



STORYTELLERS UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

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STORYTELLERS

A visit to Australia without an Aboriginal tourism experience is like going to Bondi without a surfboard. Or going outback and never seeing a kangaroo.

From gateway destinations like Sydney/Warrane, to Central Australia or the red earth of the Kimberley, Aboriginal peoples across the country are waiting to tell their stories and share the meaning of their cultures and way of life.

Aboriginal cultures date back more than 65,000 years. They existed long before Stonehenge, predate the Pyramids and are older than the Acropolis. What's more amazing is that these cultures can be experienced today.

Who better to introduce you to the world's oldest living continuous cultures than those who live, breathe and dream them every day – Aboriginal guides who call this vast continent their home.

Whether it's through feeling the light strip of ochre across the forehead or walking along the beach with an Aboriginal Elder who can read the tides by how the birds call, Aboriginal peoples bring another side of Australia to life.

Every part of Australia is Aboriginal Country and every part of that Country has a series of unique stories and experiences. The Discover Aboriginal Experiences collective offers

an exciting array of activities, tours and accommodation; from exploring labyrinths of ancient and contemporary rock art, quad biking, kayaking, fishing, mud crabbing, hiking, taking a walking tour in a city centre or staying in a lodge on lily-laden flood plains teeming with wildlife.

It's often who you meet when you travel to Australia that stays with you. Aboriginal guides are no exception. They bring a unique cultural insight to the land and history of Australia through their stories and way of life. Meet just a few of Australia's notable Aboriginal guides to see just what makes them so unforgettable.

MORE INFO

For more information on any of these experiences, including famil opportunities, high-res imagery or to arrange interviews, reach out to:

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BORRGORON COAST TO CREEK TOURS – TERRY HUNTER

Dampier Peninsula,
Western Australia



To many visitors, it's a vast, raw wilderness, where dusty red deserts meet empty beaches lapped by the world's largest tropical tides. For a young Terry, it was the ultimate playground, where he and his best mate James Brown grew up practicing Aboriginal skills such as foraging for bush tucker, sourcing water on salty tidal flats, and carving pearl shells – all learnt from Terry's father and other Bardi Jawi Elders. The pair went to school in a basic tin shed on the pearl farm with only a handful of other kids, before each was sent off to boarding school in Perth/Boorloo. But neither was destined for city life.

Now James is the managing director of Cygnet Bay Pearl Farm – Australia's oldest continuously operating pearl farm – and Terry runs Borrgoron Coast to Creek Tours. On his signature two-hour walking tour, Terry shares stories of his childhood, his culture and his deep knowledge of these lands. But it's not just Terry's guests who gain a better understanding of his Country, it's also his own extended family – and he hopes to inspire them to preserve the Hunter connection to Cygnet Bay for generations to come.

Terry Hunter is the fourth generation of his family to work in the pearling trade, but the first to become a tour guide. The proud Bardi man grew up on a remote pearl farm in Western Australia. His home, 220km from the nearest town of Broome, is part of the state's famed Kimberley region.

“I love to share my home, share our culture, and see guests' reactions as they get a better understanding of Aboriginal culture, knowledge and heritage. It's all about sharing with me.”

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BUNDYI CULTURAL TOURS – MARK SADDLER

Wagga Wagga,
New South Wales

“Yamandhu marang mudyi?” This is how Mark Saddler welcomes visitors to the banks of the Murrumbidgee River. He’s asking if you’re well, in his Wiradjuri dialect. “When you start to learn the language of the Country you’re in, you start to learn the Country itself,” he says.

This particular Country is Wagga Wagga in the Riverina region of south-western New South Wales, Mark’s homeland and the base for his tours by bus, van, motorbike and on foot. “My goal is to get people to see the land differently,” Mark says. “We visit places that are very special to the Wiradjuri community, and where few others get to go. It should open your eyes and your mind.”

Mark’s Bundyi (“share”) tours are indeed personal and eye-opening, lasting from two hours to a full day. “I share from the heart. It’s the only way I know how,” says Mark, who is also a member of the New South Wales Aboriginal Tourism Operators Council (NATOC). “It comes from 100 per cent genuine experiences across 65,000 years of my people teaching me how to bundyi with people today.”

Mark is on a mission to get people to slow down and reconnect with the land. “You may go to a place where you feel a bit special and you don’t know why – non-Aboriginal people can feel the same way, because we’re all connected to Mother Country,” he says.

“And if we don’t connect back to Mother Country, we might as well be on the next shuttle to Mars,” Mark adds. “We’ve done a pretty poor job of protecting her over the last couple centuries. Hopefully, through education and tourism, we can change that process and make sure we stay around a little longer.”

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“Aboriginal peoples have been doing land management for 65,000 years. We watch the animals to learn how the land’s going and watch the plants to time the seasons.”

BURRAWA ABORIGINAL CLIMB EXPERIENCE – SHONA DAVIDSON

Sydney/Warrane,
New South Wales



“I flew from Minjerrabah (North Stradbroke Island) in Queensland to New South Wales in 2018 to become a guide for BridgeClimb Sydney,” says Shona Davidson. “Little did I know that a few years down the track, Wesley Enoch AM – also from my island – would conceptualise an experience to showcase Sydney’s Indigenous cultures in all their glory. It’s a small world, but also a big world,” she says.

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Shona is one of the storytellers on a tour that Enoch (the Sydney Festival’s artistic director from 2017 to 2021) developed to offer guests not only a bird’s-eye view of the city – 360-degree panoramas from the top of the Sydney Harbour Bridge – but also countless insightful Indigenous observations.

Traversing 1,332 steps, Burrawa Aboriginal Climb Experience gives you plenty of time to pause and take in Australia’s largest city through Aboriginal eyes. “It still amazes me that there were three-metre-high, 65,000-year-old middens [ancient piles of shells] at Bennelong Point until the late 1700s,” says Shona. “The fact they were burnt to lime to build the colony is astounding.”

Shona is a natural storyteller, both of Creation tales and of Australian history. “A lot of people on the Burrawa climb are surprised by how much Indigenous culture still remains here,” she says. “Telling our stories, making sure they are heard, means they are preserved for generations.

“I am so happy I get to inspire people every day – and not just with the view.”

“People climb the Sydney Harbour Bridge with me and then say, ‘Well, now I have to go do a behind-the-scenes-tour of the Opera House and hear its Indigenous history.’”



DALE TILBROOK EXPERIENCES – DALE TILBROOK

Perth/Boorloo,
Western Australia



After returning from 10 years overseas Dale's journey in Aboriginal tourism began 25 years ago starting with a boomerang and artefact-making enterprise with her brother, then an Aboriginal art and gift gallery with some bush food products. From there Maalinup Gallery was developed where activities around bush tucker, culture and Aboriginal art are promoted.

Dale expanded her work with Maalinup Gallery and created Dale Tilbrook Experiences. Today Dale's two signature experiences focus on taking guests on an in-depth, hands-on journey into Aboriginal native edibles as food and medicine. "Food is our medicine," Dale explains. During these experiences guests are able to eat the bush foods and learn many interesting facts about their nutritional profile and medicinal plants. Dale also reveals some remarkable insights into Aboriginal food traditions such as the yam garden along the Swan River, the Noongar six seasons and sustainable hunting and gathering. In her art experience, the history of Aboriginal art and dot paintings is explored and participants create their own piece to take home. Dale's storytelling skills come to the fore when she delivers her Local History and Culture experience.

Dale Tilbrook needs little prompting to discuss her favourite topic, the native foodstuffs Australians call "bush tucker". "People regard lots of them as superfoods because of their nutritional make-up. Kakadu plums have the highest vitamin C content of any fruit in the world," says the Wardandi Bibbulmun Elder and chef. "If something interests me, I'm like a big sponge – I suck it all in and retain it."

