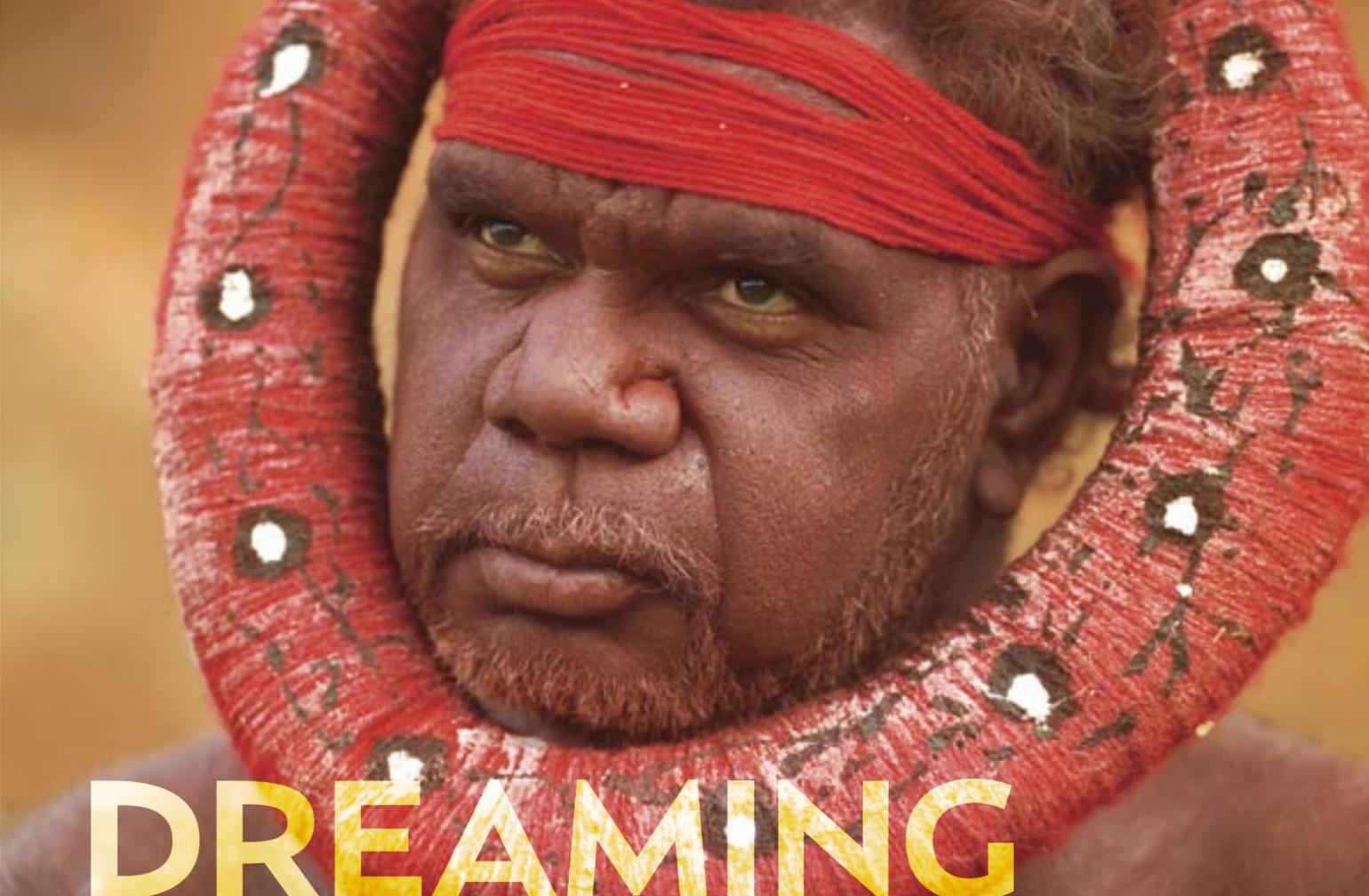


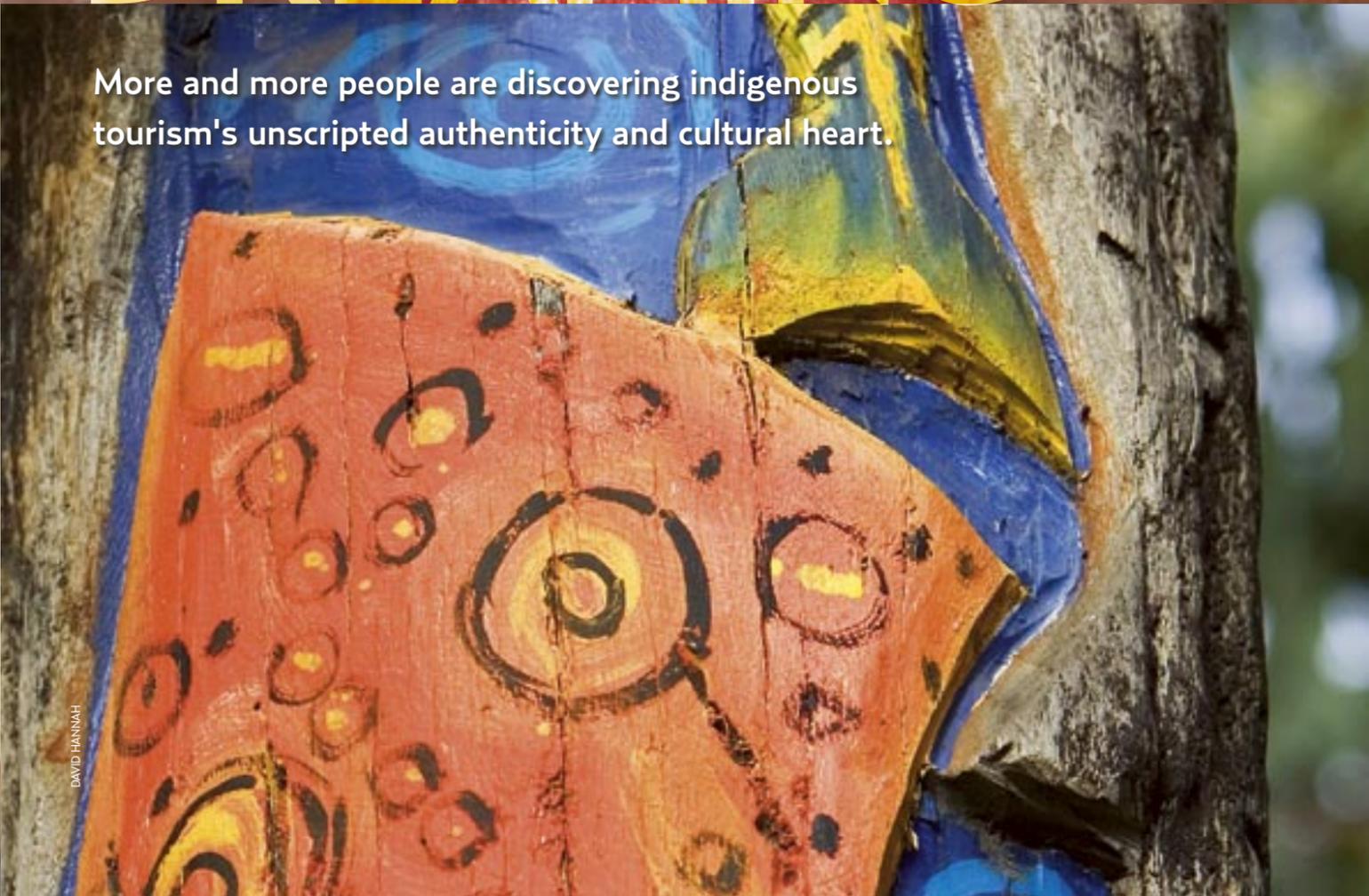
INGER VANDYKE

STORY BY ANDREW BAIN · PHOTOGRAPHY BY BARRY SKIPSEY

DESTINATION



DREAMING



More and more people are discovering indigenous tourism's unscripted authenticity and cultural heart.

DAVID HANNAH

IN THE BASEMENT of a Cairns shopping centre, Judy and Don Freeman and a small troupe of Aboriginal performers thought they were doing nothing more than staging a play; it never occurred to them that they might be helping to spawn an industry. It was August 1987 and Australian tourism was booming. But few people imagined that an Aboriginal dance theatre might interest visitors, let alone that indigenous culture might become one of the country's headline attractions.

"There wasn't a single Aboriginal tourist attraction in Australia at that time, to my knowledge," says Canadian-born Judy, who'd originally trained as a dancer and teacher. "I remember many days standing on the footpath asking people to come in and then to pay us at the end, because we couldn't think of any other way to get them in. The white community thought we were completely crazy, that it was impossible."

If the play had run for two months they'd have called it a success. Instead, the theatre group evolved into Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park, one of Australia's most awarded tourist attractions and, with around 80 Aboriginal employees, the country's largest private employer of Aboriginal people in the tourism industry.

As Tjapukai has risen from its basement beginnings, so has the entire indigenous tourism sector, which today comprises more than 300 tour operators, catering to around 1.9 million tourists a

Continued page 75

