didgeridoo and song are seamlessly melded in a mesmerising performance that every family member will learn from.

Nearby, the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park stages theatre and dance performances, as well as fire-making ceremonies and the chance to throw a boomerang and spear, while not far away at the Rainforestation Nature Park, the Pamagirri Aboriginal Experience also provides some basic weapons training on a Dreamtime Walk, along with traditional song and dance.

Western Australia’s Shark Bay area likewise offers Indigenous adventure: join an Aboriginal-led paddleboarding experience, or a kayaking or Didgeridoo Dreaming night tour (in which you learn to play the didge and eat bush tucker or seafood cooked over an open fire) with Wula Gura Nyinda. Shark Bay is a World Heritage area of red sand and turquoise waters and holds great cultural significance for the Nhanda and Malgana people.

In Sydney, the First Australians Gallery at the Australian Museum has dramatic ceremonial dance masks and costumes from the Torres Strait among its artefacts; if you join a personalised tour you’ll get Aboriginal stories and storytelling too. For something a little more adrenalin-packed, head a couple of hours north and join Sand Dune Adventures, an Aboriginal cultural tour with a difference: you’ll ride aboard a quad bike, then have a go at sandboarding down the Worimi Sand Dunes, the largest in the Southern Hemisphere. Kids can share a quad bike with their parents or choose their own adventure on a quad-bike of their own.
Australia’s Aboriginal heritage isn’t relegated to wild places – its heartbeat echoes through the centre of the nation’s most vibrant precincts. You can experience this extraordinary juxtaposition on urban walking tours, short tours, day trips, at museums, galleries and cultural centres, and in the unlikeliest of outdoor places – such as the middle of Melbourne in the Royal Botanic Gardens. There, just two kilometres from Melbourne’s central business district, you’ll find a traditional camping and meeting place for the Boon wurrung and Woi wurrung people. Join an Aboriginal guide on a walking tour of the gardens – one of the most impressive urban landscapes in the Southern Hemisphere – and take lessons in plant lore, medicine, tools and ceremony, while learning more about the ancestral traditions that evolved on this picturesque patch of earth.

In Perth, local Aboriginal heritage is waiting to be uncovered in the most urban of landscapes. At Yagan Square, a landmark new precinct in the centre of the city, contemplate the statue that honours Aboriginal warrior Yagan. This nine-metre-tall creation is named ‘Wirin’, which means ‘spirit’ in Nyungar language. Nearby, at the brand-new Elizabeth Quay precinct, the ‘First Contact’ artwork by Indigenous artist Laurel Nannup welcomes visitors to the shores of the Swan River. Take a Go Cultural walking tour along the quay with Aboriginal elder Walter McGuire, and you’ll not only receive a traditional welcome, but observe the city through the eyes of local Nyungar culture, unveiling the age-old sacred sites that are hidden amid the trappings of modernity. In the nearby Swan Valley, you’ll find the fittingly named Maalinup Aboriginal Gallery (maali means “black swan” and up means “place” to the people of Wardandi country). An Aboriginal-owned and -run enterprise, Maalinup has emerged as one of Western Australia’s most fascinating cultural hubs, where visitors can immerse themselves in Aboriginal activities, cultural performances and talks, sample bush tucker treats made with local native ingredients and, of course, browse the art – much of which is for sale.

Just outside Brisbane, the Spirits of the Red Sand interactive theatre show and dinner is another great example of that desire to share the Aboriginal experience. A live performance with song and dance that passes through a 19th century village complete with gunyah dwellings (traditional huts), it tells the story of Jarrah and his brothers as they meet Europeans for the first time and is performed by descendants of the Aboriginal people who lived here in South-East Queensland back in the 1800s.

Far North Queensland’s tropical city of Cairns might be best known for its proximity to the Great Barrier Reef, but it also allows privileged access to local Aboriginal heritage, which is alive and thriving in the local communities. Both the Tjapukai Cultural Centre and nearby Rainforestation Nature Park offer interactive introductions to the traditional weapons, tools, bush tucker, song and dance of the area.

Then, of course, there’s Sydney, where you’ll find the walking tours of Dreamtime Southern X, the fascinating First Australians Gallery at the Australian Museum, and the Aboriginal tours of the Royal Botanic Garden. Read more about Sydney’s Indigenous side below.
Australia’s most famous city has grown into a multicultural metropolis of some five million residents, but Sydney’s first citizens – the 29 clans of the Eora Nation – have inhabited the area’s beaches, hills, rivers and harbour for tens of thousands of years; a presence that can be seen and felt in several ways.

To see some of Sydney’s most famous sites from an alternative view, join a Dreamtime Southern X tour of The Rocks precinct. Wander the city’s foreshore in view of the Sydney Opera House and Harbour Bridge and gain insight into everything from Dreamtime creation stories to traditional Sydney’s Indigenous side fishing techniques employed by Aboriginal people on Sydney Harbour, learning about bush food, medicines and ochre bark and body painting, and gaining not just an education but a spiritual connection with the Sydney region’s First Nations as you go.

Their presence can also be felt in the Royal Botanic Garden, 30 hectares of green in the heart of the city, which has long been a significant site for the Gadigal people. The garden runs an Aboriginal heritage tour, weaving workshops, a bush food experience and art classes, in which visitors use sticks, ochre, grasses, bark, paints and natural brushes to create their own works of art. From here it’s a short walk to Sydney Opera House, where you can see a very clear sign of Sydney coming to terms with – and embracing – its Aboriginal past and present. At sunset every day, the sails of the Sydney Opera House are lit with a seven-minute light show, Badu Gili (‘Water Light’ in the language of the Gadigal), which celebrates Aboriginal culture at what was a traditional gathering place for thousands of years. From here, it’s also possible to walk to Sydney’s hottest precinct, Barangaroo – so named after a woman of the Cammeraygal clan, who lived here in the 18th century. A world-leading urban renewal project on some of the most expensive real estate in the world, Barangaroo wasn’t just transformed into a thriving neighbourhood precinct, but also the Barangaroo Reserve. This breathtaking expanse of greenery, planted exclusively with native flora, was hotly pursued by several multinational corporations for development before ultimately being devoted to recreating the natural landscape; one similar to that which the Eora people would have enjoyed before European settlement.
TREND: THE UNSTOPPABLE RISE OF AUSTRALIA’S PHENOMENAL ANCIENT CUISINE

Slow food. Farm-to-fork. Food mileage. Provenance. The international interest in conscious food consumption has reached fever pitch, and Australia’s food scene is no exception. But here, a different spin on the trend has emerged from the unlikeliest of places: the outback. Foods such as saltbush (a desert shrub with a beautifully clean umami) and Kakadu plum (a fruit packed with vitamin C and antioxidants) have been sustaining Aboriginal Australians for an estimated 60,000 years; today, these special ingredients – complete with time-honoured approach to preparation – are once again embraced, albeit with a very modern twist.

