

TRAVEL

INDULGENCE



DESTINATION AUSTRALIA

From Indigenous art to Kosciuszko caves

Creative comfort in Melbourne (P4) | Afloat in the timeless Kimberley (P8)

Art and about

On the indigenous culture trail in north Queensland

ANGELA SAURINE

Looking out at the vast tidal mudflats of Cooya Beach, most of us would see barren wasteland. But Joan Walker knows better.

"See these little swirls?" he asks, pointing to the ground. "Well, it's worm poo. They live under the mud and stirrings come and suck them up. At night if you shine a light you'll see hundreds of stirrings."

As a child, Walker and his brothers spent their days hunting for mud crabs and foraging for yams and clams along these shores near the mouth of the Mossman River, just north of Port Douglas, learning the traditions of the Kulkai Yalanji people from their grandparents. As an adult, he still spends his time pretty much the same way. But now he's the teacher, passing on his knowledge to tourists keen to know more about indigenous culture.

Walker's elder brothers, Lacc and Brandon, began leading cultural tours in 2006. He worked with them before starting his small group tours two years later, joining that as the youngest brother he got given all the best jobs.

Walker explains his unusual name came about because his great-grandmother was from the Torres Strait Islands and had three husbands. The first two were "black-birded" and taken out as devils. The third was a Filipino man who was fishing in the islands, hence Joan, his Spanish name.

Our tour begins with a quick lesson in spear throwing on the beach. Walker shows us how to hold the weapons, and instructs us to aim, step forward and flick. "Point a finger at the back, palm up, and let him go," he says. My first two attempts flop a few metres away. Walker swaps me for a smaller, lighter spear. It arches high in the air and lands pointy end in the ground, and I feel a tiny bit proud.

Then he throws his, and it lands about 30m away. But that's nothing. He says the farthest he has ever thrown is 35m, well the world record is 124m.

We walk handfoot across the mud towards a lone grey mangrove tree that juts out of the distant horizon. A grey mangrove tree that juts out of the distant horizon. "Think of this as a free pepper," Walker says. He explains that indigenous Australians look for different food sources depending on the season. At the time of our tour the weather is cool, which is ideal for shellfish. Around a full moon, the current is also stronger, so the crabs eat more and fatten up faster.

Mossman George Dreamtime Walks, trip guide Juan Walker, above. Dreamtime bush foods, left



We change direction and continue wading through the warm shallows towards the mangroves. Walker catches a mud crab for our lunch but all I manage is a leaf. "That's for vegetarians," he jokes. Searching the mangrove roots, we find sea snails, periwinkles and oysters but Walker warns these must be cooked to eat because they suck bacteria from the blood. "These mangroves are really special. You'll never run out of food here."

Across the road at Walker's mum's house, we wash our feet under the garden tap before going upstairs to the kitchen, where he cooks our bounty with freshly picked chillies. Then we sit on the veranda and savour the succulent flick, sucking the juice from the shell.

"Make a mess," he says. "If you're not making a mess you're not doing it properly."

As we eat, Walker shows our group three boomerangs of different shapes. To our surprise, he says there are more than 30 types of boomerangs flown in Queensland alone, and only two or three types are carved flat on one side and curved on the other as they return. Some are suitable for catching small animals such as handbills, gannets and possums; others are specifically made to snare wallabies. He then plays us tunes on a didgeridoo that sound like dragons howling and kookaburras laughing and shows us how to check if it is authentic. "I've made in Taiwan. They're looking inside for termite tracks."

Just down the road at the southern end of Dreamtime National Park, the oldest surviving tropical rainforest in the world at 100 to 150 million years old, lies Mossman

George, where we take a Ngadju Dreamtime Walk with indigenous guide Juan Walker. Above: Dreamtime bush foods, left

After a traditional welcome-to-country smoking ceremony, we view five old traditional painting trails. Minicreepers point out mossy red cottons used to carve dogfish canines and claws and shields used in warfare. As we pass sacred areas, he calls out to ancestors in the trees whom we are friends. He shows us grinding stones beside the path that his ancestors used to crack nuts, and ochre, a natural earth pigment that comes in 18 colours ranging from yellow to brown and used as face paint for special occasions.

Art is integral to indigenous culture, and tropical north Queensland is dotted with cultural centres and galleries where artists come together to work and showcase their offerings. Many also display their work at the Cairns International Fair, held annually in the city.

At Canopy Art Centre in Cairns we meet Glen Mackinnon who runs the monthly art show on the island in the Torres Strait, where he was born and raised, through vinyl art prints. He says the island is known for warfare, spears and harpoon hunting and fighting shells.

"My grandfather taught me the carving design," Mackinnon says. "He used to make the design in the sand when I was in primary school, and in high school he showed me how to use the design in my art design. It means something. This means crocodile, this is shark," he continues, pointing to his work. "I use [fish] designs because they're my people's totem. I also make my own designs."

Mackinnon moved to the mainland 15 years ago. "My Dad has a crayfish factory and store, but it wasn't for me," he says. "I'm the only artist from Yam Island and I want to go to school to educate people and tell them the story of where I'm from."

His work is now exhibited at the National Gallery of Australia, National Museum of Australia and Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane and his murals sell for up to \$10,000. He says he doesn't care if he has no money.

"I'd rather educate people about my culture."

Angela Saurine was a guest of Tourism and Events Queensland.



Yarrabah community children ready to perform at the 2017 Laura Festival

ANGELA SAURINE

Yarrabah community children ready to perform at the 2017 Laura Festival

Don't swirl as dancers, glistening with sweat, stamp their feet on the dry, brown earth to the banging of didgeridoo and drum of the didgeridoo. Children in traditional costumes, their faces painted with ochre, stand on the side, eyes wide and mouths agape, watching as they await their turn. Elderly ladies, their faces streaked with white, sit on plastic chairs in a row clapping, whistling and laughing raptly as their families perform.

Over three days, dancers young and old from 20 Cape York communities take to the stage to enact their stories at the Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival.

Some wear elaborate headdresses, others single kinchitcho, their skin painted with handprints. Some perform traditional hunting dances, prancing with spears pointed in time to the beat. Others hold their arms out to the side and soar like eagles across the festival ground.

An older man in a bright orange shirt emblazoned with the word Hawaii is so moved by the performance he kicks off his shoes and joins in, promptly stealing the show.

Children in the audience mimic the dancers, and a film me with hope to see indigenous culture being so enthusiastically preserved and passed on to the next generation.

The Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival is held every second year at Laura, 30 km inland from Cairns. The next is in 2019. lauradancefestival.com

Checklist

Without Cultural Adventure offers small-group, half-day tours for \$10 a person or full-day tours for \$200 a person, with pick-up from Port Douglas. Mossman and Daintree Village. More without adventures.com.au. Ngadju Dreamtime Walks at Mossman George depart daily \$68 for adults and \$35 for children 5-15 years. mossmangeorge.com.au.

Meetings with indigenous artists at Canopy Art Centre in Cairns are available on request. canopyartcentre.com.