Previous pages: Indigenous tourism's rich palette (clockwise from top left) – Wik basketry by Hersey Yunkaporta; Anangu man Sammy Lyons as Wati Ngintaka, the perentie man; detail of a painted pylon in Enterprize Park, Melbourne; guide Rene Douglas at Gunya Titjikala. At Cave Hill (below), Stanley Douglas explains the Seven Sisters songline to Desert Tracks tour guests, who might also meet Anangu youngsters such as Cecil (right, at left) and Lachlan Brady, and try tucker like gotjala, or honeypot ants (inset).



Desert Tracks, northern SA

THE ANANGU Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands of northern SA are a treasury of secrets, stories and songs. Cut by the Musgrave and Mann ranges, they are at once beautiful and inaccessible, with an untouched quality that has helped preserve Anangu culture. Exploring APY lands is only possible with Desert Tracks, one of the longest continually operating Aboriginal-owned tour companies in the country. Its four directors are Anangu people, the traditional owners of the APY lands, and its tours, which have been running since 1988, follow songlines – creation stories that crisscross the country like lines in a road atlas.

"We take only about 250 people into the 'Pit' lands a year," says Desert Tracks operations manager Brett Graham. "When you think how many people come to Central Australia, so few – maybe 1 per cent – get to come here and see what it's really about."

I joined Desert Tracks on a five-day tour, travelling with 18 students from a US college that offers courses on Aboriginal art and culture. We explored three songlines: the Seven Sisters, the country's longest unbroken songline, stretching 3000 km from the Gulf of

Carpentaria to the Great Australian Bight; Wati Ngintaka, the story of the perentie man wandering 600 km across the desert to find (and steal) a grindstone; and Kuniya (woma python), one of Uluru's big creation stories, which begins in the APY lands.