Dine on them in some of the world’s most acclaimed new restaurants (including Brae, Attica, Orana and Bea) for insight into Australia’s emergence as a leading food destination, or escape the bright lights for Australia’s bush tucker capital, Ayers Rock Resort. A hotbed of native food celebration and innovation, the resort offers a wide-ranging program of native food experiences which includes everything from free, accessible cooking demonstrations to the famous Sounds of Silence dinner. Nearby, RT Tours Australia serves up everything from kangaroo to quandong (a native fruit) pudding in its gourmet lunch and dinner tours set in the stunning desert.

Aboriginal experiences across the nation also provide plenty of opportunities to catch and cook your own bush tucker, such as the Catch and Cook Camping Adventure hosted by Wula Gura Nyinda Eco Adventures in Western Australia’s Francois Peron National Park. Then again, you don’t have to travel the length and breadth of Australia or spend a fortune to get a bush tucker education. If you’re in Sydney, simply head to the Royal Botanic Garden for an Aboriginal Bush Food Experience right in the middle of the biggest city in Australia.
For many people, a stay in an Aboriginal lodge, wilderness camp or glamp site is the highlight of their trip Down Under, thanks not only to an immersion in the world’s oldest living culture, but a stay in a truly spectacular location. At Cape Leveque’s Kooljaman wilderness camp in Australia’s far north-west, this is a given: owned and run by the Bardi Jawi people, the camp is set in a World Heritage landscape of brilliantly coloured white sand, red rocks and pristine blue water, and has an excellent bush-food-inspired restaurant as well as camping and glamping options – including a deluxe safari tent with a balcony overlooking the Indian Ocean.

Experiences range from traditional mud crabbing to cultural tours. Or you can simply just enjoy the music and atmosphere of the camp and chat with the locals. “It really depends on how much you want to get involved, but we would like everyone to leave with a better understanding of this country and Bardi and Aboriginal culture,” says Kooljaman manager Erica Menheere Thompson.

Alternatively, head inland to the heart of Western Australia’s Kimberley region, where you’ll find Oongkalkada Wilderness Camp, owned and run by Nyikina man Neville Polelina. In a two-night, three-day stay in eco-tent accommodation on the Fitzroy River, guests get to experience a lifestyle that’s no doubt totally different to anything they’ve known before, choosing from activities including bird spotting in the wetlands and visits to Aboriginal communities. “The best thing about this place is the tranquillity,” Neville says. “I have 52 springs on my property and a wild river... and there aren’t too many of those left in the world.”

Remote wilderness and Aboriginal culture also combine with dramatic effect at Mt Borradaile in the Northern Territory, where Davidson’s Arnhemland Safaris runs an eco-tour, fine dining and lodge experience amid the remarkable wetlands, billabongs, sandstone escarpments, catacombs and rock art galleries of Arnhem Land.

Meanwhile, in South Australia’s Ikara-Flinders Ranges National Park, you’ll find Wilpena Pound Resort. A natural amphitheatre estimated to be 800 million years old, Wilpena Pound is an awe-inspiring landscape, and the traditional home of the Adnyamathanha (or Yura) people who, since 2012, have also owned the resort – the only accommodation in the park. Take part in a Welcome to Country ceremony and mix with Yura locals, and make sure you join one of the resort’s Aboriginal Cultural Tours to see this impossibly ancient land through the world’s oldest, and perhaps wisest, eyes.
EXPERIENCING THE SIX SEASONS

Summer, Autumn (Fall), Winter and Spring might be the most common descriptions of the seasons, but they’re not the only method of dividing up the year and its weather patterns. In Aboriginal culture, many groups live by a six-season calendar, breaking up the months by the flowers that bloom, the fruits that ripen, the animals and fish that reach prime condition, and the ways the skies behave. The seasons don’t change because of a date on a calendar; instead, the switch is closely observed in nature, and felt intuitively as conditions change. Far from being guesswork, science is increasingly recognising this traditional knowledge, with the CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) and Australia’s Bureau of Meteorology working with numerous Indigenous groups to document their six seasons. Used by generations upon generations of Indigenous people across Australia, each localised system plays to nuances and awakenings that don’t necessarily fall neatly into four distinct seasonal categories.

Modern Australia is embracing this knowledge in other ways. Perth’s best fine diner, Wildflower, has leveraged the six seasons since it opened, using them to guide ingredient choice based on what’s naturally available. This method allows the restaurant to ensure the sustainability of the food sourced, just as the Noongar people advising the chef to have done for thousands of years. As the year flips between the seasons Birak, Bunuru, Djeran, Makuru, Djilba and Kambarang, the menu changes; each new culinary creation is inspired by the characteristics of that season.

It’s a system that both Whadjuk traditional owner, Walter McGuire of Go Cultural Aboriginal Tours in Perth, and Wadandi custodian Josh Whiteland of Koomal Dreaming, three hours’ drive south in Margaret River, explain to those joining their cultural tours. They point out that as well as determining what’s best to eat at any particular time, the six seasons also indicate which medicinal plants are growing and right to use – knowledge that could save a life.

Being a different language group, the words for each season differ to those used in Western Australia, as they do in Kakadu National Park, where a locally appropriate version of the six seasons is observed. In April, for example, it’s Banggerreng – otherwise known as ‘knock ‘em down’ storm season – when windy weather flattens the region’s spear grasses. Guide, Sab Lord of Lords Kakadu & Arnhemland Safaris knows the seasons intimately and reveals them on his tailored experiences of this World Heritage-listed natural reserve.
There are less than 300 people who speak the Noongar language in Western Australia. On the Tiwi Islands, only about 1700 native speakers are counted. In Central Australia, fewer than 3000 people still speak Pitjantjatjara. The numbers create a clear picture: that Australia’s Aboriginal languages are highly endangered, and in need of preservation. With 2019 marked by UNESCO as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, there isn’t a better time to focus on languages that are at risk of extinction.