Today, Dale is such an expert on Indigenous bush foods that she's in high demand to talk about them and cook them in far-flung countries such as Italy. That makes her one busy woman as she also runs Dale Tilbrook Experiences in Perth/Boorloo.

"People call me the Bush Tucker Queen as I have a passion that borders on obsession regarding native edible plants and their pharmaceutical and nutraceutical qualities. This obsession has continued to build for the last 20 odd years and is something I never tire of."

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DREAMTIME DIVE & SNORKEL – QUINN ROSS-PASSI

Cairns/Gimuy,
Queensland



The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander man was born and raised in Cairns, where he was "lucky" to be part of a six-month dive traineeship in 2019. This included a stint on the Dreamtime boat, just after the experience launched.

"I was on board for about two weeks and loved it." He joined the crew of First Nations cultural guides soon after.

Day trips to the outer reef weave together Dreamtime stories, clapstick and didgeridoo playing demonstrations and dance. "It's the hook that draws people in," says Quinn.

On snorkelling and diving expeditions, he points out the pageant of fish and coral in the Creation story of the reef. "The bombora [submerged rock shelves] were the boulders that the angry spirits rolled out into the ocean. It means standalone and they're huge," he says. "They're just a small part of this immense natural wonder that has sustained and inspired Indigenous communities for millennia."

"A lot of our people go out and hunt fish, turtles and dugongs, but we do it sustainably. If there's a big wedding, it's a lot easier to get a dugong than 300 fish. If it was a turtle, you wouldn't use one part and chuck the rest of it away. It's something that's frowned upon in Indigenous cultures."

Looking up from the vibrant depths of the Great Barrier Reef is what first hooked Quinn Ross-Passi on scuba diving. It's something he shares with day-trippers on a Dreamtime Dive & Snorkel cruise, a unique Indigenous tour taking visitors across the World Heritage-listed reef in a catamaran before pausing to allow guests to dive in and explore the underwater world.

"It's like looking into a stained-glass window. It has all those waves in it, but it's not static: it's moving. It's just like the whole world around you is moving at the same time," says Quinn.

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DREAMTIME SOUTHERN X – MARGRET CAMPBELL

Sydney/Warrane,
New South Wales



You might encounter her – or one of her guides – cradling a tiny pot of ground ochre while standing in The Rocks waiting to welcome you to the 90-minute walking tour. The pale paste is dabbed onto your wrists to connect you to Earth Mother and the sandstone lying beneath your feet. Aunty Marg might also draw symbols on herself with the ochre paste, which dries in the sun as she talks.

As you stand in front of modern wonders such as the Sydney Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Aunty Marg's stories will take you back to a time when this land and the harbour looked very different. Before colonisation, Indigenous peoples would watch out for the whales they considered a spiritual ancestor. They'd also bring fish here to cook over their campfires.

Aunty Marg is from the Dughutti and Jerrinjha nations of New South Wales, but has 10 other ways of identifying herself, including various animal Totems. These all link her into a deep network of kinship and connection. Spending time with Aunty Marg will highlight how the Dreamtime still shapes the world's oldest continuous living cultures – estimated to be more than 65,000 years old – and the responsibilities of Elders in today's society.

When you meet Margret Campbell, feel free to call her Aunty Marg. In Australia, addressing an Indigenous Elder as “Aunty” or “Uncle” is a sign of respect, although it's polite to ask for permission before using these terms. Aunty Marg is the founder-owner and managing director of Dreamtime Southern X, which runs tours offering fascinating insights into Sydney/Warrane's Aboriginal Dreamtime beginnings.

“Reconciliation is not just about shaking hands and feeling welcomed into Country. Reconciliation is about all people connecting with Aboriginal peoples' cultures to learn how we can respect and conserve our Earth Mother that we all live and walk upon.”

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FIRES CREEK BOTANICAL WINERY ABORIGINAL EXPERIENCES – KEVIN ‘GAVI’ DUNCAN

Central Coast, New South Wales



While Gavi is a well-known face on the New South Wales Central Coast – a member of the Darkinjung Land Council, passionate supporter of protecting the region's waterways, and an active guide – perhaps his most fun role is at Firescreek. In Holgate, just 90 minutes north of Sydney/Warrane, Gavi captivates visitors with a showcase of Aboriginal artefacts and instruments, followed by a tasting of bush tucker and the estate's botanical wines.

“There are so many beautiful medicinal and nutritious native Australian foods,” he says. “And they're just now being appreciated across the country and around the world. I would love to have knowledge of this bounty embedded into Australian school curricula – to take kids through the bush and show them how amazing and sustaining the land is.”

For visitors to Firescreek, Gavi has a simple goal: “To teach people who the local Aboriginal people are, and have them understand our spiritual culture. I want people to appreciate the native plants that have been sustaining Indigenous communities for millennia. Talking to people on Country is by far the best way to get the message across. It really is a spiritual and life-changing experience.

Uncle Kevin ‘Gavi’ Duncan is the kind of person you meet and never forget. The respected Elder's stories sear into your memory. As do the haunting tunes he plays on his didgeridoo, with notes that reverberate through your soul for weeks – even years – after you leave the Firescreek Botanical Winery where Gavi hosts an Aboriginal Storytelling & Wine Tasting Experience.

“Indigenous cultures in Australia date back more than 65,000 years. But we've only been allowed to tell it for the last 50 years. There's a lot of catching up to do.”

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FLAMES OF THE FOREST – GARY CREEK

Port Douglas,
Queensland



“An integral part of the belief system of the Kuku Yalanji people is centered around nature and the intimate knowledge of Mother Nature’s cycles,” says Gary. “We asked permission from our Elders to tell this and other stories. They know when you are ready to pass them on. It’s a very proud moment when you, as an individual, have shown excellence in an area – whether it’s as a hunter or as a song man – and are given permission by the community to share this knowledge with other people.”

The performance he and Yanganda curated for Flames of the Forest is extremely personal and individual. “It’s only for the night. You won’t see anything else like it, anywhere else in the world,” says Gary. “The key is keeping it very private. We talk about our upbringing through a Dreamtime story, and its meaning to us. We share a lot about our language. We play the didgeridoo and sing in traditional language.

“I’ve heard people in the audience mumble under their breath, ‘wow,’ when we perform.”

Gary says it’s very humbling experience. “It changes people’s perceptions or enforces them,” he says. “We’re able to share spiritual information that people can take away. It can change lives.

“It’s hard to put into words our lifetime of knowledge. Through Flames of the Forest we’re able to bring together so many elements that reveal 65,000 years of culture.”

“It’s very addictive to see how enlightened people become after watching a Flames performance.”

Cultural education and entertainment have been Gary Creek’s passion for as long as he can remember. “It’s all I want to do, and know how to do,” he says. While he has been part of dance troupes and Aboriginal performing groups for three decades, today his focus lies in Flames of the Forest, a spectacular rainforest dining experience in Port Douglas that is given a twist every Thursday evening.

Under the cover of darkness, with fairy lights and candles all around, Gary and his brother Yanganda take things to the next level, highlighting their Kuku Yalanji heritage through music, songs, stories and performance.

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JANBAL GALLERY – BRIAN “BINNA” SWINDLEY

Mossman,
Queensland

When you sign up for an art lesson with Brian “Binna” Swindley, expect the unexpected. The only Aboriginal artist in Tropical North Queensland to own his own gallery – Janbal Gallery in the town of Mossman, in the shadow of the Daintree Rainforest – Binna runs his painting workshops his own way. So instead of using a paint brush, for example, you might be wielding a bamboo stick. “They’re great for dot paintings,” he says.

Binna is a contemporary artist who respects tradition. Much of the detail in his paintings comes from painstakingly applied dots, a traditional technique of his people. “We belong to the rainforest; the dots represent the raindrops,” he says.