After skirting Mt Conner, 90 km east of Uluru, to enter the APY lands, we camped the first two nights at the foot of 1435 m Mt Woodroffe (Ngarutjaranya), SA's highest peak, just a few kilometres from the start

"The people here have still got the stories"

of the Kuniya songline, where the woma python laid her eggs on an exposed slab of rock. Like so many of the important sites, the rock slab's significance was not in its beauty or bulk. Surrounding it were mountains and rocks of remarkable allure, yet in the creation stories many of the most striking landscape features are mere subplots.

"Bringing people out here, it makes them realise that all across Australia, the rocks, the trees, the swamp, all of it is part of a story," said traditional owner Stanley Douglas. We met him at Cave Hill, Central Australia's largest rock-art site. Inside the



Myrmecocystus sp.

cave, the painted walls and ceiling tell the story of the Seven Sisters being pursued across the country by a man named Wati Nyruhu. "It's not finished yet," Stanley explained of the paintings, even though some had been dated to 22,000 years old.

Past Cave Hill, our journey paralleled the Wati Ngintaka songline, culminating in an afternoon of inma (ceremony). At five points along the songline, the creation story was sung and danced for us. At one site we danced part of the ceremony ourselves, the men separated from the women, stamping through the dust.

"We sing the songline to keep the spirits alive," traditional owner Lee Brady explained. "When the spirit dies, the land dies. The people here have still got the stories and the songlines, and that's why they fight hard to keep their places because if they give that up they give themselves up, they give their souls up."

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Dampier Peninsula, WA

BENEATH A BLOOD-RED sunset, Rod Curtis stood at the edge of the Indian Ocean, fishing rod in hand. He hadn't had a bite in hours and he hardly seemed to care. "We've been travelling around the country for seven weeks and we've seen some amazing places and done some amazing things, but this is the best place we've been by far," the Melburnian said. "It's like a holiday away from a holiday, a chance to stop and swim and snorkel and fish and laze around."

Rod's "best place" is Kooljaman, on Cape Leveque near the tip of the Dampier Peninsula in the Kimberley, a wilderness camping resort jointly owned by the nearby Aboriginal communities of One Arm Point and Djarindjin. Winner of a swag of tourism gongs, including Australian Tourism Awards for ecotourism and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism, Kooljaman commands a glorious position above three beaches where migrating whales pass close by. It offers accommodation from simple campsites to thatched beach shelters, cabins and roomy safari tents. Dining options are just as varied, from self-catering, to the excellent Dinkas Restaurant, to a 'bush butler' service in which meals are delivered to safari tents to be barbecued on the jarrah decks.

Surrounded by Aboriginal communities, Kooljaman offers plenty of scope to experience indigenous culture, from traditional stun-fishing to Aboriginal-run boat tours to Sunday Island. I joined a tagalong 4WD tour with the irreverent and likeable Eric Hunter, and we snorkelled and fished our way north to the tip of the peninsula. Later I joined Vincent

Angus mud crabbing in Mudnunn's creek, plucking out crabs the size of small dogs from between mangrove roots while trying hard to ignore the crocodile slides on the banks.

Kooljaman's tourism success has led to a burgeoning number of local tour operators on the Dampier Peninsula. In 2005, these businesses banded together to create Ardi, a representative body for indigenous tour operators on the peninsula. Membership stands at around 15 businesses. "We want to set it up and market the peninsula as a stand-alone destination, separate from Broome," Ardi secretary Kathleen Cox said.

Kathleen's own business, Goombaragin Eco Ventures, is one of the peninsula's newest offerings, with four tents commanding a position at least the natural equal of Cape Leveque. The accommodation is simple but there are plans to improve it. Overlooking Pender Bay, the scene is a kaleidoscope of coastal colours: red and black cliffs, white sand, turquoise ocean. Dolphins feed below the cliffs in the mornings and manta rays leap from the sea.

"We try to do a lot of walking to make it nature-based," Kathleen said. "If we can show visitors the whole symbiotic thing, how one thing is dependent on the other so we must respect and look after it, then we're happy."

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"we have cultural obligations and we have a responsibility to country"



The late afternoon sun sets Cape Leveque's western beach ablaze. Nearby, at Mudnunn, Vincent Angus displays a pair of mud crabs (below left), while at the Dampier Peninsula's northern tip, tagalong 4WD tour operator Eric Hunter points out the area's natural attractions.



year. "If you combine indigenous tourism with the arts, my guess-timate would be that it's an industry worth in excess of \$100 million a year," says Indigenous Tourism Australia (ITA) executive chairman Senator Aden Ridgeway.

More impressive than the pure numbers is the ever-diversifying nature of Aboriginal tourism experiences. No longer just about dance and didgeridoos, indigenous experiences now cover almost every facet of contemporary tourism: cultural, eco, adventure, volunteering, luxury stays, camping. You can rescue green sea turtles on Cape York Peninsula, follow songlines in the out-back, visit the cellar door of an indigenous winery beside the Lachlan River in NSW, take a cultural cruise on Sydney Harbour,

stay in a safari tent on the fringe of a Central Australian community, or participate in a traditional hunt.

"There's been a general lack of new tourism experiences developed in Australia in the past five years but we've had an exponential growth in the number of new experiences being developed by Aboriginal people," says John Morse, an ITA board member and former Australian Tourist Commission managing director. "It really has become quite diverse to cover the whole range of Aboriginal experiences and culture."