At the time of Australia’s colonisation in the late 18th century, at least 250 different Aboriginal language groups were counted, with an estimated 700 native dialects in use. Today, the estimate is put at around 120 existing indigenous languages, with most Aboriginals adopting English, or the blended Australian Aboriginal English as their first or second language; some also mix their mother tongue and other Indigenous dialects in a form of pidgin or Kriol. Many older Aboriginals still speak numerous indigenous languages, yet it’s estimated that only 20 to 50 languages can be described as ‘healthy’, in that they’re being learnt by younger generations.

In the face of this loss of language, and with it, culture and identity, many individuals are working to protect their spoken culture. Indigenous singer songwriter Gina Williams switched to only singing in language in 2013 and has been sharing the beauty of her ancestral tongue with concert halls and music festivals ever since. In 2016, she collaborated with The Church’s Steve Kilbey to translate the 1988 global hit, Under the Milky Way, which they went on to perform together (the song celebrates its 30th year in 2018). Williams, who was a foster child, connected with her cultural backstory by learning the Balladong Noongar dialect at TAFE college in Perth and describes it as a “beautiful, musical language”.

Meanwhile, in the lands surrounding Uluru, interpreters are used to link visitors with Anangu artists – who speak Pitjantjatjara – at Maruku Arts, enabling the symbols, motifs and cultural methods to be translated across cultures and unlocked for modern appreciation. North of Broome, in the ochre-hued lands leading to Kooljaman at Cape Leveque, Aboriginal rangers educate people about the various languages spoken in the area, and their role in preserving culture on the Bardi Jawi Ranger Talks.

With the Sydney Harbour Bridge in the background, a welcome ceremony delivered in language acts as a link between visitors and the area’s traditional owners. The Dreamtime Southern X team explains Aboriginal language origins – Sydney once had five Indigenous languages, now there are two – and reverts to language in stories and songs throughout its tours.

Plenty of Indigenous words are used in everyday Australian English vernacular, too. Kangaroo, galah, yabby and barramundi describe native fauna, while boomerang, willy willy, billabong and humpy are common names for objects and the environment. These words are a small, yet significant part of Australian culture, and point to the value of preserving the Indigenous languages that produced them.

Dreamtime Southern X, New South Wales

Maruku Arts, Northern Territory
For Aboriginal people, the power of fire and smoke stretches well beyond the obvious uses of heating and cooking. For thousands of years, the two have been combined in traditional smoking ceremonies, a custom whereby native leaves and wood are burnt to produce wafts of pale smoke scented by the Australian bush.

A ceremony signifies many things, depending on the occasion. Most commonly, it’s used to cleanse an area of bad spirits, offer healing and wish wellbeing upon those present. The ancient blessing is delivered as smoke wafts over each person, symbolising goodwill and generosity. The traditional practice is also used to pay respect to ancestors, the land and sea, and can be a sign of forgiveness for past wrongs.

Smoking ceremonies bring people together for celebrations, including marriages and births, for initiations or separate men’s and women’s business, but equally for solemn events, such as the end of a treasured life. In modern-day Australia, contemporary smoking ceremonies are regularly performed at public, urban events both in language and English as a Welcome to Country. They’re seen as a sign of respect to the land’s traditional owners, recognition of the country’s history, and of conscious social inclusivity.

Far from just lighting a fire, both the leaves and wood used are carefully selected for the different smoke they produce. Some woods are dampened to slow burning, or larger pieces are selected. Certain woods are believed to have cleansing properties, releasing natural oils as they burn. The plants used differ from region to region, and from clan to clan.

At Mossman Gorge Centre in Queensland, the Kuku Yalanji people perform a smoking ceremony to introduce guests to their land and culture at the start of their Dreamtime Gorge Walks. In Western Australia’s verdant south-west, the custom is delivered by Noongar elder and law man, Joey Williams of Poornarti Aboriginal Tours, as he explores numerous traditional healing methods. In Melbourne’s Royal Botanic Gardens, those joining an award-winning, Kulin-led, Aboriginal Heritage Walk are invited to be gently enveloped in smoke, before connecting with the green space’s diverse plant life and their traditional uses. As each smoking ceremony is performed, a gift is released from one culture and offered to another; as the smoke clears, it’s hoped the gift is wholeheartedly received.
Did you know it’s impolite in Aboriginal culture to look someone directly in the eye? Or that shaking hands isn’t always the done thing? How about that it’s taboo for women to play the didgeridoo?

Just as in Japan, where diners slurp loudly to indicate satisfaction with a meal, and in Malaysia, where people point with the thumb rather than the index finger, there are customs unique to Aboriginal culture, and while Aboriginal people have adopted or become accustomed to numerous western behaviours, there are deep cultural insights to be gained by learning about theirs.

A little knowledge aids positive interactions. Aboriginal people often take long pauses before responding to a question for example, comfortable with the silence as they consider their response. They may speak quietly, and if there’s a question they’d rather not answer, they may say that it’s secret men’s or women’s business, or gently divert your attention elsewhere. Respectful of their elders and their culture, they’re eager only to offer what they know, or what’s appropriate for them to share.

In Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, SEIT Outback Australia guides explain customs on their off-road 4WD tours of Cave Hill, one of the most significant art sites in Central Australia. As visitors approach the 20,000-year-old artworks, it’s revealed that the local Anangu don’t make eye contact when they talk, and don’t shake hands (that’s reserved for funerals); a simple hello is more appropriate. There’s also a chance the Aboriginal people may not be there. They have extensive family networks, and culturally, everything is shared — be it cars, houses, or food. If something or someone is needed, Aboriginal people will leave immediately.

In Queensland’s Daintree rainforest, Walkabout Cultural Adventures leads visitors along a path near a waterfall, but only women can enter the cascades, as it’s a place for secret women’s business. Male guide, Juan Walker, doesn’t have the right to talk about what goes on there, nor would he even know. Across the country in Shark Bay, only men are invited to learn how to produce the warble of a didgeridoo around the campfire, on the Didgeridoo Dreaming Night Tour with Wula Gura Nyinda Eco Cultural Adventures; culturally, it’s not something women are permitted to try. Meanwhile, family structures and the social systems that bind the Limilngan and Wulna clans are shared on Pudakul Aboriginal Cultural Tours, near Darwin, with Aboriginal guides happy to engage in conversations about cultural ways. Rather than read it in history books, in Australia, you can hear first-hand from the world’s oldest living culture.
From quad biking to spear throwing, Australia’s traditional owners are offering tourists unrivalled adventure experiences. It might be tempting to presume all Aboriginal experiences involve a serious appreciation of Indigenous culture, its ancient ways and tens of thousands of years of history. But far from being restricted by the past, Aboriginal people are using their cultural backstories to enhance the fun of an ever-growing list of adventure activities. As nature-loving, outdoorsy people, they relish the fast-paced action of quad biking, the gritty thrills of sand boarding, and the centring peace of kayaking as much as anyone. Yet they hold an ace up their sleeves: often, traditional land rights mean they have access to secret corners where others can’t go to, and their shared cultural knowledge means they can find the way to hidden spots others don’t even know about, and see things others overlook. For Aboriginal guides and those who join them, it allows people to walk among rarely seen rock art, spear and eat mud crabs using traditional tools, visit Aboriginal communities in remote areas and explore national parks in ways others simply can’t.