Binna first learned to paint from his uncles, who belong to the local Kuku Yalanji tribe. “They painted didgeridoos and boomerangs and bark paintings; I’ve never painted on bark in my life,” Binna says, laughing. “Things always change. You can’t go backwards, you have to go forwards. How I paint changes every year.”

What doesn’t change is Binna’s dedication to his art, which, he says, is a reflection of his life. “My art is about me – what I’m hunting and what I’m gathering, what I see and what I feel,” he says. His paintings are filled with local flora and fauna, especially the cassowary, a large flightless bird that lives in the rainforest. “That’s my Totem bird – it’s very special to me.

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“Red and yellow and white – the colours of ochre that our ancestors used – are the oldest colours in the world, and those are still colours that we still use today.”



JARRAMALI ROCK ART TOURS – JOHNNY MURISON

Laura,
Queensland

To call Johnny Murison a character is an understatement – this animated Kuku Yalanji man only knows one speed, and right now that's full throttle towards the Magnificent Gallery. This outdoor site on the Cape York Peninsula is home to more than 450 works of rock art covering a 40m-long swathe of sandstone. It's the camping base for Johnny's overnight Jarramali Rock Art Tours, which decode the stories his ancestors left behind more than 20,000 years ago.

"My jaw hit the floor when I saw the art the first time," says Johnny. "There are paintings of turtles, barramundi and kangaroos; fertility symbols, spirits and hunters. It gives me goosebumps to think they were painted by my family members, Kuku Yalanji people."

It's thought 10,000 such rock art sites adorn these 230,000 hectares of wilderness in the Laura Basin, collectively known as Quinkan Country. The Magnificent Gallery is particularly special because there are no boardwalks or sealed roads to get here – only intrepid travellers make the off-road journey with Johnny. "The 4WD track we take is one of the gnarliest I've ever been on," says Johnny. "It's steep and rugged, and often washes away during the wet. We call it the 'Thousand-Dollar Track,' because that's what you need to fix your car after you've driven it."

Johnny's camp (replete with a natural rock infinity pool filled with rainwater) is on the edge of an escarpment, just 400m from the art.



"My Elders would come here for shelter during the wet season, to avoid the rain and heat and flies. And they'd paint to pass the time," he says. In doing so, they transformed this hidden pocket of Far North Queensland into an outdoor Dreaming story that does complete justice to its name – and then some.

"A lot of the time I have people on my tours who are in tears after seeing the art. It's such a special place – it will grab you by the heartstrings."

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KAKADU CULTURAL TOURS – NEVILLE NAMARNYILK

Kakadu National Park and Western Arnhem Land,
Northern Territory



It's a story Neville recounts as a guide on the [Guluyambi Cultural Cruise](#), a journey that sluices through the murky, crocodile-infested waters of the East Alligator River, deep in the heart of the Northern Territory's World Heritage-listed Kakadu.

"I say to people, see those melaleuca trees? I was born in the bush, wrapped in that paperbark and my umbilical cord cut with a mussel shell," he says.

Neville spent his formative years in Kakadu, learning to hunt by the seasons. "June, July and August – there's barramundi, black bream, snakes, water monitors, water chestnuts and water lilies. In September, it's bush apples and plums. In December, bush carrots and bush potatoes [yams]."

He eventually trained as a plumber, working in both Darwin/Gulumerrdgen and Jabiru (the park's main township), before switching gears. He joined Kakadu Cultural Tours as a guide in 2010. "I have good memories growing up. I learnt from my parents, my nana and poppy. I was always watching and listening. Now I get to share my knowledge of Country and storytelling," he says.

On cruises, Neville recounts his earliest childhood memories. "It was all Arnhem Land. There was no tourism. Nobody came in. I've been living off the land since I was 13 years old."

"I can still remember watching my father engraving a message stick [a letter carved into a tree branch], in the same way our people have done for more than 65,000 years. He gave it to another fella to take to West Arnhem Land. Today we have mobile phones. There's no more message sticks."

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KARRKE ABORIGINAL CULTURAL EXPERIENCE & TOURS – NATASHA ABBOTT

Watarrka National Park, Northern Territory



“Our bush foods are seasonal. The majority are spring and summer. We have berries, fruit, natural honey and acacia tree saps. Our people grind the seeds from prickly wattle and make a damper. We eat lizards.”

The Aranda woman worked in mining and land rights, before joining Karrke in 2014 as a guide and operations manager. “It was a way to give back to my community,” she says. “My brother is an Aranda man. His wife is a Luritja woman. Together they are preserving the language of Watarrka.”

Early tours were held “under the shade of the trees”. Today, people wind between huts to listen to the Aranda language and learn about bush medicine and the beauty behind dot paintings. “It’s how we show spirit beings who still live in their land.”

Bush tucker plays a big part. “We show how our people winnowed acacia seed pods using the wind and their hands to make a round-shaped patty they cooked in hot ash. It was bland, but our people ate it.” It’s something that resonates with guests. “People write back and say: “On my drive back, all I could do was look for the acacias.”

“People always question how we survive in this harsh country,” says Natasha Abbott, nodding to the rugged ranges and semi-arid desert of Watarrka National Park, near Kings Canyon in Central Australia. “Our people have been coming to this land for tens of thousands of years.

“When people experience us, they get a deep appreciation that everything has a purpose – every rock, every tree, every animal and being. Jukurrpa, our Creation beings, are always still in the land and they watch over us.”

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KIMBERLEY CULTURAL ADVENTURES – ROBERT DANN

Broome/Rubibi,
Western Australia



Australian Army Reserve), Robert became involved in performance through Modern Dreamtime Dancers and the Aboriginal Dance Development Unit, before being accepted into the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. In many ways, this background gave him the grounding skills to be the engaging guide that he is today.

“My tours go into depth about Broome’s history. With guests we talk about how the town became the centre of Australia’s pearling industry, and how blackbirding became a thing,” says Robert, referring to the illegal (but practiced) process of kidnapping Aboriginal women to work on pearling luggers. “I tell very intimate stories. They’re not always happy, but they’re the truth. And people like that honesty.”

Robert also takes his guests on a deep dive into native Australian bush tucker, which he has turned into a side business called Bindam Mie. “When I was young and we were hungry, we’d walk around, and if it was in season, get the boab,” he says, referring to fruit from the tree iconic to the Kimberley. “We’d climb the tree, break it open and eat it straight up. Sometimes we’d take the fruit back home and put it into a pot and make iced tea or porridge.”

Today, Robert turns boab into ginger beer and iced tea, as well as a healthful powder and syrup – he also makes Jiggal Ointment, infused with essential oils including kunzea, honey myrtle, eucalyptus and vitamin E, and used to treat everything from bites to sunburn. “We have a supermarket and pharmacy all around us in Mother Nature. I love using this bounty to create things that are both healing and delicious,” Robert says.

Robert Dann is one of those talented people who excels at anything he tries his hand at. A proud Nyul Nyul man and Kimberley local, he’s a dancer, choreographer, musician and also a hospitality legend, thanks to his company [Kimberley Cultural Adventures](http://kimberleyculturaladventures.com.au).

“I was born in Broome in the 1970s and am a Traditional Owner of the Winawul Country – the Sandy Point area of nearby Beagle Bay. Growing up here, hearing my family’s stories and seeing things change so rapidly, it was a natural progression for me to tell this to other people,” Robert says.

Following a stint serving in the Norforce (North-West Mobile Force, an infantry regiment of the

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“I’ve learnt that you need to take care of yourself and Country first – then you can take care of others.”