Aden says that during the industry's early years, many operators were nervous about sharing their traditional stories. "I think [this] was more about a mistrust in *Continued page 77*"



Gunya Titjikala, Central Australia

On the isolated outskirts of the Titjikala community, 110 km south of Alice Springs, sit Gunya Titjikala's five stylish safari tents.

AT GUNYA TITJIKALA, there's little that you might normally expect from a \$1350-a-night resort. Its five stylish safari tents offer a few simple luxuries – deep bathtubs from which one can gaze up to glistening night skies, incongruously white linen, vast desert views – but there are no swimming pools, no spas, no lighting and minimal facilities. What you pay for at this unique venture, 110 km south of Alice Springs, are not indulgences but an experience as raw as the land.

"Our people don't perform, our tour guides aren't scripted; it's a raw and unfabricated product," Gunya Tourism managing director Paul Conlon says. "We don't pitch ourselves as a great tourism operator, we pitch ourselves as a community developer. We deliver a good product, but that's not the real reason we're in there... we're there to generate jobs and

establish a sustainable economic base for the community."

Operating since 2004, Gunya Titjikala is a 50/50 venture between the Titjikala community and Sydney-based Gunya Tourism, with financial backing from the likes of former Macquarie Bank executive Bill Moss. It's the first of several such community-based stays planned by Gunya Tourism, with others to follow on The Coorong (south-eastern SA) and at Murwangi (Arnhem Land).

Two-night, three-day package stays at Gunya Titjikala include accommodation, meals and tours to Chambers Pillar, the community arts centre and gathering witchetty grubs. Dot-painting workshops can be arranged and fireside malu (kangaroo) cook-ups are likely. "It's very much a hands-on exercise," Paul says. "The guides go out as a mob and you're part of that mob."

For the three days I spent at Titjikala the guiding mob consisted of community residents Peter Doolan, Rene Douglas and Susan Umagura. Peter is one of Titjikala's most regular hosts, with a ready grin and a face full of character and lines, while Rene is as talkative as Susan is silent. On our first afternoon, we packed an esky with coffee, tea, milk, biscuits and kangaroo tail and drove across the sand plain to a thicket of witchetty bushes, where we dug at roots to uncover half a dozen witchetty grubs. "They taste just like scrambled eggs," Rene assured me, chewing on a biscuit as I dusted sand and ash from one of the grubs cooking in the fire. I, too, would have preferred the biscuit.

The next day we journeyed out to Chambers Pillar, 35 km from Titjikala, where Rene explained the creation story of the evil Itikiwara,

a knob-tailed gecko spirit ancestor, before we returned to wander through the arts centre. Expanded last May, the centre showcases the work of more than 30 Titjikala artists, including Marie Shilling's popular naïve-style paintings and the characteristic 'bush toys' of Johnny Young and David Wallace, wound together from scraps of copper wire.

Dinner was shared with a handful of Titjikala residents, before a night spent in glorious desert solitude, with only the faint yapping of dogs and the hum of the generator for company. Standing on the tent balcony, covered in a day's dust and staring over a seemingly endless desert plain studded with jump-ups...priceless moments.

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Titjikala artist Hazel Ungwanaka paints a wildflower scene in the community arts centre. Up to 15 artists work here each day.

Gunya glimpses: copper-wire kangaroos (below left), part of the bush-toy collection from Titjikala artists Johnny Young and David Wallace; guide Peter Doolan's affable smile (below centre); and witchetty grubs (below right) served on a bush platter, straight from the coals.



relation to historic dispossession of land and how the people go about sharing these stories," he says. "Would it be done in a way that recognised the integrity of these stories as well as being respectful for them? It's not in the indigenous interest to want to set up Disney theme parks on Aboriginal culture."

Mandy Muir has witnessed the change firsthand. A traditional owner of lands in Kakadu National Park, in the NT, she has worked in tourism for 19 years, first on boats at Yellow Water and now as owner-operator of Murdudjurl Art Centre and Cultural Tours. The desire for more intimate and authentic experiences has been reflected in the rapidly growing number of Kakadu visitors who join her tours: in 2004, Murdudjurl had 270 tourists. Now it has more than five times that number.

Indigenous tourism operators throughout Australia report similar trends. Mandy says that as the numbers have grown, so has the sense of respect for Aboriginal culture, both from tourists and within the tourism industry. "People are more understanding," she says. "I know just through my tours, people ask me, 'Why do you close areas off?' I say that we have cultural obligations and we have a responsibility to country and the old people that lie within it, and they've never realised those stories until now."

"Our people don't perform, our tour guides aren't scripted; it's a raw and unfabricated product"

Tourism can bring renewed interest and pride in a community's culture, particularly among younger residents. It may also offer the prospect of viability and independence beyond 'sit-down money'; bringing positives to Aboriginal groups at a time when politicians and the wider population are focusing on negative aspects of some Aboriginal communities. "Tourism's a shining jewel amongst the bad," Aden says. "It can create jobs and value-add along the chain and that helps communities overcome their impoverished circumstances."

WHY THEN, is indigenous tourism more popular among international visitors than domestic travellers? In 2006, 15 per cent of international visitors to Australia had an Aboriginal tourism experience, yet less than 1 per cent of Australian travellers did so. It's little wonder that much of the marketing focus has been aimed overseas, particularly in Europe.

Last February, Tourism Australia sponsored the Indigenous Experience Roadshow in Europe. Aden led a delegation of 15 tour operators, trumpeting Aboriginal tourism in London, Milan, Paris, Utrecht and Berlin. "It was an absolute success," he says. "We know there's business starting to be written up and we know there's also a buzz about something fresh and new coming out of Australia that goes beyond just those traditional icons of people walking around on a beach."

