

An Arnhemland Eco-cultural Experience

By Cindy Petersen



A group of eco-tourists from Sydney with the spoils of a successful day of hunting and gathering. The successful hunter in the middle is legendary Australian rugby league player Ron Coote.

Arnhem Land is the largest Aboriginal land trust in Australia and Maningrida is its unofficial capital. Maningrida's Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation is committed to the improvement of life for all Aboriginal people in the region under its "umbrella", an area totaling some 10 000 sq km. Cindy Petersen joined a group of Sydney-based businessmen to sample two of Bawinanga's Aboriginal eco-cultural tours.

Day 1

It's like a huge cemetery with thousands of gravestones was my first thought. There I was, bouncing around in the back of the Landcruiser, gazing out across a veritable sea of magnetic termite mounds. When you think about it, those termites are pretty clever to build such impressive arrow-head-shaped structures, the thin ends aligned north-south so they never get the full brunt of sun.

So I had one or two more wines than I should have the night before out on the Lodge's escarpment patio. I was still feeling pretty good about it all. This was Arnhem

Land, the very top of the Top End itself, and I was on a fascinating Aboriginal eco-cultural tour conducted by the Maningrida-based Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC).

These tours have been established as part of a joint venture between BAC and the Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge. The Lodge was hosting a large Harvey Norman corporate group and each guest would spend three days fishing and one day experiencing the culture and traditional lifestyle of some of the Aboriginal people of central Arnhem Land. My role was to accompany the guests on two different day tours.

So here I was, driving across cracked, buffalo-scarred black-soil tracks towards the west bank of the Blyth River near Gupanga. There were two Toyota Landcruisers on the tour, and our guides for the day were Stuart (chief guide and the senior Traditional Owner of the area), his wife Valerie and Matthew and Dickson (brothers and members of Djelk Rangers). Also aboard was BAC Training Co-ordinator, Wyn Manners, who has developed these tours with the local people.

This was another glorious early-dry-season

Territory day: a beautiful, clear blue sky, with a slight cooling breeze, and the temperature hovering around 28°.

The drive is an integral part of these tours as it takes you through many different and fascinating landscapes. In some places, the vegetation was still green and lush thanks to the remnants of wet season streams snaking



Head guide Stuart Ainkin demonstrating the correct method for cast netting baitfish.

NAFA on fishing the Top End

Maningrida

The town of Maningrida lies on the estuary of the Liverpool River, on the coast of Arnhem Land. The Kunibidji people are the traditional landowners of this country. The name *Maningrida* is an Anglicised version of the Kunibidji name *Manayingkarirra*, which comes from the phrase *Mane djang karirra*, meaning *the place where the dreaming changed shape*.

The Arnhem Land Reserve was established in 1931 and the township of Maningrida dates back to 1949 when Welfare Branch patrol officers Sid Kyle-Little and Jack Doolan were sent by the Government to set up a ration and trading post there. The trading post was abandoned after some 18 months, and a permanent Balanda presence was re-established by Dave and Ingrid Drysdale in 1957, partly to quell the post-war migration of Aboriginal people from the Blyth and Liverpool Rivers regions into Darwin and to repatriate people to the area. Patrols went out to spread the word and encourage people to move into the settlement. Within a few years many people from the surrounding area lived in Maningrida. However, there were exceptions, the most notable being Rembarrnga/ Dangbon leader Mandarrk and his family who stayed *out bush* at Dumangerre and Yayminy.

In 1972 the policy of Self-determination was introduced by the Australian Government. The basis of this policy is that indigenous Australians may have different needs and aspirations in some aspects of their lives to those of non-indigenous Australians. Central to this is land rights and in 1973 the Woodward Land Rights Commission was established.

Subsequently, the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 was passed and Aboriginal people in the Maningrida region were granted inalienable freehold title to their lands under Federal law. The mosaic of land ownership in the Maningrida region relates to each individual's clan affinity.

There are up to 16 languages and dialects spoken in the Maningrida area, and most people in Maningrida speak two or three languages, with many older people speaking little English.