KINGFISHER TOURS – BEC SAMPI

The Kimberley,
Western Australia



Gija woman Bec Sampi grew up in Woolah Country (also known as Doon Doon), a tiny outstation community near Western Australia's World Heritage-listed Purnululu National Park. It's a wonderfully remote place, nine-odd hours' drive east of the Kimberley region's tourism hub of Broome. This remoteness has informed Bec's personality: her observational skills, her ability to connect with Country, her comfort in isolated, outback locations. As a 13-year-old, she explored Purnululu's curious landscape of red rock boulders and rounded

sandstone domes during a cultural immersion trip with her grandmother. The pair camped in the bush, with Bec learning how to read hidden messages in Aboriginal rock paintings, find plants that serve as bush medicine, catch fish using spinifex grass, and understand cultural Songlines that reveal ancient, unmarked paths through the wilderness.

Bec, a former schoolteacher who is fluent in the Gija, Wola and Kriol Indigenous languages, shares much of this knowledge on her tours of Purnululu, home to the extraordinary Bungle Bungle Range. As the head guide with Kingfisher Tours, she blends modern science with traditional education to provide fascinating explanations for how the formations in her homeland came to be, woven together with song and softly spoken truths.

“The way you see my Country is different to how I see it. Some people are amazed, because they only had an impression of Aboriginal peoples on the street. I see this as a reconciliation tour; you'll see we're First Nations peoples and we've lived through hard times.”

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KOOMAL DREAMING – JOSH WHITELAND

Margaret River,
Western Australia



As the only Aboriginal guide in the Margaret River, Yallingup and Dunsborough regions south of Perth/Boorloo, Josh has the stunning south-west of Western Australia in firm focus.

Cultural tours to Cape Naturaliste trace the dazzling blue coastline. “There's always something moving on the water,” he says. In February, schools of fat salmon make their annual run up the coast. “Our people would retell that in song and dance.” Come July, it's migrating whales. “They come right up to the rocks,” says Josh. “We tell the Creation story of mamang, the whale.” This story tells of a young Noongar man who travels to new lands in its belly.

Walking tours are a chance to share bush medicine and bush tucker. “We use peppermint leaves for whistling different bird calls or lighting fire the traditional way, with sticks from the bush.”

When Josh Whiteland began Koomal Dreaming back in 2010, he didn't need to look far for inspiration. “I wanted to share all the things I loved doing on Country. Noongar people are saltwater and forest people. My tours move between the two. I share a lot of our language and traditional stories. People love that connection to place, identity and native foods.”

Tours to Ngilgi Cave are truly special. “I was going into the cave to play the didgeridoo and I thought: ‘Why not bring people with me?’” says Josh. It's a natural amphitheatre dripping in stalactites, stalagmites and beautifully coloured shawls. “The acoustics are incredible. You couldn't get a better sound with an amplifier. People love it.”

“You're not talking about someone else's stories; you're talking about your own stories and experiences. You're sharing knowledge that's been passed down through generations. You can't get that anywhere else in the world.”

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KOORIE HERITAGE TRUST – ROB HYATT

Melbourne/Narrm,
Victoria



The trust began in 1985 at the Melbourne Museum as a way to “give Aboriginal peoples a voice on how artefacts are displayed, in a cultural rather than anthropological way,” says Rob. It has since become an independent not-for-profit, housing more than 6,000 items from pre-colonisation to today, and covering everything from photographs to oral stories told by Elders.

“It’s just one of the ways we’re able to show the diversity of Aboriginal cultures in both Victoria and Australia,” says Rob, who spends a lot of his time curating cultural competency workshops for government and corporate groups. “We have this amazing opportunity to talk about our collective history and the impact of colonisation, and what that means today,” he says. “It’s truth telling, but without any attached blame or guilt.”

Rob and his team also run tours around Melbourne/Narrm, revealing the city and its stories through Aboriginal eyes. “Every tour is unique, because the guides tell their own stories – having an individual expression of culture is really important,” he says. “People get to see our heritage on display, including ‘scar trees’ and cultural sites. It makes our heritage feel tangible.”

“A lot of visitors to the Koorie Heritage Trust have no idea what Aboriginal cultures look like in an urban setting,” says Rob Hyatt, the organisation’s education and visitor experience manager. They enter the Aboriginal-operated trust’s architecturally dramatic gallery and cultural centre at Federation Square in the heart of Melbourne/Narrm, he says, and are “somewhat taken aback by what they discover.”

“Visitors sometimes ask us, ‘Where are the real Aboriginal people?’ Our role is to educate that diversity is us – we’re all different because we all have individual cultures and experiences.”

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MABU BURU – JOHANI MAMID

Broome/Rubibi,
Western Australia



his own. “Chatting to him I learnt there’s plenty of space for people to get into Aboriginal tourism. There are so many different and interesting things to explore, and so many niche areas to take on.” So Johani did just that, launching [Mabu Buru](#) (which means ‘healthy place’, or ‘good land’) in 2020.

Thankfully, he was also a crocodile wrangler and tour guide at Malcolm Douglas Crocodile Park. Because as we all know, there weren’t many tourists visiting Western Australia that year. In retrospect, Johani says this was a blessing, giving him the leeway to fully perfect the Mabu Buru offering.

“I decided that to be unique, I needed to make Mabu Buru really personal and hands-on. I wanted it to be focused on sharing stories about us, and our culture,” Johani says. “Culture is always front-and-centre. And you can’t talk about culture without talking about how we maintain a connection to Country.”

Johani was a Yawuru Country Manager Coordinator in 2018 when he caught up with Bart Pigram, a legendary tour guide in Broome and owner of [Narljija Experiences](#). “Back then I was part of an Indigenous ranger group, employed to look after Yawuru Country, conducting flora and fauna surveying, and monitoring and research in both land and sea,” Johani says. Spending time with Bart got him thinking about venturing out on

While Johani is adamant he doesn’t want his tours to get political, he says that sometimes controversial topics get raised by guests. “I never dismiss a question or topic. Talking about issues, historical and present, helps teach everyone why Aboriginal communities in this part of the world are the way we are. A timeline often comes up, and while it’s confronting, it can also change people’s perspectives immensely. Some people say it is life-changing. We share things that aren’t on the web.” When he says ‘we’... Mabu Buru is a family affair, and often Johani’s uncles, sisters, aunts, brothers, kids and friends get involved.

Johani says his tours often run overtime, because he loves keeping the conversation going. “I’m happy for that to happen, because you know that through this discussion, in a way reconciliation is happening. I really care about the greater good. And at the end of the day, I’m just doing what I can to protect our mob and our culture.”

“A lot of people may not have engaged with Aboriginal people before. Mabu Buru gives them a chance to ask questions.”

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MANDINGALBAY AUTHENTIC INDIGENOUS TOURS – VICTOR BULMER

Cairns/Gimuy, Queensland

“I’ve always been involved in issues concerning our people, and how we connect through our Songlines, Storylines and Dancelines,” says Victor Bulmer, a Djunbunji Land and Sea Ranger and guide with Mandingalbay Authentic Indigenous Tours. “I was pretty much raised to be a ranger and share my story.”

A Mandingalbay Yidinji man, Victor knows his Country south-east of Cairns/Gimuy intimately and saw an opportunity to launch the Djunbunji Land and Sea Ranger program in 2010 to give back to the community he has such an affinity for. Its goal is to not only ensure the conservation of the land, but also provide training and employment opportunities for the Indigenous community. The Mandingalbay tours came later in 2015, to share the story.

“I’ve seen a huge growth in interest in Indigenous tourism since we launched,” says Victor. “People who take our tours cannot believe what they are seeing – we give them a fresh perspective of the land.

“We have people who have lived here their whole lives and didn’t know these ecosystems existed and that this area had an Indigenous history and was a food bowl for our ancestors. I meet botanists who come on tours and had no idea that the plants we see had nutritional and medicinal uses.”