Australian travellers, however, still appear to prefer the beach. Though the numbers of domestic tourists taking part in Aboriginal tourism is growing, Judy believes this may not be a deliberate change among Australians. More likely, it's simply that many of the new experiences appeal to Australian holidaymakers. "Some people have said to me that the phrase 'cultural tourism' is the kiss of death in the domestic market," she says. "For example, the Cape York Turtle Rescue is attracting domestic tourists. It's not because it's an indigenous "

business, it's because it's a turtle-rescue business. On the Aurukun Wetland Char- ters there's great fishing and most Aus- tralians like to fish."

John says that if indigenous tourism is to truly prosper, the hurdle of domestic disinterest must be cleared. "Generally, experiences in the tourism industry can't survive just on the international market because 65–75 per cent of the market is domestic."

Aden agrees, but doesn't shy away from targeting interna- tional tourists. "I think we've got to get the international mar- ket to work as a mirror, to reflect the value of indigenous tourism back to the domestic market, because here we've got to overcome myths and stereotypes of the walkabout mentality, unreliability or the quality of the experience," he says. "The

"It's a chance to look at where they live in a differ- ent way – get an ancient perspective of the bush"

reality is that there are some fantastic experi- ences out there but not a lot of people know about them."

SOME LANDS will never be open to tourists and some stories will never be told, but many barriers are crumbling. Remote Aboriginal communities are eyeing off tour- ism, seeing it as an investment that involves reasonably low start-up capital and relies mostly on attractions that already exist: little-visited lands and the world's oldest surviving culture. But the challenges remote communities face in establishing tourism can be enormous, from the creation of infrastructure to finding community leaders able to devote themselves to a new tourism venture. Few communities can cope with large-scale tourism, so the trend is *Continued page 83*

In a spray of grasstrees (below), Evan Yanna Muru shares wisdom about the plants, animals, history and culture of Dharug country, near Sydney. But much of the Blue Mountains Walkabout is aimed at helping people "feel" the Dreamtime, rather than passively hear- ing about it. "It's not just something for one day, it's something you can apply to your whole life," Evan says. Parisian Celine Lopez-Sere (right, at right) and American Mira Hattal got into the spirit, having their faces painted with ochres, while others recorded their stories on bark and sticks (below right).

PHOTOS: WARREN FIELD



Blue Mountains Walkabout, NSW

SPEND A LOT of time in the bush and had thought, for a whitefella, my eyes were pretty good at reading the country: kangaroo walked here, Aboriginal engraving hidden there. But after a day on the Blue Mountains Walkabout, I was stunned by how much I miss. It's like having a whole new way of seeing the bush opened up – whether it's the barely discernible charcoal etchings in the back of an overhang, the fragments of a Dreaming story writ- ten in the landscape itself, or the crushed gumleaves up your nose (it's a medic- inal thing).

Blue Mountains Walk- about has been run since 2000 by former Aborigi- nal Discovery Ranger Evan Yanna Muru. Personable, gentle and softly spoken, Evan takes groups of up to a dozen people for a day walk on rough bush tracks in Dharug country from Falconbridge to Spring- wood. It's a sensual expe- rience – participants are encouraged to touch, smell, taste and listen to



the bush. Meditative exer- cises teach new ways to slow down and really "see" the bush – with the whole being, not just the eyes. "I'm just giving the bush a voice and allowing people to hear what the bush is saying," Evan says.

There's about four hours of walking during the day, down into secluded, cool valleys where rocks and fallen logs are covered in long- haired lichens like shaggy carpets. As with many places in the Blue Moun- tains, it's hard to believe it's only an hour and a half from central Sydney. Evan doesn't stop often, but the breaks, when they come, are long, and Evan takes time to share

ancient stories, demon- strate cultural aspects such as ochre painting and describe ceremonial rites.

Most people who go on the Walkabout are international backpackers, but Evan hopes more Australians will take the opportunity. "It's a chance to look at where they live in a different way – get an ancient perspective of the bush," Evan says. "It seems to be a very pow- erful experience. A lot of people tell me it's the best thing they've done in their whole Australian trip."

KEN EASTWOOD

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Gay-wu women's program, north-east Arnhem Land

THE MATRIARCH of the Bawaka Homeland, 54-year-old Barbara Burarrwanga, etches her family tree into the silvery sand. With her finger, she makes little lines showing first her full sisters, then the sisters born to her father's other wives, then the brothers. She thinks and counts and marks out 36, hoping she's remembered everyone – but there's not enough beach between us to show close to 90 grandchildren. How many in all? About 2000 in the family, she says proudly, including her famous uncles Galarrwuy and Mandawuy Yunupingu, and her artist aunt Gulumbu. They are Yolngu people of the Gumatj clan. And for a couple of days, we visitors to her country will learn what that means.

This is the gay-wu (or dillybag) women's program, part of the first indigenously owned and

operated tourism business in Arnhem Land, called the Bawaka Cultural Experience. Barbara's son, Timmy, heads up this project, which, since March last year, has welcomed some 600 day visitors to part of their ancestral home, a stunning strip of coastal cliffs and dunes south of Nhulunbuy on the Gove Peninsula. More recently, Barbara has added the dillybag program, for women only, which includes an overnight stay and a deeper exploration of the culture, history and stories of this untouched area.