Take New South Wales-based Sand Dune Adventures, who rev 400cc quad bikes over the highest coastal sand dunes in the southern hemisphere – measuring 12 to 30 metres (40 to 100 feet) high – and then invite you to sand board down them. Tours weave in stories about the Worimi people and their long-running connection to the land, adding context to the adventure.

With Walkabout Cultural Adventures in Far North Queensland, you have permission to do something you’d never be allowed to do in real life: spear throwing. The traditional method of catching a fishy feed looks simple enough, but give it a go and it’s surprisingly challenging. A tranquil sea kayak in Western Australia with Wula Gura Nyinda Eco Cultural Adventures becomes a wildlife education as you paddle above turtles, rays, sharks and perhaps even an elusive dugong in the World Heritage-listed waters. Then, at the northern tip of the state, you can strap yourself in for a bumpy 4WD journey around the Dampier Peninsula, foraging for bush tucker in creeks near Kooljaman wilderness camp. Peering into the rocky clefts and crevasses of Nitmiluk Gorge, in the Northern Territory, from a scenic cruise is one thing, but getting so close you can touch the age-sculpted wilderness from a Nitmiluk Tours canoe – then plunge into the water for a swim – is quite another. Or, raise the bar even higher by glimpsing the 70-metre-high landforms from a helicopter. Then, in the state’s tropical wetlands, the crocodilian inhabitants become completely accessible on an aquatic safari. It’s a fitting introduction to lands where some of the most extraordinary rock art galleries in Australia are hidden in caves, visible only through Davidson’s Arnhemland Safaris guides, who have special permission to share them. Aboriginal adventure tourism adds extra layers, making experiences as meaningful as they are memorable.
SEEING UNDERWATER THROUGH ABORIGINAL EYES

Tasmania’s Bay of Fires is arguably one of Australia’s most extraordinarily arresting sites. Its glass-like water, rusty boulders and blindingly white sand is the subject of countless photographs. Delve beneath its surface beauty, however, and discover the Indigenous stories that hide in the rich earth, in the ancient rocks and in the elegant bushland, transforming the place into a living natural museum. Those stories are unlocked on a four-day guided tour known as the **wukalina walk**, led by the Palawa people. Time spent with this Aboriginal group is particularly astonishing: they’re the only group of humans to evolve in isolation for more than 10,000 years, developing a culture that’s unique in the world. Their insight into the surrounding ocean, its islands and the magical coastline is transformative, and unobtainable in any other way.

Well known operator Josh Whiteland from **Koomal Dreaming** has recently commenced a new venture **Cape Cultural Tours** which marries the fragrant Margaret River air – stung by wildflowers and the sea – with Aboriginal-guided fishing, coastal foraging and an education into the ecology of this rugged coastline. The Noongar connection to the beaches, cliffs and capes is drawn both from the past, ongoing traditions and a present-day appreciation for the natural bounty of this water-lapped area.

A canoe-bound perspective of the Katherine River is granted by **Nitmiluk Tours**, bringing the grand waterway to life through the eyes of the Jawoyn. Most who approaching the national park’s 70-metre-high rockface will see only its grandeur: with an Aboriginal guide, you’ll spot the rock art hiding near the water’s surface. A remarkable, and remarkably unusual way to experience Australia’s aquatic landscapes.
Australia’s Indigenous people regard the country as family. It is loved, cared for and respected, with a lifelong connection formed from birth. There’s no exclusive possession, no fences, no development and no exploitation: people and earth live in harmony, inseparable from one another.

That deep connection to the natural environment is something that’s evident any time you’re experiencing the bush and the outback with an Aboriginal guide. Get an understanding of that connection with a SEIT Outback Australia tour led by Uluru’s Anangu people. Your guides will share the desert dunes of their homeland and reveal the painted caves that tell ancient creation stories, plus take you off-road in 4WD vehicle to parts of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park that most never see.

Rarer still is experiencing a riverside stay at Oongkalkada Wilderness Camp, in Western Australia’s epic Kimberley region. Meet the land’s traditional custodians in their outback communities, savour bush foods and discover Wandjina spirits and the mysterious figures of the Gyorn Gyorn in remote rock art paintings hidden in time-sculpted gorges. Having the outback’s stories told directly to you by Aboriginal people enables a deeper understanding and appreciation; suddenly, you see it differently.

Connecting with the earth is the key theme for Noongar law man, Joey Williams of Poornarti Aboriginal Tours. The verdant Stirling Ranges of Western Australia’s cooler southern end harbour creation stories, bush medicine and significant ceremonial sites that are translated and uncovered by Williams. Sense the land’s power as you listen to his stories by the fire and throw inhibitions aside to take part in a traditional dance.

In South Australia, be introduced to Wilpena Pound’s 800-million-year-old natural amphitheatre with a traditional welcome to country ceremony, followed by an Aboriginal guided walk that shares the importance of Dreaming to Indigenous culture and spirituality. The Yura people, who own and run Wilpena Pound Resort, will also point out otherwise overlooked bush shrubs that change with the seasons and gorge fossil layers that defy comprehension.

Having disconnected from the ‘real world’ for four or five days on a Venture North Safaris journey through Kakadu, Arnhem Land and the remote Cobourg Peninsula, you’ll start to perceive the land as family, as Aboriginal people do. Treasuring the one place that provides everything you need, from food and water to shelter, warmth and beauty, begins to make perfect sense. You’ll wonder why you ever saw it any other way.
**In the vibrant capital city of Perth, Aboriginal culture is palpably alive,** writes Carrie Hutchinson.

The notes are hypnotic. Most Australians would be familiar with the rhythms and phrasing, but few would have any idea of the meaning behind them. It is a song of the Dreaming and Walter McGuire, who is standing on the banks of Derbarl Yerrigan, the Aboriginal name for the Swan River, is singing it.