The tours have clearly been a hit, as Victor and the Mandingalbay Authentic Indigenous Tours team are in the process of expanding.



Victor says there are plans to develop a new eco-centre replete with viewing towers, ziplines and a cultural hub, offering insights into the region’s Indigenous heritage – before visitors get to hear it all first-hand on a tour with Victor at the helm.

“I grew up on Country knowing my strong connection to the land and community from both my maternal and paternal sides of the family.”

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MARUKU ARTS – SARAH DALBY

Uluru,
Northern Territory

It’s not easy to capture the immensity of landscapes and legends that surround Uluru, a place as spectacular as it is sacred to Anangu communities. But this is Sarah Dalby’s life’s work, and she’s now helping others grasp it all, as a tour guide and art teacher with Maruku Arts – an Anangu-owned regional gallery and cultural centre, near the base of Uluru in Australia’s Red Centre.

“I learnt [to paint] from my aunty in Ernabella, a long time ago,” says Sarah, who started painting on canvas at Ernabella Arts – Australia’s oldest continuously running Indigenous art centre, in north-west South Australia.

“I paint Tjukurpa [the Creation period, or Dreaming],” she explains. “Sometimes Kuniya Liru [a legend about a woma python woman and poisonous snake man]; Puli Mankurpa [three landmarks of Central Australia]; Kapi Tjukurla [waterholes], and Kungkarangkalpa [the Seven Sisters Creation story]. I like to watch the environment and paint what I see.”

It’s a sentiment Sarah – a *minyma* Anangu woman from Australia’s Central and Western Desert, whose own art sells fast among collectors – encourages among Maruku Arts visitors who sign up for one of her workshops to discover Aboriginal painting styles and techniques, and hear the stories behind them.

“I tell people to draw small stories. I show them symbols of my home and share my Tjukurpa. They show me their stories, their Tjukurpa. Sometimes I get them to paint the walks they’ve done, their footprints.”

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“I like teaching others about Tjukurpa, about my Country and how to paint... It makes me happy.”



NARLIJIA EXPERIENCES – BART PIGRAM

Broome/Rubibi,
Western Australia

When Bart Pigram gazes across the flat, Tiffany-blue expanse of Roebuck Bay in Broome on the Kimberley coast of Western Australia, he doesn't just see water. He sees mangroves harbouring crabs and molluscs, and pearling luggers that used to dot the horizon.

Bart, who started Narlijia Experiences in Broome in 2015, takes people on an engaging walk through the mangroves and mudflats which come to life with mud crabs, mudskippers and abundant birdlife at low tide. He recounts ancient stories of the saltwater Yawuru people giving his guests a greater appreciation of Broome's natural environment, marine life and a complete understanding of Aboriginal history and settlement of the town.

Bart embodies the rich multiculturalism that runs through Broome. He has Aboriginal, Asian and European heritage, and he uses it to express the way locals embrace cultural diversity. His family history also links back to the pearling boom at the turn of the 20th century, enabling him to share both fascinating and sinister stories of the past on his walks between bays, along the mangroves and through the town.

He weaves Dreaming stories through his well-researched talks, as he points out ancient shell middens or plucks an amazing oyster fresh off the rock. "I'm close to this area," he says. "My people's language, our understandings, our Creation stories all come from here. I believe the environment here is among the best in the world and my culture belongs here."



"I want to get people grounded when they get to Broome and reveal all the secrets and all the history. The good, the bad, all of it – and give them a true experience of what it's like here."

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NGARAN NGARAN CULTURE AWARENESS

– DWAYNE BANNON-HARRISON

Narooma, New South Wales



Dwayne Bannon-Harrison, a descendant of the Yuin people of New South Wales' far South Coast, was an accomplished football player and a plasterer by trade in Bathurst, west of Sydney/Warrane, before experiencing what he describes as his "call back to Country".

"In 2010 everything really turned on its head. I was all set up in Bathurst but I had a really strong urge to return to the New South Wales South Coast, like I was being spiritually called back," says Dwayne, who hadn't lived on his ancestral land since he was a very young child.

Unable to resist the pull any longer, he sold his house and business, packed up his young family, and moved 400 kilometres (250 miles) south-east to the coastal town of Narooma. There he was welcomed back to Yuin Country by his grandfather, a renowned Elder, who quickly became Dwayne's cultural mentor.

"Because I was his eldest grandson, he really took me under his wing to teach me the ways. You've got to be chosen to receive that kind of in-depth teaching," explains Dwayne.

At 26, the transformative experience was so profound that it inspired Dwayne to establish Ngaran Ngaran Culture Awareness (NNCA), an Aboriginal-owned and operated cultural training service, that today shares Yuin culture in the form of immersive travel experiences.

You can learn about the Yuin way of life by joining NNCA's Yuin Retreat experience. Hear sacred Dreaming stories passed down for tens of thousands of years, and bear witness to traditional ceremonies, song and traditions; at night, retire to your lavish "glamping" tent, complete with plush bedding, ensuite bathroom and gourmet catering that showcases native ingredients.

"I believe that's why I had the calling to come home, to create a vehicle to continue the traditional teachings of our bloodline."

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NGURRANGGA TOURS – CLINTON WALKER

Pilbara,
Western Australia



“I want to educate people about my ancestry and protect what’s here.”

“We’ve been here forever and a day, probably longer,” says Clinton Walker, who estimates his family has lived in the Pilbara region of Western Australia for more than 2,500 generations. A descendent of the Ngarluma and Vindjibarndi people, Clinton has thousands of years of cultural knowledge at his fingertips and he’s passionate about using it. Leaving behind a career in the state’s mining industry, the former mechanic now channels his energy into sharing Aboriginal stories through his tourism company, Ngurrangga Tours.

Containing one of the world’s largest concentrations of petroglyphs (rock engravings), his Burrup Peninsula backyard (part of an area known as Murujuga, which means “hipbone sticking out”) is the perfect setting. When Clinton approaches a rubble of boulders etched with images of animals, fish, footprints, symbols and people, he stops to greet the Spirit Ancestors in his language, requesting safe passage through this sacred spot. Then, he picks his way to a rock face depicting long-gone megafauna, such as a giant kangaroo. “They went extinct 30,000 years ago, so the rock art is, at a minimum, that old,” Clinton says. It’s believed there are more than a million engravings in Murujuga National Park, 1800 kilometres (or a two-hour flight) north of Perth/Boorloo.

Clinton’s tours follow the Songlines of his ancestors. Songlines are ancient wayfaring pathways shared through stories and songs, using landmarks as guideposts. Clinton’s hope is that by teaching others about these Songlines, his beloved history, culture, and Country will be preserved for another 2,500 generations – and beyond.

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NITMILUK TOURS – JAMES ‘BROOKSY’ BROOKES

Nitmiluk,
Northern Territory



“No two days are ever the same,” he explains. “I love the changing seasons of Nitmiluk and the variety of guiding conditions, some more challenging than others.

“I also get to meet amazing people – there’s something about this part of the Northern Territory that attracts visitors with a spirit for adventure.”

It also draws people with a thirst for knowledge.

“When I started in the role there was not a lot of information out there on the Jawoyn people,” Brooksy says. “In fact, there was nothing written down at all; I had to rely on my knowledge passed down through generations. Now, visitors are really interested in the First Nations peoples and how we manage Country here.

“The focus of conversations I have has also changed. In the past it was just about wildlife. Now, people are not afraid to ask about Aboriginal cultures and history. Plus, there’s a huge interest in Indigenous art. I love showcasing this side of Jawoyn heritage.”

“I never tire of seeing the excitement on people’s faces when they see the gorge, and then learn its history. You can’t learn the stories we tell you in guidebooks.”