The word *Balanda* is used by all language groups in the Maningrida area to refer to non-Aboriginal people. *Balanda* is a corruption of the Macassan word *Hollender*, meaning *Dutchman*. Macassan visitors to the Maningrida area in the 18th and 19th centuries described white people this way and indigenous people have henceforth used the term to describe white-skinned visitors to Arnhem Land.

through the bush and seeping into the drying billabongs. In contrast, those floodplains that had already dried up completely were more your typical savanna landscape. It was in these places that the traditional owners had started their dry season burning, leaving the earth tinged with black in a yearly cycle of renewal.

We drove on the hardened floodplains past a variety of wildlife, including those entertaining, prancing brolgas which are so often imitated in traditional Aboriginal corroborees. Stuart stopped the vehicle periodically to point out animal tracks, and the faeces of water buffalo and of wild

boar herds that had been through the night before. In due course, we saw a buffalo. Stuart said it was an old bull, and it certainly had an impressive spread of horns.

On these tours, Stuart and Valerie pull over at random and delight in explaining the different forms of bush tucker available, including the kernel of the pandanus nut which takes quite a bit of cracking.

The drive to our final destination took about an hour and a half.

Stuart pulled up on the edge of a mangrove forest, and we walked for 100 m to a small creek that runs into the Blyth River. As we walked along the bank, I eyed the water nervously — it looked like prime crocodile habitat! Stuart reassured us that he was very familiar with this area, and it was quite safe to follow him into the water. He did add, however, that we should stay close and, if he told us to get out of the water, we should do so immediately. Suddenly Stuart was very popular as we all crowded around him. I'm sure he was amused to suddenly be the centre of a throng of nervous city slickers.

Stuart demonstrated how to use a throw net to catch small fish in the creek. He explained that we would then use these as bait to catch something a bit bigger. The Harvey Norman boys, all builders and developers from Sydney, really took to this — shoes off, walking knee deep in the water and throwing the nets,



Hand lining on a small creek, waiting for the big one to climb on.



Val searching the lagoon mud for some goodies, while the author looks on.

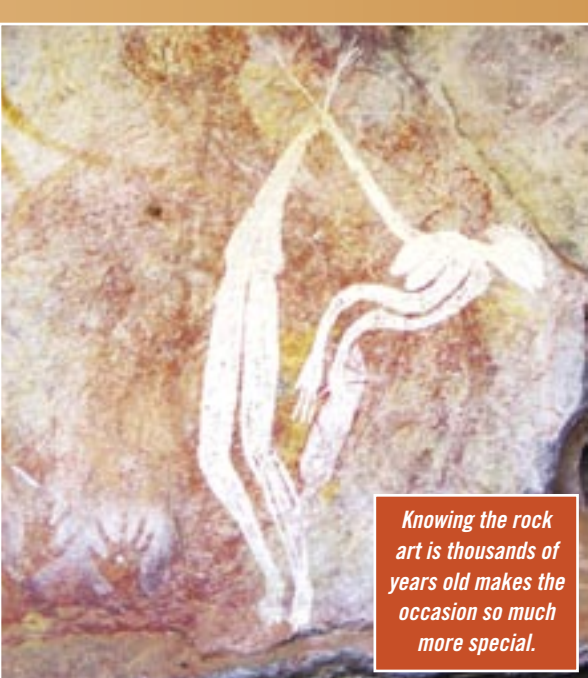
catching bait and then thrashing barramundi on handlines. Barramundi is not the only target in these mangrove creeks; Stuart also spears mud crabs at the base of mangroves in the tidal pools and Valerie collects shells with edible flesh.

Lunch involved sitting around the campfire which Valerie. The billy was boiling ready for a cup of tea, and our guides threw the fresh seafood straight on to the coals. Once done, the skin was lifted whole from the fish and we simply picked off moist, smoky flakes with our fingers. It seems Valerie's job is to pull the mud crabs apart and demonstrate how to crack the claws with a rock and expose the succulent white flesh.

The tour ended after lunch with the drive back to the Lodge, and an opportunity to see more of and learn more about this truly-awesome remote part of northern Australia. And the air-conditioning wasn't too bad either.

Day 2

The next morning I awoke with a feeling that it would be a special day, and it certainly started that way. Our group included legendary rugby league player, Ron Coote, and they were raring to go.