The attention of his guests is interrupted by the appearance of a pod of dolphins, their dorsal fins breaking the surface of the water behind him. This isn’t an unusual occurrence. Even at Elizabeth Quay, one of Perth’s newest redevelopments on its urban waterfront, nature is everywhere.

As a Nyungar elder, Walter knows this only too well. On his daily Go Cultural Aboriginal Tours, he shares the history of the world’s oldest living culture while pointing out the areas of the city that were once important campgrounds and hunting areas for his ancestors.

To the west is the vast Kings Park; to the north is the location of Perth’s long-lost Great Lakes, an extensive network of wetlands, swamps and lakes reclaimed during the 80 years after British occupation and now covered by the buildings and highways of the modern world. Until the 1940s, the Nyungar people still used them as an important meeting place, as well as a source of food and fresh water.

While Walter sings and the dolphins swim, we’ve paused in front of a five-metre-tall sculpture by Nyungar artist Laurel Nannup. It resembles a giant bird on a boat gazing out across the water. “That’s right,” Walter says, song finished for the moment. “That’s what the sails on the boats looked like to my people during First Contact – a very big bird.”

During the 90 minutes that follow, Walter – who has spent his life learning the Nyungar culture and customs – leads the group around Elizabeth Quay, revealing what life on the waterfront was like for his ancestors. And what it’s like now. We sit while he shows us the tools of his people, then set off at a gentle stroll, learning about animal tracks, bush food and the sacred sites and hunting grounds where his ancestors once roamed.

It is peak summer in Australia when I join a small group of interstate and international visitors to take Walter’s tour. But for the Nyungar people it is Bunuru, one of their six seasons. This is the warmest part of the year in the south-west of Western Australia; a time when, traditionally, the Nyungar would have moved to the estuaries to fish. In the colder months of Makuru, they would take shelter in the hills. The seasons for them are divided not by date, but by changes in temperature and wind, the arrival of rain and the abundance of different kinds of food.

It is an all-too-brief glimpse into the oldest culture in the world – one intrinsically tied to nature, even in the most modern of urban environments.
A river cruise through an ancient gorge leaves a lasting impression, writes Jennifer Pinkerton.

On a crisp dry season day, the Katherine River cuts an emerald path through the cliffs of Nitmiluk Gorge. I’ve arrived to bed down in one of the outback’s most luxurious stays, gaze at ancient art sites, swim in rock pools and, importantly, take a cultural cruise along the waterways of Nitmiluk National Park, which connect a total of 13 sandstone gorges, like the beads of a necklace.

So far, it’s easy to see why locals rave about Nitmiluk Gorge (previously known as Katherine Gorge). Located three hours’ drive south of Darwin, this Aboriginal-owned natural playground attracts less hype than its better-known cousin, Kakadu. Yet that only adds to its appeal; Nitmiluk feels like a well-kept secret, albeit one that teems with spiritual significance, owing to an association with the 17 clans that make up the local Jawoyn people.

It’s still early in the morning. After dropping my bags at Cicada Lodge, I walk the one-kilometre trail to a lookout perched above the first gorge. The rising sun paints the sky in a tropical cocktail of colours – orange, red and pink. I gaze down upon the river, where rainbow bee-eaters soar above the water’s surface. On either side of the banks, walls of florid foliage sway in sync with the breeze. A small array of travellers has gathered to take the river cruise, which glides along the first gorge en route to ancient rock art galleries. Our Aboriginal guide explains that the name ‘Nitmiluk’ was bestowed upon the park by Nabilil, a figure from the time of Nitmiluk’s creation – commonly called the Dreaming. Beside the gorge, Nabil heard the song of the cicada, a chorus of “nit, nit, nit!” He then crowned the park a place of ‘cicada dreaming’. We pause for an art fix, and our group wanders around cliff-face galleries filled with ancient etchings.

After floating along the second gorge, it’s time to return to the first for our water-borne finale. Southern Rockhole offers an idyllic swimming spot, tucked away from view. A short walk up the riverbank leads us to a tumbling waterfall that tips into a clear pool. I dive in and spot silver fish swimming beside me. “Nitmiluk is alive with delicate creatures,” I say to the guide. “It is,” he replies, “but there are complex rules as to what we can hunt and what we must leave behind to appease our creation ancestors.” The park, he explains, is governed by a mystical and deep lore and history.

As daylight starts to fade, I return to the lodge, set amid a blooming native garden – one that swirls with wattle, bottlebrush and banksias. Here, 18 discrete units encircle a poolside outdoor dining area, where the friendly staff serve the evening’s three-course meal prepared using local bush foods. Beyond my table, a cicadas’ chorus starts up. “Nit, nit, nit!” The song chimes in with the sinking sun. Nitmiluk’s dreaming stories seep into my sleep that night, and they continue to do so long afterwards – when, like clouds, my visit here reshapes into dream-like memory.

**SUGGESTED FEATURE TITLE**

- OUTBACK DREAMING ON THE KATHERINE RIVER
- JOURNEY THROUGH THE ANCIENT NITMILUK GORGE
- A CULTURAL CRUISE THROUGH NITMILUK GORGE
- WELCOME TO NITMILUK – THE PLACE OF CICADA DREAMING
- SOAKING UP THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NITMILUK GORGE

**Nitmiluk Tours, Northern Territory**
An open-air ‘classroom’, in sight of Uluru, provides an unforgettable introduction to Aboriginal art, says Katrina Lobley.

Under a bright mid-morning sun, Ayers Rock Resort guests gather outdoors for what might be one of the world’s most unusual art lessons. As we watch, an Aboriginal desert artist sits in the red sand, drawing concentric circles with a fingertip to signify the waterhole, campsite or fire that will be the centrepiece of the story she’s about to paint.

Other symbols that depict ‘creation time’ (Tjukurpa) stories are revealed, as an assisting interpreter translates what the artist is saying in her Pitjantjatjara language. Parallel lines, we learn, indicate a journey. A U-shape is the imprint of a human backside sitting in the sand. Deft movements of the hand, fingers and knuckles reveal more still: here’s the slink of a full-bellied python on the move, e paw prints of a dingo; from more recent Australian history come the squelchy pads of camels, an animal introduced to Australia by 19th-century European settlers.

The experience is an unforgettable introduction to both Aboriginal art and the culture of the Anangu people, who have lived in this desert for tens of thousands of years. With Uluru looming large on the nearby horizon, there is plenty of inspiration for the dot paintings guests will now sit down to create, illustrating their own life story in acrylics on canvas.