A tourism business was her husband's dream, Barbara says. She, her three blood sisters, her

daughter and son decided to take it on when he died six years ago. They want to create local jobs – they have the

strong support of the Yirrkala community, around 50 km up the road – but they're also keen to share knowledge of the life of the Yolngu and provide real contact with the land. It's the first thing they say when they greet us and the last thing when they hug us goodbye: "Take what you have learned and tell people. We want them to know."

During walks, sisters Ritjilili and Banbapuy and Barbara's daughter Djwandil nonchalantly identify roots used for dyeing, leaves for treating sore eyes or earache, and the white orchid that blooms to signal the season for hunting stingrays. They also share their deeper, spiritual knowledge.

Bawaka is about the unexpected; it follows a loose timetable

thing when they hug us goodbye: "Take what you have learned and tell people. We want them to know."

The core story of this country and its clans is of the two Creation Sisters, who crossed the sea by canoe carrying dillybags containing the essence of their power. One of the sisters was pregnant, seeking a place to give birth. You must go to Bawaka to learn the details – to see in dawn's light the rocks and dunes they created, to hear the Burarrwanga sisters sing the story of this epic journey. But it is why on arrival we are given bags and baskets, and taught to weave our own. "All stories, food, people, language, can be carried in a dillybag, like ones used by the Creation Sisters," Barbara says. "You can take it out as needed, to spread the knowledge."

It is a young business – we are just the third group of women to come on the experience – and an adventure, from the bumpy ride through sand to the Bawaka home site, to the sight of a crocodile streaking from the dunes into the water. There are delights and comforts too – we stay in thatched

huts looking onto a perfect blue and silver crescent. Our first meal of tender-fleshed mud crabs is caught and cooked by the great dancer Djakapurra Munyarryun, best known for his evocation of the Dreamtime at the opening ceremony of the 2000 Olympics. What exactly is this revered performer doing here? He's family. Bawaka is about the unexpected; it follows a loose timetable and each trip evolves its own rhythm.

Barbara shows us the old, falling-down huts where she lived with her parents after the local Aboriginal community lost its mammoth court battle against the giant Alcan (then called Nabalco) bauxite mine and alumina refinery. It opened in 1972 and still sprawls redly across the tip of the Gove Peninsula. To avoid looking at it, some 20 members of the Burarrwanga family piled into an open-backed truck and moved south to Port Bradshaw and later, to Bawaka. They hunted, fished and Barbara taught the children in

a small tin schoolroom. When the truck didn't work, they would walk seven hours to Yirrkala for supplies of sugar, tea and flour.

These days, the trip takes just 90 minutes in a 4WD and takes us past the site of the famous Garna Festival, which a dozen or so family members attend each year. Again, it's about sharing the knowledge as widely as possible because however the Bawaka women's program develops – and it is regarded as a hopeful model by NT Tourism – it will always remain an essentially handmade project.

The site itself will be open to tourists for just 104 days each year, to minimise impact. The sisters also prefer that each group of women number no more than six. Small of scale. Big of heart.

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PHOTOS: COURTESY OF NITC



Women's business. This Bawaka women's program included (left, from left) Sonia Munyarryun, holding her son Russell, Banbapuy Ganambarr, Barbara Burarrwanga, Tracey Billot, Kate Shilling, Coby Martin-Jard and writer Jennifer Byrne. Barbara and her sister Ritjilili (above) demonstrated how to prepare pandanus leaves for weaving baskets and dillybags before all the women had a turn. They were also shown bush medicines and foods such as the red bush apple (right).



Syzgium suborbiculare

Aurukun, far north Queensland

AURUKUN. For decades the name evoked fear in anyone who was brought up in Queensland's tropical climes. The Aurukun of my childhood was a place known for social problems, violence, depravity and alcohol abuse. Local press advertised Aurukun as a "no-go zone" if you were white or an outsider.

So it was with some apprehension that I flew into Aurukun to visit a new tourism venture in the Wik community. Memories of what I had read about the place began to dissolve as I watched the spectacular landscapes of the country unfold in slow motion beneath the plane. A turquoise sea lapped against white

sand beaches fringed by bauxite red cliffs on the western shores of Cape York Peninsula. Nearing the mouth of the Archer River, the plane startled a large manta ray from its lazy, floating siesta and sent it flying, bird-like, out of the water.

A gaggle of local kids greeted us at the Aurukun runway, welcoming us with waves, smiles and

healthy childlike fascination. I'd expected to see rundown humpies, rubbish, graffiti and disenfranchised people. Instead, the town was a pleasant mishmash of colourful, well-maintained houses, clean streets, and a community with a spirit of progression and a market garden at its heart. At the newly

formed Wik and Kugu Arts and Crafts Centre I watched Mavis Ngallametta hanging pandanus leaves on the fence to dry before weaving them into baskets. Unlike other Cape York groups who paint, the Wik tell their stories through sculpture and basketry. Young men are taught to carve spirit poles, firesticks and make firestick sheaths from beeswax.

The most ambitious small-enterprise project in Aurukun has been Aurukun Wetland Charters, a pilot tourist program based around Wik ways and fishing on the Archer River. I boarded the custom-built catamaran *Pikkuw* to spend three days plying the Archer and Watson rivers,

which are pristine and virtually un-fished waterways that snake deep into remote parts of Cape York Peninsula. Kids from the Aurukun community were heavily involved in the construction of *Pikkuw* and are responsible for all of its interior design. The project's principal aim is to provide ongoing employment for disaffected youth in the community.

