

# Tracing Songlines

**ALENEY DE WINTER** explores the importance of seeing Australia through the cultural lens of its First Nations people.

“Can you tell me another story?” my son asks shyly as my daughter runs the spiky flowers of a callistemon brush through the lengths of her hair. Jenny, founder of Galamban Extraordinary Aboriginal Culture Experiences and a member of the Wreck Bay Aboriginal Community in Jervis Bay, happily acquiesces, sharing an enchanting yarn of how the land and the people were created by ancestral spirit brothers who took the form of wind and sea. While my wee Gumnut Baby is distracted by the pretty fern frond crown Jenny has kindly crafted to keep the sun off her little face, my spellbound boy laps up every word – as do I, adding them to the mental box of treasures I’ve been collecting since I was their age.

A connection to Australia’s Indigenous peoples and culture has never not been a part of my life. As a

child, I listened with rapt attention to my father’s stories of his teenage adventures going “bush” in the Northern Territory to witness ceremonies and lore sacred to the men of the Larrakia language group. A seaman who found himself in Darwin at the end of the troubled 1950s, when Australia’s First Nations people were yet to be even officially recognised and the government’s removal policies were in full swing, my dad rejected the enforced divide. Instead, he embraced the culture of the Larrakia people as readily as they embraced him.

Having passed on the wayfarer gene, dad proudly waved me on when, at 17 and straight out of school, I highailed it north in a beat-up old Kingswood. While confronted by the reality of my own privilege, I too connected with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their Songlines – traditional story lines that cross the country connecting geographical and sacred sites in Aboriginal culture.

## Connected to country

Having made the same commitment to raising my own children to understand the importance of connection and reconciliation, listening, learning and engaging with evolving Indigenous culture is now an everyday part of our travels. From one-on-one lessons in playing the didge and crafting tools from native bush materials to filling bellies with bush tucker and waxing philosophic on the true shared history of our country, the openness and generous spirit of First Nations people has led my kids on a path of connection to country and treasured friendships.

Genuine Indigenous experiences are now easier to access than ever with Tourism Australia’s Discover Aboriginal Experiences collective, a carefully curated collection of extraordinary experiences showcasing the world’s oldest living culture through the cornerstones of cultural insight, authenticity and meaningful connection.

Tourism Australia managing director, Phillipa Harrison, says: “Visiting Uluru, the spiritual heart of Australia, and learning about the culture and history of the Anangu people has been one of the most inspiring and rewarding experiences I’ve had in Australia. While Uluru itself is awe-inspiring from any angle, hearing the stories and traditions of the region from the local people is what makes this experience so profound.”

But beyond the obvious allure of Uluru, every part of Australia is Aboriginal country, and every part of that country has stories and experiences unique to it. And when you consider that the Indigenous peoples of Australia have danced, sung and recorded their stories on rock faces for a mind-boggling 60,000 years, there are many tales to be heard. Discover Aboriginal Experiences are led by local Indigenous guides who live, breathe and dream it every day and are waiting to share those stories and a culture that belongs only to them.

“It is something that I encourage Australians to experience for themselves through one of the incredible tourism operators and experiences offered by our Discover Aboriginal Australia collection,” says Phillipa.

## From the heart

Port Stephens' Sand Dune Adventures is one of those operators. Passionate in preserving and celebrating the heritage of the Worimi land, with the blessing of Worimi elders, the company is 100 per cent owned and operated by the Worimi Local Aboriginal Land Council to promote and foster the best interests of its people and culture.

CEO Andrew Smith believes connection is the answer to reducing the divide between cultures and eliminating prejudice and racism.

"The key to truly seeing Australia through the cultural contact lens of its original people is for them to leave everything they think they know at the door and come in with a 'childlike' heart and mind," Andrew says.

Andrew is passionate about Indigenous people being given a voice and opportunity to share the stories that belong to them.

"When colonisation removed us from our lands and tried stopping us from practicing our culture, the one thing we had (the intangible they couldn't fathom) was our Story, which is how we continue to maintain our relationship with one another and our Mother (land)," Andrew says.

"Story is now more important than ever, as it's the connection and component that makes our culture a living entity. We know that in order to keep it, we have to share it (give it away)."

That sharing begins on a Sand Dune Adventures tour where guests are invited to ride a 400cc quad bike across the largest

coastal sand dunes in the Southern Hemisphere with experienced Aboriginal tour guides. The migration of the dunes means that historical Worimi camping grounds and tool sites are exposed on a daily basis. Guides share their history, stories and traditions to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of the significance of the dunes.

"If you listen to a non-Aboriginal person sharing our knowledge, it's simply of the 'mind'; however if you listen to an Aboriginal person telling their story, it's a heart connection and this evokes emotion and creates a relationship between guide and client – building identity and connection," Andrew says.