Maruku has a warehouse at Mutitjulu, an Indigenous community near Uluru that’s off limits to tourists, and a retail gallery at the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park’s Cultural Centre that showcases a broad range of paintings to suit every budget and the decorated wooden carvings known as punu.

A smaller selection of works is also sold at an art market near the site of the dot painting workshops. Artists who have earlier demonstrated their methods to the workshop students sometimes take a seat at the market stall and continue to make work, dotting the paint onto canvas with tiny sticks, throughout the day. They natter to each other in language, sometimes sharing a broad smile with a curious visitor who comes by for a closer look.

After the art lesson, it can be easier to ‘read’ the paintings on display at the market stall. No longer abstract thanks to these insights, they now tell fascinating stories of life in Australia’s spiritual and geographic centre. Flip over some of the unframed canvases and it’s likely you will see traces of red dust. Perhaps there’s a waft of campfire smoke as well. It’s certainly an evocative souvenir to take home.

Maruku Arts, Northern Territory

• EXPERIENCE A DOT PAINTING WORKSHOP IN AYERS ROCK
• AN ART LESSON WITH A DIFFERENCE
• UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH AN ABORIGINAL DESERT ARTIST
• A FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE OF ABORIGINAL ART
• SEE ABORIGINAL ART BROUGHT TO LIFE BEFORE YOUR EYES
At the only place on Earth where two World Heritage sites collide, a poignant exercise in cultural connection unfolds. By Natasha Dragun.

It’s mid-morning, and I’m knee deep in the ocean. Thankfully, we’re in the tropics, so being partially submerged is more like a warm hug than a wake-up-call. Also, thankfully, I have a bamboo-and-steel spear in my hand, which makes me feel a little less concerned about the fact that the surrounding mangroves have been known to host the occasional crocodile. Our host and guide, Juan Walker, certainly isn’t fazed by the notion however, smiling broadly as he wades through the water, showing us how to throw the spear to catch mud crabs and fish.

Walker has been hunting on and around two-kilometre-long Cooya Beach his entire life, following the traditions of his Kuku Yalanji ancestors, who’ve had a presence here for more than 50,000 years. This pocket of Queensland, just north of popular holiday destination Cairns, is where the Daintree Rainforest meets the Great Barrier Reef – two World Heritage sites responsible for nurturing some of Australia’s most incredible flora and fauna. It’s hard to imagine a more blissful, and emblematic, Australian setting: an opaline fringing reef on one side, dense jungle on the other, the aroma of barbequing seafood and baking damper on the breeze. Little wonder this has been the picture-perfect backdrop for Walker’s half- and full-day Walkabout Cultural Adventures for the past 15 years.

From the sand we can hear an orchestra of birds chattering in the treetops. Walker identifies the notes of noisy pittas and varied trillers, and points to what he’s just sighted: the elusive cassowary, an endangered flightless Australian bird foraging on the forest floor.

Aside from sharing hunting tips – which do nothing to improve my wobbly spear throwing technique – Walker tells us stories of his grandparents and parents, who happen to live nearby in a home where we’ll later enjoy lunch in the sun. Over the course of the day, Walker shows us how to forage for pipis, crack open almonds and decode bush medicine, guiding us through some of Far North Queensland’s most significant cultural sites around Cape Tribulation and this pretty stretch of beach.

We also visit Mossman, a tiny, sugar-cane-laced town that happens to be the gateway to one of the state’s most sacred Kuku Yalanji sites, Mossman Gorge.

Our day ends at the Mossman Gorge Centre, browsing the eye-popping artworks of Kuku Yalanji people, who often paint using natural pigments sourced from the surrounding countryside. But my mind remains where I left it moments earlier, at the gorge itself. An immensely spiritual place, where the Mossman River tumbles over granite boulders into freshwater swimming holes, it’s a beautiful place for a dip.

As we floated in the water, a giant Ulysses butterflies drifted past on the breeze – a graceful electric-blue creature thought to be a returned ancestor, according to Walker, looking over those who remain on this earthly plane. After hours of Dreamtime tales, learning about Aboriginal legends and lore in this heavenly place, it doesn’t sound implausible at all.
WUKALINA WALK, TASMANIA

A four-day walk along a vibrant slice of Tasmania’s coast offers a rare window into Tasmania’s Aboriginal culture, writes Andrew Bain.

It’s a dining table that time has turned into a sand dune, an Aboriginal midden so deeply layered with shells that it rises metres above my head. If I was to hike past it alone, I might barely notice it among the other dunes along the gleaming Bay of Fires coastline, but I’m here hiking with the wukalina walk, the first tourism venture from Tasmania’s Palawa (Aboriginal) community.

Suddenly this dune is far more than a lump of sand and discarded shells. It’s a timeline of seafood dinners – so many thousands of them that it’s almost beyond comprehension.

“It hurts my brain to think of how many meals had to be eaten to make a midden this size,” says guide Ben Lord.

It seems appropriate that this ghost of meals past is just steps from the wukalina walk’s krakani lumi camp, where last night I’d been welcomed to the end of my first day of hiking by a fire-grilled dinner of wallaby (the smaller cousin of a kangaroo) and native mutton bird.

For two nights this camp will be my home, albeit it’s more home than ‘camp’. Wooden sleeping pods dot the scrub, with walls that winch open to reveal safari-tent-style accommodation and beds draped with wallaby skins. In the large central hub, a domed living area is designed to reflect the shape of the Palawa shelters that once lined this coast. Fruit sits in kelp baskets made by Palawa elders, and beanbags and more wallaby skins dot the wooden floor.

For four days I will walk this coast, rising over low Mt William (wukalina to the Palawa people) and following the dazzling white beaches of the Bay of Fires to the lighthouse on Eddystone Point.

Through the bush behind the beaches, I feel as though I’m wandering the aisles of an ancient grocer as Lord and fellow guides Jacob and Janaha point out edible plants such as pigface, currant bush, she-oak apples, lettuce weed, and the hearts of grass trees. Where once I saw only scrub, I now see a wild pantry.

On the beaches, nature catches up with culture. As we walk for a full day between krakani lumi and Eddystone Point, it’s a journey along a stretch of coast so brilliantly beautiful – blue seas, white sands, the Bay of Fires’ signature orange lichen – and yet so empty of people. Granite boulders cluster between the beaches, and the fine-grained sand is so white it’s like hiking on a sheet of paper, but we walk only in the company of seabirds.

