

LESSONS OF YESTERYEAR

Embracing the past at a place
where the rainforest meets the sea.

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IT'S EASY TO GET
LOST IN BINNA'S
BEAUTIFUL WORK
AS HE TALKS ABOUT
HIS VARIOUS PIECES

OPPOSITE PAGE: JUAN AT COOYA BEACH. THIS PAGE: ART
WITH KUKU YALANJI. ARTIST BINNA AT JANBAL GALLERY.

Juan Walker's ancestors, the Kuku Yalanji people, have spent generations at Cooya Beach, ambling along the grainy sand foraging for food, whizzing about in the shallow water searching for mud crabs, diving in deeper to hunt for sea turtles and dugongs, and resting on the shore watching the sun go down at the end of the day.

"My grandma was from Mossman and my grandpa was from the Daintree," Juan tells our group, who are exploring with his business, Walkabout Cultural Adventures. "They had an arranged marriage and went on to have 12 kids; Dad was one of the 12."

Most of the family has stayed in Kuku Yalanji country – of which the traditional boundaries are roughly just south of Port Douglas to Cooktown – and on the Walkabout Adventures website Juan writes why: My country, the Kuku Yalanji country, is family, culture and identity. The trees of the rainforest, the rocks of the riverbeds and the reefs of the sea were all formed by our ancestors, who continue to live in land, water and sky. It is filled with connections of human, wildlife and plants, all speaking language and following lore. Country is loved and cared for, and country loves and cares for her people in turn. Country is self.

Juan's love for his home is evident soon after we arrive, as he beckons us to a firepit where his brother, Brandon Walker, is grilling butterfly pearl meat, an expensive delicacy usually reserved for special occasions. "You gotta try this – it's worth around \$100 per kilo," Brandon says, greeting us with a mischievous grin that would have served him well at school.

Our small group is enthralled by Brandon's cooking skills and could happily keep chatting and snacking, but Juan pulls us away. "There will be snacks when we get back," he laughs. "My grandma's recipe damper – but I want to show you Cooya Beach first. The Kuku Yalanji call Cooya Beach Kuyu Kuyu (pronounced Guhyou Guhyou) and it means lots of fish."

Juan, together with his small team of Aboriginal guides, runs a variety of full-day and half-day tours that span both the Coral Coast and Daintree Rainforest, so our walk along Cooya Beach is just



STAYING HERE

Port Douglas is just over an hour's drive from Cairns. If you can, break up the journey at Thala Beach Nature Reserve in Oak Beach; the eco bungalow-style retreat stands out because it's both a bush and beach retreat. In Port Douglas, Pullman Port Douglas Sea Temple Resort & Spa offers all the comforts of home in luxury surroundings.

GETTING HERE

Tigerair flies to Cairns. From Cairns it's an easy and beautiful coastal drive to Port Douglas.

a small taster. Still, it's enough to get a sense of how sacred this area is.

Juan shows us beach lettuce first, explaining that the plant leaves are good for repairing skin and the fruit can soothe sore eyes. Almost every shrub or bush we pass has a purpose – the umbrella tree can cure a toothache, the beach hibiscus is used for dehydration, and crows feet morning glory can be used on cuts to draw out infection. Many of the plants can also be eaten. "For our people, nature gives us everything," Juan says as he picks us native hibiscus flowers. "Try this – it tastes like sweet lettuce."

THE CALL OF NATURE

Nature, too, inspires, and I discover this when attempting my own dot painting at Janbal Gallery in Mossman, an art space managed by Kuku Yalanji artist Brian Swindley, known by locals simply as Binna. "Janbal means quandong in the Kuku Yalanji language. It's a blue rainforest fruit that you can eat," he tells my group on arrival.

Binna explains how inspiration is often sensory for him, with sights, smells, textures and tastes all playing key roles. "When I go hunting or walkabout in the



FAR LEFT: JUAN TEACHING GUESTS ABOUT THE LAND. LEFT: GARY CREEK AT FLAMES OF THE FOREST. THIS IMAGE: BINNA OF JANBAL GALLERY WITH A GUEST. BELOW: RED CLAW GRAB AT FLAMES OF THE FOREST.



rainforest it's about what I see and feel," he tells us. "The many different shapes of seeds, for example. Or some of my dot paintings represent rain drops. When you walk under the canopy of the rainforest you feel the drops falling down on you."

His background in contemporary fine art spans decades, and it's easy to get lost in Binna's beautiful works as he talks about his various pieces, offering a level of depth not usually possible when appreciating art. Binna has a hearing disability, however he speaks clearly and lip-reads, and together we walk through the gallery, talking, admiring and learning about the handiworks displayed.

As we take our seats and get accustomed to our tools, Binna explains the complexities of dot painting. We are to use different ends of the stick for smaller and bigger dots; the right pressure is another key factor to refining our work; looking down at your art – as if from a plane – is another key factor.

It's harder than it looks, and my first few splotches are all different sizes and look more like a leopard's skin than anything methodical, but with patience and practise I manage to get the dots closer together and somewhat similar in size.

Thankfully Binna pops around and rescues my mess. He turns my jumble of disorderly dots into a fish with interesting-looking fins, and by the time I finish the end result looks reasonable (at least from a distance).

The others in my group have had similar experiences, but from afar all the artworks look half-decent. As Binna insinuated, we've all chosen to illustrate nature and wildlife – fish, trees, the night sky – an echo to just how important these elements are to Aboriginal people.

THE STUFF OF FAIRYTALES

No trip to Tropical North Queensland would be complete without the Flames Of The Forest experience – a lavish dinner in a rainforest ballroom.

Together with my group I attend the Aboriginal Cultural Experience and I'm blown away as soon as we arrive. A bus ride along a windy road transports us to a forest location, then a weaving path leads us to a fairylight-lit area that feels a world away from the hustle and bustle of city life. Here, smiling staff weave through the crowd with wine and canapés and the sounds of nature add to the magical feeling.

Dinner follows, with a mesmerising story-like performance by two Aboriginal brothers, Gary and Robert Creek. We eat and chat, then Gary and Robert share insights with the crowd about their lives and the lives of their ancestors.

"As children we learnt the before and after," Gary says soon after we've finished our entrées. "Once taught, once shown, you had greater understanding. You learnt what you were told, where to search, and when. And above all, you learnt why." **tt**