Born and bred in Katherine in the Northern Territory, Jamie ‘Brooksy’ Brookes knows a thing or two about Australia’s most remote wilderness areas. His formal education came courtesy of School of the Air, although his family taught him everything he needed to know about the Jawoyn people and life on the land.

Still, despite being a local, Brooksy didn’t actually glimpse Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) – a string of 13 ancient sandstone gorges – until he was 19. The same year he got a job as a guide with Nitmiluk Tours; that was more than 25 years ago. But Brooksy’s passion for his role hasn’t waned.

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SALTWATER ECO TOURS – SIMON THORNALLEY

Mooloolaba,
Queensland

Simon Thornalley spent the formative years of his childhood sailing around the turquoise seas of Tropical North Queensland with his parents. It was this experience of living on a yacht and exploring coastal Queensland that he says gave him a lifelong yearning to stay connected to the sea – and his culture.

Simon's father hails from Lincolnshire in the UK and his mum has Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal heritage. His parents met in the Whitsundays, where his dad worked as a boatbuilder and his mum as a sailor.

"Mum and Dad bought an old timber boat and cruised up and down the coast," says Simon. "I was almost born on that boat. Dad and Mum had to come ashore in Tin Can Bay and hustle to hospital in Gimpi Gimpi [Gympie]."

His family later settled on the Sunshine Coast, and after finishing school, Simon, too, pursued a career at sea, including stints as a commercial diver and six cruises to Antarctica as a first officer on a charter vessel. His work eventually brought him back home to the traditional lands of the Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi people where, in 2020, he and his wife Jenna bought a century-old timber sailing boat and co-founded Saltwater Eco Tours in Mooloolaba.

"I belong to the saltwater people," says Simon, who shares stories about his own Sea Country connections on his unique marine experiences hosted on the Spray of the Coral Coast.

"My most treasured memories revolve around being able to visit remote islands, go to shore on a sandy beach looking for coconuts, and catching fish for dinner," he adds with a smile.

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"I get to combine all of my passions: eco-tourism, sustainability, and Indigenous culture and share that with visitors and see the satisfaction of what people take home from that experience."

SAND DUNE ADVENTURES – ANDREW SMITH

Port Stephens,
New South Wales

Andrew Smith is the boss of a thrilling venture that combines high-adrenaline quad biking with ancient Indigenous coastal culture. The CEO of Worimi Local Aboriginal Land Council, which operates Sand Dune Adventures at Port Stephens on the New South Wales North Coast, was a long-time Australian Taxation Office employee when the opportunity arose in 2006 to do something completely different.

"I didn't know anything about quad bikes or Aboriginal tourism or tourism in general," he says. He did know a lot about governance and accountability, though – expertise that helped as he pondered how to turn the Southern Hemisphere's largest moving sand dunes into a viable business that supported his community as a not-for-profit social enterprise. "We were asset-rich but cash-poor," he says.

When Andrew started developing the business, he had only eight quad bikes and "stood by the side of the road waving signs at passing cars hoping they would come". Tourism Australia backed the venture, naming it an Indigenous Tourism Champion. Business mentorship, along with great word of mouth, also helped turned Sand Dune Adventures into a thriving enterprise within just a few years.

Profits are poured back into the local Indigenous community, funding employment, housing, education, health and Elders' programs. "It's about the growth and empowerment of our community," Andrew says.

Quad-bike riders journey up to 20 kilometres over the awe-inspiring dunes – some of which are more than 30 metres high.

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"About 95 per cent of people who come on our tours are really after the quad bikes, but every single tour gets exposed to the occupational history and Aboriginal culture of the area."

SEALINK NT – KEVIN BAXTER-PILAKUI

Tiwi Islands,
Northern Territory



Kevin Baxter-Pilakui was born in the air, way above his remote island home. His mother was flying from the Tiwi Islands to hospital in Darwin/Gulumerdgen, the capital of the Northern Territory, to deliver him, except that Kevin arrived early, halfway between both. He jokes that he's from no-man's land, but in truth, Bathurst Island (which is 60 kilometres off the mainland) has always had his heart.

He lived on Bathurst Island until he was 12, when schooling in the big smoke called, and he started guiding tours after he graduated. Seven years ago, he decided the scenery in Darwin/Gulumerdgen was no match for the "islands of smiles". He wanted to return to his ocean-lapped roots to help share its culture.

Now, the former football player leads SeaLink NT's Tiwi by Design tours. He introduces visitors to smoking ceremonies, where wafting plumes from native leaves rid people of bad spirits and feelings. He takes them through the island's lauded screen-printing art centre, where iconic designs make their way onto colourful materials. He teaches them about sourcing ochre pigments from the island and mixing them for painting.

He also shows off the hard, heavy ironstone used for carvings of birds and towering pukamani poles, the sacred, decorative posts placed at burial sites during a traditional ceremony. Kevin also loves to surprise his guests with the news that neither the didgeridoo nor the boomerang is found on the islands – revealing the differences between them and greater Australia.

"There are some 900 to 1000 different dialects across the Northern Territory, and sometimes it's taboo for the mainlanders to share parts of culture, but the Tiwi Islands and our culture are open to the world. For us, it's important to share."

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SOUTHERN CULTURAL IMMERSION – COREY TURNER

Adelaide/Tarntanya,
South Australia



explore Aboriginal knowledge of native plants at the Adelaide Botanic Garden," Corey says. He and his staff today lead hands-on tours through the leafy expanse, decoding medicinal plants and bush tucker, as well as walking tours through Adelaide city centre. "There are lots of Aboriginal sacred sites around the gardens and the city," says Corey. "Like scar trees [where bark was removed from trees to be used for various purposes, from creating canoes to baskets], and a site where Elders past would camp out."

Corey's reason for growing Southern Cultural Immersion comes down to a single point: demystifying Aboriginal culture. "People who don't understand or know about our culture have this romance about what it is... they generally think we dance around in loin cloths and play the didgeridoo. Our tours are about telling the truth, and informing people so we can move forward. They're also about showing people how absolutely incredible and beautiful this country is, and what a natural bounty we have offered to us. Aboriginal people have been conserving it for millennia. And we want to share our knowledge on how to do this for future generations," Corey says.

"For example, plants need slow burns, to ensure that there are no out of control bushfires. We have been doing this for thousands of years. And Aboriginal communities leave middens [piles of shells and bones], to tell other mobs what has been eaten in an area recently, and what should be protected. It's incredible to think this has been our knowledge for so long."

"It has been a fantastic and emotional journey to go from a sole trader to a thriving Aboriginal-owned company."

Kaurna man Corey Turner began his life in Aboriginal tourism at an early age, when he worked on tours of South Australia's postcard-perfect Fleurieu Peninsula with his mother. It sparked a passion that saw him take over the Living Kurna Cultural Centre at Warriparinga, a nature reserve south of Adelaide/Tarntanya. He nurtured an art gallery and retail space on the culturally significant grounds, and began expanding operations – think cultural training, workshops, performances... and then tours through his company [Southern Cultural Immersion](http://SouthernCulturalImmersion.com.au).

"I noticed that some of my staff were really interested in, and had amazing knowledge of, plants. So we sat down and worked out a way to

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TOP DIDJ CULTURAL EXPERIENCE & ART GALLERY – MANUEL PAMKAL

Katherine,
Northern Territory

Manuel Pamkal was born in a Northern Territory community so remote that the first time he saw a white person, he thought he was looking at a ghost. When he first arrived at school (as a teenager, having never sat on a chair or held a pen), the principal guessed his birth year as 1966. Manuel is more inclined to believe a whitefella who married into his family and saw him as a baby – he says 1963.

Today, the charismatic Dalabon man tells his fascinating life story to visitors at Top Didj Art Gallery near Katherine, 320 kilometres (200 miles) south-east of Darwin/Gulumerdgen. It starts with his childhood spent hunting goannas and lizards and digging for yams.