Under the watchful eye of Dawn 'Mama Archer' Koon-dumbin, the indigenous custodian of the Archer River, I collected mud shells, paperbark and tea-tree leaves. We swam at crocodile-free waterfalls, collected sugarbag

honey from the hives of native bees, and hunted for fish and mud crabs using hand spears. Locals would then expertly cook the fruits of our labour on an open fire.

Aboard *Pikkuw* at the end of each day, tribal elders taught me Wik language and culture against the backdrop of a spectacular west-cape sunset. It has altered my perceptions of Aurukun and its people forever.

TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY INGER VANDYKE

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Alert for crocodiles, Jim Koongatema fishes for stingrays and other fish in the Archer River, near Aurukun. On the three-day tour based on the catamaran *Pikkuw* (bottom left), Jim also demonstrated traditional techniques such as fire-starting (bottom centre) under the watchful eye of Dawn 'Mama Archer' Koondumbin (below), the river's indigenous custodian.

towards low-volume, high-end tourism, even if this means pricing most Australians out of the market.

"I think that the more successful indigenous operations that are emerging are all pitched at the high end where you don't want volume," says Paul Conlon, managing director of Gunya Tourism, which has constructed safari-tent accommodation at the edge of the Central Australian community of Titjikala, 110 km south of Alice Springs. There are only five tents, each priced at \$1350 a night, and the target occupancy is just 30 per cent. "That's the number the community appears able to cope with," Paul says. "They don't want to work seven days a week, and they certainly don't want to work 24/7."

Titjikala underwent a seismic shift to establish the operation, moving from a permit system that restricted entry to the community, to inviting tourists to become part of ordinary community life. Four years into the venture, Titjikala resident and traditional owner Joe Rawson says the community remains nervous but proud. "We just thought we'd take it on and give it a try; see what the tourism industry was like," he says. "It's only small at the moment, but within five years we hope to have it full-on... full-on wages and everything for the community people, instead of living on the dole. When we first started we only had a couple of us working, now we have 64 on the payroll."

EMERGING BUSINESSES are better prepared than 20 years ago. Today, on average, almost 4000 tourists take part in an indigenous experience each day, and the blizzard of new businesses has led to a network of support services. ITA provides information to indigenous tourism operators about establishing, funding and operating a business. In the Federal Government's Business Ready Program, six mentors from across Australia provide guidance to a selection of start-up tour operators. Judy and Don Freeman are among the mentors, advising five indigenous businesses on Cape York Peninsula.

"To me, this program is the most valuable thing we've hit upon," Judy says. "We're seeing such tangible benefits. They [the five businesses] all have brochures, they all have collateral, they all have websites, they all have systems in place and they have a presence in the market none of them had two years ago."

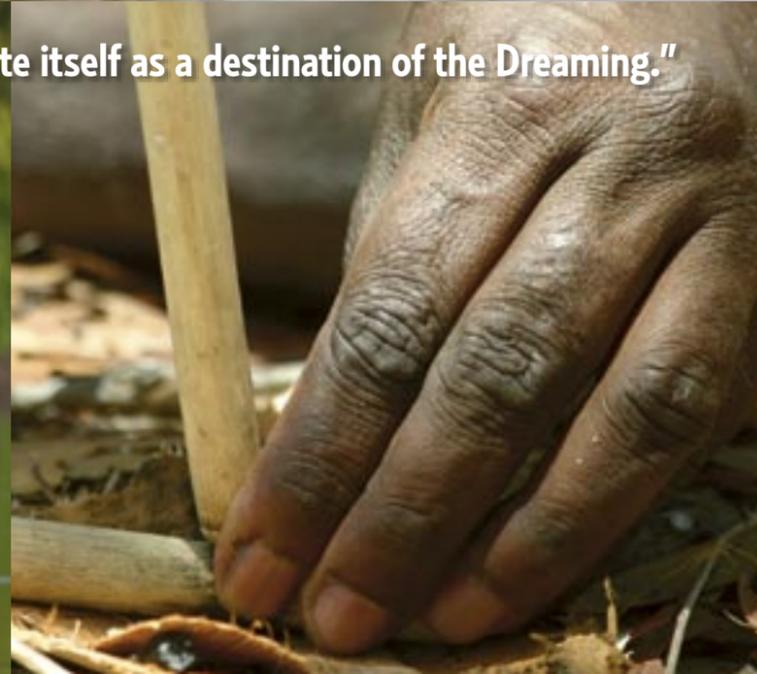
Forecasts for indigenous tourism are buoyant and the flow-on positive for Aboriginal people, with more community-immersed experiences and more Aboriginal people working in both indigenous tourism and the general tourism industry. "In Kakadu and Arnhem Land I worked with a man called Jacob Nayinggul, and I asked him, 'How do you see Aboriginal tourism and the Aboriginal people in 10 or 20 years?'" John says. "He said, 'It's very simple. Aboriginal people must be running their own businesses, managing their own businesses, employing Aboriginal people and employing non-Aboriginal people'"

Aden boldly predicts that indigenous tourism will become Australia's premier visitor attraction. "In 10 years time I think Australia will promote itself as a destination of the Dreaming. I think it has to become the overarching central feature of the Australian experience because Aboriginal people can talk about the Great Barrier Reef or Uluru/Ayers Rock and bring the land to life in a much more meaningful way. It's the oldest surviving culture on the planet, there's a story waiting to be told in relation to the land, and the people are ready to share that." **AG**

See "Koorie Heritage Trust" and "Culture Club", page 84



"In 10 years time I think Australia will promote itself as a destination of the Dreaming."



Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne

"WHEN I WALK through Southbank as an Aboriginal person I see the wetlands that were once here," Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT) education manager Dean Stewart said on Southbank Promenade as he led me on a two-hour Yarra River walk. "Even those big skyscrapers, every element of them – the glass, the steel – comes from the land, so even they are intimately connected to land and place. It's a stretch of the imagination but I see them as like big river red gums."

While Aboriginal tourism may have its heartland in the outback and bush, city experiences can also offer genuine glimpses of indige-

nous culture and history. KHT, in King Street, in the bustling heart of Melbourne, houses two galleries of changing collections and a permanent exhibit ranging from creation stories through to contemporary culture. It also operates guided walks that re-imagine the pre-settlement-era Melbourne of two centuries ago.

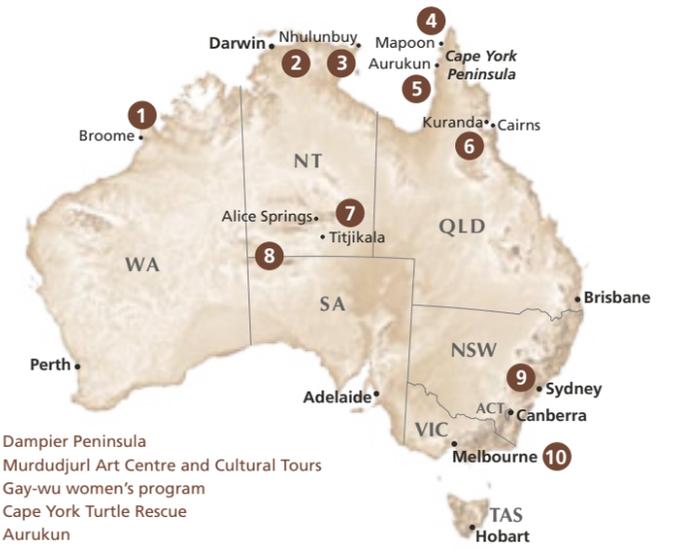
Beside us, the Yarra flowed flat and brown where once a waterfall served as a lifeline to the Boonwurrung and Woiworong people. The falls were blown up by settlers in the 1880s during construction of Queens Bridge. Around us, Southbank swarmed with people and res-

taurants where platypus and eels once swam through swampy pools. So much had changed, but Dean saw continuity and a land that was still in control. "The essence of what all these people are doing here hasn't changed," he said, pointing to the restaurants. "The wetlands provided food, so eating and drinking here is what people have always done." Likewise, he explained, the MCG was a corroboree site, so its tradition as a place of ceremony continues. "All that we've done as human beings is be drawn to the same places for the same things."

www.koorieheritagetrust.com,
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 ph: (03) 8622 2600



Koorie Heritage Trust education manager Dean Stewart (opposite) encourages walkers to "feel" the wetlands beneath the Southbank concrete (above). The tour begins in Enterprise Park (below).



- 1 Dampier Peninsula
- 2 Murudjurl Art Centre and Cultural Tours
- 3 Gay-wu women's program
- 4 Cape York Turtle Rescue
- 5 Aurukun
- 6 Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park
- 7 Gunya Titjikala
- 8 Desert Tracks
- 9 Blue Mountains Walkabout
- 10 Koorie Heritage Trust



Culture club

Other top indigenous experiences in and around capital cities

<p>Adelaide Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute, 253 Grenfell Street. Australia's oldest indigenous owned and managed arts centre. www.tandanya.com.au</p> <p>Brisbane The Dreaming festival, Woodford, 90 minutes drive from the city. Festival of dance, film, comedy and music, held each June. www.thedreamingfestival.com</p> <p>Canberra Reconciliation Place. Pathway linking the High Court of Australia and the National Library with 16 artworks on indigenous and reconciliation themes.</p> <p>Darwin Biliru Tours and Cultural Experiences. Tours and workshops in the city bilirutours@bigpond.com</p>	<p>Hobart Shag Bay Heritage Walk. 1.5 km (one-way) walking track along the River Derwent's eastern shores, past Aboriginal heritage sites. www.tribalwarrior.org/cruise.html</p> <p>Melbourne Tjanabi restaurant, Federation Square. Bush-tucker restaurant run by a Boonwurrung elder. www.tjanabi.com.au</p> <p>Perth Kwillana Dreaming cultural tours. A range of Nyungar-led tours around the Mandurah region kwillana@bigpond.net.au</p> <p>Sydney Bangarra Dance Theatre, Pier 4/5 Hickson Rd, Walsh Bay. Innovative contemporary dance company. www.bangarra.com.au Tribal Warrior Cultural Cruise of Sydney Harbour, departs from</p>	<p>Further information www.contactguides.com</p> <p>Indigenous Tourism Australia www.indigenoustourism.australia.com</p> <p>Aboriginal Tourism Australia www.ataust.org.au</p> <p>Western Australian Indigenous Tourism Operators Committee www.waitoc.com</p> <p>Indigenous Business Australia www.iba.gov.au</p>
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Andrew Bain and Barry Skipsey travelled courtesy of Gunya Titjikala, Desert Tracks, Australian Pinnacle Tours, King Leopold Air, Kooljaman and Goombaragin Eco Ventures. Thanks also to Australia's North West Tourism, Carl Skinner, John McIntyre, Sorrel Wilby, Kerry Lorimer, Ian Crawshaw, Monique Choy, Sara Jones, Peter Walton, Evan Yanna Muru and all those mentioned in the article for their assistance.

City experiences can also offer genuine glimpses of indigenous culture and history