At Eddystone Point, I spend my final night sleeping in the refurbished lighthouse keeper’s cottage. Wombats dawdle across the lawns outside, and it’s a short walk to a second midden, sprinkled with stone tools, that seems to cling to the edge of the point as it tips away into the Tasman Sea.

From the midden, I look south along the coast, where the beaches continue as bright white streaks. But this beautiful place is now more than just a view. It’s also a living tale about Tasmania’s often-forgotten Aboriginal culture.

SUGGESTED FEATURE TITLE

- CULTURE AND NATURE IN THE BAY OF FIRES
- HIKE INTO AN ANCIENT CULTURE IN THE BAY OF FIRES
- MIDDENS AND MARVELS IN THE BAY OF FIRES
- BEACHES AND BUSH TUCKER IN NORTH-EAST TASMANIA
- AN ANCIENT PATHWAY ALONG THE BAY OF FIRES
A trip with Pudakul will get you up close with Aboriginal culture… and face to face with crocodiles, writes Dilvin Yasa.

Standing on the banks of Corroboree Billabong, a row of saltwater crocodiles slowly appears, eyeballing us suspiciously from the river. It’s hard to imagine a time when you could have walked into these waters and fished or enjoyed a kayak here with friends but Graham Kenyon, local Limilngan man swears that was his childhood through and through. “This was before Australia’s ban on crocodile hunting came into force in 1971,” he remembers. “Now, we estimate there are at least 10 crocs you can’t see, for every one that you can.”

For the past 10 years, Kenyon – along with wife Lynette – has been sharing his memories, experiences and own backyard with travellers through his business Pudakul Aboriginal Cultural Tours. A wholly Aboriginal owned and operated business, Pudakul marries nature-based explorations of the Mary River Wetlands, where we are at present, with Aboriginal cultural demonstrations at his Beatrice Hill homeland, located 45 minutes’ drive from Darwin. It’s not a bad backyard when you’re in the tour operating business: the Mary River Wetlands is known to have one of the highest concentrations of saltwater crocodiles anywhere in the world, anywhere in excess of 100,000 at any given moment.

Traversing the waters of the billabong under the early morning sun, it can be difficult to keep your eyes (and thoughts) off sights of the next ‘saltie’, which can grow to upwards of four metres in length. But Kenyon does a fine job of keeping things light, both pointing out the colourful flora and fauna which dot these waters and sharing stories of what he calls the world’s original home delivery service. “A croc will kill one animal and hang its carcass by the shore across low-hanging branches,” he explains, as we make eyes at two crocs, sunning themselves on the shore. “Then they sit back and wait for the other creatures to be lured in for a taste, before – bam! They spring into action and get a fresh meal every time.”

Back on dry land (limbs intact), it’s a short drive to Kenyon’s property for the cultural element of the tour. Led by local Aboriginal guides, we accept a small capful of water poured over our heads as a Welcome to Country – a protocol which can involve speech, dance, song or ceremony (customs vary from region to region, but each ceremony gives custodians an opportunity to formally welcome people to their land). Then we embark on a series of hands-on lessons: how to find – and use – bush medicine, how to play a didgeridoo, how to make and throw a spear, and how to weave a dilly bag from the fibres of a sand palm.

The demonstrations themselves are fact-filled but perhaps more importantly, they are filled with banter, personality and easy laughter. At the tour’s completion, I am left with a sense of wanting more; it would be easy to stay a day or two here (overnight accommodation at Pudakul is already in development, as it turns out). For now though, there is damper – a simple Australian bread – served with tea, to savour, and the memories of the day to go with it.
A quad bike tour across the spectacular dune system of Stockton Bight is full of excitement and cultural insights, according to Dan Scott.

Though we’re still getting used to our quad bikes as we enter the sand dunes of Stockton Bight, near Port Stephens, New South Wales, we already know we are in a special place. Spread out ahead, the dunes rise and dip like the swell in a caramel-hued velvet ocean, patches of glinting shells appearing like flotsam on the surface. The discarded shells belong mostly to pipis, edible clams, and are the main component of many middens (feasting sites), visible in the dunes, covered and exposed, over time.

“This place is sacred to the Worimi,” says guide Rachel Syron, a member of the Worimi community herself, as we pause beside a large midden. “An underground freshwater table runs beneath the dunes here, making it a perfect spot to gather and eat, both pipis, foraged by our women from the seashore, and kangaroo hunted by our men, inland.” As well as middens, there are significant burial sites secreted in the private Worimi conservation lands we are travelling through. So, the pre-tour plea to stay on existing tracks, in order to avoid damaging sacred spots, is as important as the safety briefing.

Begun nine years ago with eight quad bikes, Sand Dune Adventures is a venture staffed entirely by local Aboriginal people, mostly from the Worimi community, whose nation is bound by the Hunter River (further south), and the town of Taree to the north. Last year, the company won Australia’s most prestigious award for Indigenous tourism. It now has around 100 bikes.

What’s impressive is how tours deftly deliver cultural insights along with the adrenaline-pumping fun of riding quad bikes across an otherworldly Mad Max-like landscape. At one point, Syron leads us to the summit of a 20-metre dune before giving us the option to plunge down its sheer slope. “Now, don’t use the brakes and try to keep straight,” she advises as I survey the drop, trepidation jangling in my stomach, before I counter-intuitively manoeuvre the bike over the edge.

We are soon confident on the sturdy red machines, and after that it feels like we’re gliding over the lithe, curvaceous body of Mother Earth. It’s a constantly changing scene; the entire dune system is moving inland at 4.5 metres per year. One 15-metre dune halved in size over the past month.

Our one-hour adventure concludes with Syron revealing the many uses the Worimi have for coastal vegetation. Wattle seed is used to make damper bread; the paperbark of melaleuca trees can be grafted off to create perfectly waterproof bowls or coolamons (a dish with curved sides, for which Aboriginal Australians have many uses). Its leaves can also be used as anesthetic.

Flying out of nearby Newcastle airport after the tour, I glance out of the window and see for the first time the extent of Stockton Bight, which reaches for 32 kilometres along Australia’s east coast. Then, in one corner, I spot a looping trail of tiny beetle-like quad bikes, and wish I could still be down there, exploring the extraordinary dune system, with the people who’ve called it home for thousands of years.