After a near-death experience as an adult (detailed in an episode of the ABC television program, Australian Story), Manuel turned his life around, quitting alcohol to become a role model for his community.

At Top Didj, he shows visitors how to throw a spear and light a fire – while telling a few jokes along the way. He welcomes people by playing the didgeridoo and singing a song in Dalabon – a central Arnhem Land language that experts say is now spoken fluently by less than half-a-dozen people.

Manuel is a talented artist who specialises in rarrk (cross-hatching) painting. His fine brush is made from billabong reeds and his preferred medium is acrylic on canvas. “I’ve been painting all my life, from young up until now,” he says.



“I really love my job – I meet people from everywhere,” says Manuel. He’s chatting during his lunchbreak after entertaining a “big mob” of 42 visitors. “I want to work here until I retire.”

INJALAK ARTS CENTRE (VENTURE NORTH) – JOEY NGANJIMIRRA

Arnhem Land,
Northern Territory

On its tours across the Northern Territory’s remote Arnhem Land and the Cobourg Peninsula, Venture North Safaris pauses at Injalak Hill, one of the world’s most significant rock-art sites. The only way to visit is with an Indigenous guide from the Injalak Arts Centre in Gunbalanya, someone in-the-know like Joey Nganjmirra.

A talented artist himself, Joey has been revealing the stories behind the sacred sites here for more than 20 years. “It’s mind-blowing to think there are more than 50,000 rock-art sites in the region, dating back 20,000 to 30,000 years,” he says.

Visiting the hill is a powerful experience, says Joey, referencing the many different layers of history: the ancient tunnels, paintings of spirit figures, caves, burial sites. And everything is raw – there are no formal pathways here, no signs.

“I tell people about the animals depicted in the art, and how this tells a story of what communities saw on the land and conservation. There are also different layers of art from different communities, which means different styles,” Joey says. “The art of West Arnhem Land is very unique – it has its own style and tells its own story through language.”

You can see Injalak Hill from the Arts Centre, just across the billabong, where Joey and his team greet visitors before heading to the rock-art site. “There’s so much more interest in meeting and hanging out with Indigenous people these days,” he says. “It’s so important to reach out and engage. This is how our knowledge and understanding spreads.”



“It always amazes people that there is such an important piece of history in such a remote part of the country.”

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VOYAGES INDIGENOUS TOURISM AUSTRALIA – JAYDEN WEETRA

Uluru,
Northern Territory



For Jayden, the training was in hospitality, which allowed him to take up an apprenticeship at Ayers Rock Resort in Uluru, before becoming a chef at acclaimed Tali Wiru, then at the resort's Mangata and Arnguli restaurants at Desert Garden Hotel.

"The training gave me a lot of support, and I've had a lot of mentors. It gave me the chance to work with chefs from all around the world," Jayden says. It also gave him the chance to work with the native Australian ingredients that he grew up eating as a child.

"I love experimenting with bush ingredients. I like zesty flavours, like desert lime and rosella. Quandongs are also very nice. I had them growing up as a kid – they were everywhere in the countryside of Adelaide. We also use a lot of lemon myrtle at Ayers Rock Resort. We have a lemon myrtle cocktail at Walpa Lobby Bar, and I use it in dressings, salads and as a dry rub on meats. It's a really versatile herb."

When Jayden moved to the Northern Territory in 2018, it was his first time away from home in Adelaide. "When I finished school, I wasn't sure what to do. I saw an ad to be a trainee with the National Indigenous Training Academy at Ayers Rock Resort. And I took it up."

The Academy is an innovative program run by Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia, established to provide young Indigenous Australians with solid career prospects in retail, horticulture, hospitality and tourism at Voyages properties, as well as wider employment opportunities with other organisations.

Jayden says one of his greatest joys is teaching visitors about native ingredients. "I am proud to share my culture with our guests. It's good to show tourists something that they might have never tried. It is nice to see their reaction straight away – I like that we can talk to the guests directly. I find they might not have many expectations, but they are generally keen to try things."

"I grew up eating all this amazing native bush tucker raw. And now I get to use it in my cooking. It's exciting."

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VOYAGES INDIGENOUS TOURISM AUSTRALIA – MOSSMAN GORGE CULTURAL CENTRE – ROBERT LAFRAGUA

Mossman, Queensland



growing up. "I used to sit around the fire with the Elders, especially at night, and they'd tell me stories I now share," he says.

Robert was working in tourism in 2007 when Uncle Roy Gibson asked him to become part of the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre project. "He took me for a walk, and said 'What plants do you know?' Twenty minutes later he asked, 'Look, you want a job?'"

Mossman Gorge was a very different place back then. "We'd get up to 1,000 cars a day," says Robert. Thanks to Uncle Roy, in 2011 the road was closed to private vehicles between 8am and 6pm daily, with electric shuttles instead carrying visitors to the Centre, which opened in 2012. "We started to see more animals come out," says Robert, noting he even spotted a rare bush kangaroo not seen in these parts for 30 years.

Plants are Robert's greatest passion. "It can change your outlook of the rainforest by knowing the purpose of trees," he says. "I point out the stinging tree first. It has a heart-shaped leaf with prickly edges like fibreglass. The trick: you take the spikes out with the root of the tree."

"The buff-breasted paradise kingfisher is our meteorologist. When it flies here from Papua New Guinea, we know the wet season is coming."

"When the blue ginger flowers, that's the time the cassowary starts hanging around. It also tells us the brush turkeys are laying their eggs, so we need to look for their nests," says Robert 'Skip' Lafragua.

The seasonal floral and faunal calendar is among the knowledge bounty the Kuku Yalanji man shares on Ngadiku Dreamtime Walks at Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre, 20 kilometres (12 miles) north of Port Douglas in Tropical North Queensland. "It's a way to respect the rainforest and keep our knowledge and culture alive," he says.

The Daintree Rainforest's lush, boulder-strewn Mossman Gorge was Robert's backyard

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WAJAANA YAAM GUMBAYNGGIRR ADVENTURE TOURS – CLARK WEBB

Coffs Harbour,
New South Wales



Gumbaynggirr/Bundjalung man Clark Webb doesn't do anything by halves. After becoming Coffs Harbour High School's first Aboriginal school captain in 2002, Clark went on to set up the not-for-profit Bularri Muurlay Nyanggan Aboriginal Corporation (BMNAC) in 2010, which works to uplift Aboriginal youth. Now, a proportion of profits from his ecotourism business, Wajaana Yaam Gumbaynggirr Adventure Tours, is invested back into language teaching programs and other projects run by the BMNAC.

"I'm really passionate about the revitalisation of our language and culture, so that is what drives Wajaana Yaam Gumbaynggirr Adventure Tours," says Clark, who has been learning the Gumbaynggirr language for 14 years. Clark loves a good yarn and will happily share the Gumbaynggirr word for any marine life, animals or native plants that guests spot during one of Wajaana Yaam Gumbaynggirr Adventure Tours' guided stand-up paddleboarding/kayaking or walking tours, which are conducted at three spectacular locations within the Solitary Islands Marine Park on the New South Wales Mid North Coast. Clark and his team are passionately doing their bit to make the Gumbaynggirr language accessible and keep it alive, even though a lot of it was lost.

"When we can't find a word for a certain plant or an animal, it's part of the disruption that happened to our culture," Clark says.

But that doesn't stop Clark from bringing the Dreaming to life on his fascinating stand-up paddleboarding trips, with his contagious smile and welcoming nature putting you immediately at ease, even if you're paddling for the first time.

"Our language is our soul, so when we speak our language in Coffs Harbour – when we speak Gumbaynggirr – we're making our soul strong again."