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## Celebrating culture

In Queensland, the Year of Indigenous Tourism was established to celebrate Queensland's unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

"We have two ancient cultures living side by side with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people both having distinct histories, cultures and experiences," says Tourism and

Events Queensland chief executive officer Leanne Coddington.

"We are seeing a global move towards travellers seeking a genuine cultural experience, as well as seeing an increasing number of Australian travellers wanting to connect with their history. The Year of Indigenous Tourism initiative aims to highlight those experiences throughout the state where visitors can have authentic meetings, learn about culture and connect with our country."

One of these experiences is Cape York's Jarramali Rock Art Tours where visitors, led by Kuku-Yalanji man Johnny Murison, can delve deeper and unravel the ancient stories of his people through hidden rock art.

"Bridging the gap is what it's all about," says Johnny. "If people can appreciate and understand it (my culture), then I've done my job. We need people to know that there's nothing to be ashamed of. When you see the gallery and you see how skilled my ancestors were, you know they weren't savages, but academically eloquent."

There's no questioning the eloquence of Blake Cedar, a young man who grew up surrounded by three cultures: Torres Strait, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian. A natural storyteller, Blake joined Dreamtime Dive – an operator in Cairns committed to developing a genuine employment pathway for local Aboriginal youth – as a reef education ranger. His goal? To combine cultural science with Western science, and to help fill the gaps in understanding Aboriginal and Indigenous cultures.

Blake says, "There is a lack of awareness in the sense that, while everyone knows there are Indigenous people here and that they are the First Nation, a lot of people stop at a certain level. When you come on a Dreamtime Dive tour, we fill in your head with the real stuff. People walk off knowing and understanding and appreciating our culture. We have to re-educate people [in] the correct way. It gives me an adrenalin rush, as I can give them the correct information."

## Going walkabout

Juan Walker, another Kuku-Yalanji man, had a vision to offer visitors an insight into the history and cultural practises of his nation and how his people continue to evolve and adapt to living in the modern world.

Through his immersive Walkabout Cultural Adventures in the World Heritage-listed Daintree Rainforest, Juan has bought his vision to life, giving the Kuku-Yalanji people a voice and the opportunity to preserve and showcase their culture, significant sites and



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their connection to the land, sea, forests and creatures of their country.

"To us, country is everything and we, as the people of this place, have a responsibility to protect it. The best way to do so is to educate visitors about how to look after it, and through observation from tens of thousands of years, I think Aboriginal land uses and practises speak for themselves," Juan says.

## Cultural compass

Founder of Crooked Compass, Lisa Pagotto, believes families need to educate their children on all of Australia's history, not just European settlement, and introducing Indigenous history and culture early enables them to develop an open mind, leading to greater acceptance and understanding.

"This history has shaped our nation today and really needs to be shared to break down barriers, provide further education, and broaden people's minds and perspectives," comments Lisa.

From Outback NSW to the Torres Strait Islands, the boutique operator welcomes teens on their immersive small group tours and younger children on private departures. The intimate scale of the perspective-shifting tours allows guests to forge connections with Indigenous guides.

"Every Indigenous experience we offer is thoroughly researched with a clear goal in mind, from a rewarding personal and educational perspective for our travellers to a

personal and professional achievement for our guides," Lisa adds.

## One for all

Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia has long sung a pitch-perfect song of sustainable, authentic, culturally rich Aboriginal tourism. Its flagship Ayers Rock Resort provides the perfect gateway for visitors to the red heart of Australia, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. A high percentage of Indigenous staff creates a more authentic experience for guests seeking meaningful connections, while Voyages support and partnerships with local Anangu-owned operators ensure their stories are shared in an accurate and meaningful way.

"It is vital that we educate young Australians about our Indigenous history and culture. Cultural enrichment is one of the most valuable takeaways for families travelling through remote areas of Australia," says Voyages' Ray Stone.

"The richness of culture in the Red Centre is something that resonates with both our national and international guests, who in turn take away a greater understanding of Anangu culture and their close connection to language and country."

With a strong commitment to social responsibility, all profits are reinvested in Indigenous education, training and development across Australia, and the Anangu Communities Foundation continues to fund projects to assist local Anangu people.

## Meaningful connections

Back in Jervis Bay, Jenny shows my son how to use a long, thin leaf to make a whistle to attract Booderee National Park's snakes, should he feel like one for breakfast. While he appreciates the tip, he's happy sticking with the seeds that taste like bubblegum that she's picked for him, straight from the bush.

Through immersion, my kids are learning in a way they cannot in a classroom. They've been taught how to make tools from nature and explored the bush with traditional teachers who have happily passed on their scientific knowledge of plants. They've mapped the sky and listened to stories passed down for generations. They've stood side by side with our First Nations people and simply talked and listened, making meaningful connections. And through many a generously shared Songline, they're being taught to look at the landscape in a whole different way and to make better decisions about looking after country and its people. ■

## More Info

[australia.com/aboriginal](http://australia.com/aboriginal)  
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