SUGGESTED FEATURE TITLE
- Saddle Up for a Family Adventure: Quad Biking on Giant Sand Dunes
- Expect Thrills Galore Riding the Giant Sand Dunes of Stockton Bight
- Ride the Coastal Dunes of Stockton Bight on a Quad Bike
- Thrillseekers Apply Here: Ride Giant Sand Dunes on a Quad Bike
- Action-Packed Adventure: Quad Biking on Sand Dunes
Amid the ancient geology and mulga woodlands of Australia’s Red Centre, comes an unexpected culinary delight, writes Glenn Morrison.

In the desert, to the east, the steep and jagged ranges that bisect Central Australia finally give up their sunset hue of deep crimson, and yield to the gathering night as stars begin to blink overhead.

Bob’s boyish grin betrays genuine excitement at this landscape, a place his Aboriginal ancestors – a language group called the Arrernte, who are connected with country around Alice Springs – have called home for at least 35,000 years. A chef by trade and southern Arrernte by descent, Bob is connected with his father’s country, at nearby Rainbow Valley. Bob has prepared a five-star meal of local and bush delights, all part of his popular Mbantua Dinner Tour.

Located in the spiritual heart of Australia’s outback – the aptly named Red Centre – Bob’s company, RT Tours Australia, pitches its experiences as a mixture of ‘food, country and culture’. This evening, we’ve experienced just that. First, an afternoon stroll around the historic Alice Springs Telegraph Station, an 1872 relic from early European settlement from whence messages were first conveyed along a single strand of wire all the way to Britain. We trek briefly into Simpsons Gap, a picturesque gorge cut deep into the West MacDonnell Ranges it is a place, Bob explains, where several Aboriginal ‘Dreaming’ tracks meet. We stand and listen to the numerous birds, spy a grey kangaroo and scan nearby rocks for a glimpse of the ever-so-cute black-footed rock wallabies that frequent the tiny waterhole there, before moving on.

Bob points from his cooking fire across the acacias and mulga woodlands of the desert toward the town of Alice Springs, some 20 kilometres distant. Silhouetted on the horizon is the prominent peak of Mount Gillen, a sacred place recalled in Arrernte stories that tell of its creation in the Dreamtime.

Camp chairs and tablecloths at the edge of a sandy clearing, provide our dining room, not far from Bob’s cooking fire. It’s a surreal scene, with wattle blossoms and beefwood trees surrounding us in a geology that dips so steeply from the horizontal it seems to defy physics. And the silence is palpable, especially for guests hailing from the cities.

Tony, a 50-something cycling devotee and father of two – is one such guest. Out here, he observes, the absence of sound has been an unexpected and simple joy. More delicious still, however, is the evening’s crescendo.

In a display of some of Australia’s most exquisite native produce, Bob has served some rarely-tasted delights, including tangy bush tomatoes, hand-ground emu rissoles and mouth-watering kangaroo fillets with sweet potato fritters and saltbush. To finish, dessert is served – a steamed pudding featuring quandong (a native peach), accompanied by smoky, chocolatey, wattleseed-flavoured apricots and white chocolate.

“Now I’ve had the best,” says Tony, satisfied. “If I ever want to eat kangaroo fillets again, I’m going to have to come back to Alice Springs to see Bob.”

It feels true enough, and we all laugh. But our attention is swiftly diverted to Mount Gillen, to which Bob is still pointing. From behind the peak, rising faster than I might ever have imagined, is a fat blood moon barely one night from full. But sooner than any might hope, we must. And so we bounce once again down a moonlit dirt road we farewell our spectacular glimpse of Australia’s past – one that seems not so far from its present, after all.
Mud-crabbing offers a taste of tradition in the Daintree, writes Fleur Bainger.

Linc Walker’s smile is as wide as the horizon. It’s low tide at Cooya Beach, the traditional fishing grounds of the Kuku Yalanji people. The ocean shallows ripple like the bed of sand beneath them, the water too cloudy to see the mud crabs we’re hunting. We carry traditional spears, hesitantly raising them in anticipation of a sidestepping crustacean that might come our way. But whenever one does, each of us would-be hunters lets out a screech, jabs blindly then hops on each foot, fearful that our sharp-pincered target might take revenge on our toes.

It must be a funny sight, one that never gets old for our guides, Linc and his brother Brandon. The pair grew up in this saltwater country at the feet of the lush Daintree Rainforest, a 20-minute drive north of Port Douglas. To them, spearfishing is a way of life, a tradition passed down by their ancestors, and one they keenly want to keep alive. It’s what motivates them to share their culturally inherited skills as they introduce curious visitors to their home, one story at a time. As they talk, it’s clear the brothers feel such a sense of connection to this beach, its mudflats and nearby mangroves, that it’s indivisible from their identity.

I spy movement beneath the water and raise my arms as Linc has taught me, trying to affect a stalking pose. But instead of cleanly spearing crab shell, I miss. The crab retaliates, raising its powerful, storm cloud-coloured claws and latching on to my spear with breathtaking strength. As I try to lift our dinner into a bucket, it releases and scampers free. Cue more laughter from Linc.

Fortunately, their talent for mud-crabbing ensures our communal buckets are soon full – but not overflowing. One of the distinct messages of this experience is the importance of living in harmony with nature and treasuring its resources.

Time spent with one or both of the charismatic brothers is part of Adventure North Australia’s Daintree Dreaming Tour, which also includes venturing into Mossman Gorge for a traditional Welcome to Country smoking ceremony by Mossman Gorge Centre and lunch.

In keeping with the Aboriginal custom for sustainable living, we take only as much as we need. It’s an intelligent approach that has allowed Aboriginal people to step lightly throughout Australia for tens of thousands of years. Now, Linc hopes the sharing of these inter-generational teachings will ensure he, and other Kuku Yalanji people, will be able to remain on country. Tourism, he says, provides the employment Aboriginal people need to stay in the rural locations their hearts, minds and spirits are tied to.

The brothers sport long locks, black wrap-around sunglasses and rugby players’ physiques, but they’re as cuddly as teddy bears – something we see first-hand when we’re invited to the family home. We wash the sand off our feet and pile under the veranda, delighted at the generous gesture that makes us feel like one of the family. There’s loud chatter and endless laughter as the crabs are boiled up for a tasting of tender, white flesh and homemade damper. Having caught it ourselves (sort of), under the guidance of members of the world’s oldest living culture, naturally makes it taste even sweeter.
A flagship suite of extraordinary Aboriginal Australian experiences, showcasing the world’s oldest living culture through the cornerstones of cultural insight, authenticity and meaningful connection.