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WALKABOUT CULTURAL ADVENTURES – JUAN WALKER

Port Douglas/Daintree,
Queensland



Juan Walker was a shy young man considering an electrician's apprenticeship at a mine when relatives talked him into staying on Country in Tropical North Queensland. The Kuku Yalanji man can thank his grandmother for directing him onto a different path when she found him a job as a tour guide with Daintree Ecolodge in 1999. "It took me a while to be able to talk to strangers – that was the hardest part, getting over that shyness," says Juan. Today he runs his own business, Walkabout Cultural Adventures, from his Cooya Beach base near Port Douglas.

There's no trace of that shyness now as Juan leads visitors through the landscape he knows so well. In the mangroves and shallows, he demonstrates how to spear a mud crab and identify coastal food sources. In the World Heritage-listed Daintree Rainforest, he shows visitors the lush layers where cassowaries roam.

"It's one thing to learn about Aboriginal history through textbooks, sitting down in a classroom, but out on Country, it makes things a whole lot more real," he says. "It's a lot more hands-on – you can see how we know about bush medicine and bush tucker."

You'll also see his Country through new eyes, as just about every landmark comes soaked in myth and legend. Juan can tell you, for instance, a Dreamtime story about how a hungry snake slithered down from the mountains towards the coast to look for food, its body carving out the sinuous Daintree River along the way.

"I tell my kids Dreamtime stories at night for their bedtime stories," he says.

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WARINGARRI ABORIGINAL ARTS & TOURS – YUMBUN

Kununurra,
Western Australia



traditional homelands – and into town,” he says. “Our bush life became second-in-line to jobs and school. We had to teach our young people about our traditional lifestyle: painting, storytelling, hunting, gathering and corroboree. It’s really important stuff.”

Waringarri Aboriginal Arts & Tours, the art centre where Yumbun now works, is in many ways his legacy. He helped to get the centre started during his time with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. The aim is to preserve and continue the Miriwoong culture, which has fewer than 20 fluent speakers remaining, making it a critically endangered language. Yumbun heads the guiding team, leading tours through the galleries and out onto the Country he is still so deeply connected to. Often, the emerging artist will play the didgeridoo and dance, or show his drawings of station life. He particularly loves the cross-cultural exchange he has with visitors.

“I know if they ask a lot of questions, they’re really interested and I’m really proud of that,” he says.

“Everyone talks about bridging the gap and closing the gap. Our tours are really important for that, to engage with the white audience, to show them history about our mob, our culture and our challenges as well.”

Yumbun was born on Carlton Hill Station, a vast cattle farm that became famous when blockbuster Australia was filmed there in 2007. Station life is in the Miriwoong Elder’s blood, staying potent even after he was sent away for schooling, first to a remote outback mission and then to Perth/Boorloo, some 3000 kilometres away. Also known by his English name, Ted Carlton, Yumbun returned to work as a stockman, riding horses and mustering cattle until pastoral laws changed, upending his life.

“The old people used to tell us stories about bush times and station times, bush tucker and bush medicine. It really hit our people hard when we got pushed off the stations – our

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WILPENA POUND RESORT – MICK MCKENZIE

Ikara-Flinders Ranges National Park, Flinders Ranges,
South Australia



On walking tours around Wilpena Pound – a natural amphitheatre covering more than 8,000 hectares (19,770 acres) – Mick gives visitors the chance to glimpse the land through Indigenous eyes. “My father used to say you have to crack open your intellectual box, your mind, to see the world spiritually,” he says.

“You could be coming here for 30 or 40 years, but until I say, ‘See those two serpents lying down?’, you might not see them,” he says of the pair of powerful Akurra serpents whose bodies today form the sides of Wilpena Pound.

Mick worked as an archaeologist before joining Wilpena Pound Resort in 2016. He began running cultural tours soon after, just as the surrounding national park was renamed Ikara-Flinders Ranges, ikara being the Adnyamathanha word for ‘meeting place’.

As one of the Custodians of Ikara-Flinders Ranges, Mick sees his role as an interpreter of the land. While hiking to spiritual Arkaroo Rock, he tells the Creation story of Wilpena Pound, depicted in ochre and charcoal on cliff walls visitors pass by. “Adnyamathanha is made up of two words: adnya means rock and matha is people. We are the rock people.”

“Our Adnyamathanha country is very rich in history. Our people have been connected with the land since times began. We’re walking and talking and seeing 800 million years of Creation.”

“My late grandfather said to me back in the 1940s, ‘How can we teach our culture if we don’t share it?’,” says Mick McKenzie. The Adnyamathanha Elder and guide draws on 65,000 years of wisdom at Wilpena Pound Resort, an Indigenous-owned and -operated retreat in South Australia’s majestic north Flinders Ranges, 440 kilometres (275 miles) north of Adelaide/Tarntanya.

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WUKALINA WALK – CARLEETA THOMAS

Bay of Fires,
Tasmania/lutruwita



As a young girl, Carleeta Thomas went muttonbirding, foraged for abalone and learnt to fish and dive off the rocks of Cape Barren Island, a tiny Aboriginal community in Bass Strait, off the north-east coast of Tasmania/lutruwita.

It's this connection to Country that shines on the wukalina Walk, a breathtaking four-day, three-night journey through wukalina (Mount William National Park) and larapuna (Bay of Fires), home to the palawa people for up to 65,000 years. Fittingly, muttonbird is served on day two of the walk. "We also do rock wallaby," says Carleeta. And then there are scallops cooked in the shell over the fire, and a mean damper [bush bread].

Carleeta, a young palawa woman, was approached to become a guide on the experience – the first Aboriginal-owned tour in Tasmania/lutruwita – fresh out of high school. "I was really lucky for the Elders to see something in me at such a young age," she says. "Being on Country is powerful. Learning about my culture and being able to share what I know and what I learned growing up on Cape Barren has been amazing."

For Carleeta, wukalina is a chance to walk in the footsteps of ancestors. "We've had signs from the old fellas," she says. Yellow-tailed black cockatoos often appear when they speak about chief Mannalargenna. "It was his Totem," she says. It's the same when they tell the fire Creation story. "Kaylarunya [the black swan] doesn't fly at night," says Carleeta. "But the last few times we mentioned her name, she swooped over the campfire." When the embers fade, visitors retire to architect-designed huts, the waves a lullaby inducing sound sleep.

"It might not look big, but from the summit of wukalina, you can see the entire north-east coastline of Tasmania. The old fellas used to signal to our people over on Cape Barren that the sealers were coming through. Just being up here, and being able to see home, is special."

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WULA GURA NYINDA ECO CULTURAL ADVENTURES

– DARREN "CAPES" CAPEWELL

Shark Bay, Western Australia



Capes came home from the big city in 2000 and started his tourism venture in 2004. "Apart from my family, it combines two of my greatest passions – and that's the environment and my culture," he says.

Wula Gura Nyinda Eco Cultural Adventures will take you kayaking through the region's stunning bays. Along the way, you learn about the strong spiritual connection between this land and its Traditional Custodians. You can also slip from the double kayaks into crystal-clear waters to snorkel and swim with rays, fish and turtles.

Capes also runs a Didgeridoo Dreaming night tour – a didgeridoo meditation around an open campfire. Bush tucker and fish are cooked over the fire, and males can try their hand playing the timeless instrument. Traditionally, only men play the didgeridoo, but females on the tour can try coaxing music from a conch shell. On a 4WD tour of Francois Peron National Park, you might spot the thorny devil – a spiky lizard that stars in one of the region's Dreamtime stories.

"When you visit places it is easy to 'see' Country, but to truly take something away with you – you need to feel the spirit of Country. This is what I share with visitors. People walk away with a deeper appreciation of what Country means to my people, here in Gutharraguda (Shark Bay)."

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