Knowing the rock art is thousands of years old makes the occasion so much more special.

We set off once again with Wyn, Stuart and Valerie, this time for Gorrong Gorrong. This is an area of coastal marsh land, with a perennial freshwater swamp formed by the wet season rains.

The drive took us along a red dirt track to

the house of our hosts for the day: Dennis and Filamena, along with family members cousin Aaron and Josh, a gorgeous little 2 year old who was full of fun.

Our destination on this tour was a shallow, marshy billabong, and the focus was real boys' own stuff.

Once there, Valerie and the men had a look around and decided that we would all head straight into the water.

I was thinking: Are you kidding? However, the locals all plunged straight in, so when in Rome!

Soon I was sinking into the mud as the boys all took off in one direction and I struggled to catch up with the ladies.

Okay, let's go... uh oh, foot stuck... oh no, other foot stuck... damn camera in one hand... can't get that wet...

okay, I'm going down, yes flat

in the mud, as loud as a herd of buffaloes!

The ladies were in hysterics, wondering what this crazy white woman was going to do next. "Come on Cindy, come on" was all I could hear, and Val effortlessly glided across the top to help me up. Determined to conquer the difficult conditions, I set off again. Val and Filamena were very keen to find some tucker, and it was refreshing to leave the cares of the modern world behind and



Stuart prepares mud crab on the coals.

focus on the basics.

We continued through the water to the other side. This is Filamena's country, and she explained it had come time to start some fires. Burning the land promotes growth for the next year, and moves the animals.

We sat under a tree to have a relax, and I took some photos of little Josh. He was loving it and I was happy to snap away with the green grass of the billabong as a backdrop.

Suddenly, a commotion heralded the return of the boys, who were pumped up



Val and Filamena were very pleased with Ron's effort of spearing the goanna, and immediately set about preparing it for lunch.

Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation

Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC) is located in Maningrida and functions primarily as an outstation resource centre.

The name *Bawinanga* encompasses elements of the language names *Barada*, *Gunwinggu* and *Rembarranga* to demarcate the extremities of its jurisdiction.

Originally the services provided to outstation residents included the provision of basic shelter and water supplies, radio communications equipment, a mobile food and clothing shop, the construction of airstrips and roads, an art purchasing facility, mechanical workshop, and support for ceremonial and cultural activities.

Over the years the corporation has grown in response to the enlarging outstations population, and now supports approximately 800 Aboriginal people residing on some 32 outstations.

Whilst the servicing of outstations and cultural maintenance remain the core functions of BAC, greater expectations of economic sustainability for the community have led to BAC operating as a regional development agency with a strong focus on economic development, enterprise development and the creation of employment opportunities.

The Corporation administers a CDEP program of 560 participants who are engaged in activities as diverse as mud brick manufacturing, natural resource management, rock art research, mechanical repair, building, municipal works, the arts and social services.

BAC is now one of the biggest CDEP organisations in Australia, has one of the largest art centres and most successful ranger projects and has had a long association with visiting researchers from Australia and overseas. It is widely recognised for best practice as an indigenous service delivery organisation. The Corporation is committed to the ongoing maintenance and improvement of life for all Aboriginal people in the region under its "umbrella", an area totaling some 10 000 sq km and hopes to achieve this by the continued provision of essential services, enhanced self-determination, the development of sustainable enterprises and improved educational and training opportunities.

NAFA on fishing the Top End

Stuart searches through the mangroves for the delectable mud crab. Here he carefully pins the crab down with his spear to stop it escaping.



after a successful spearing session. They had a number of barra and catfish, and Ron Coote even climbed a tree to spear a goanna. He also got the biggest barra, a respectable 88 cm. The girls were very pleased — goanna and barra for lunch.

We started a campfire, and Dennis and Stuart decided to go for some prawns with the cast net. Ron was in the thick of it as usual, scoring some whopper prawns to add to the menu. Val showed me how to prepare the goanna for cooking, and soon delicious smells were wafting from the fire. The barra and prawns were superb, and though I tried the goanna, I don't think I'll be having it at home!

It's worth noting at this point that goanna are a protected species. Only the traditional owners are allowed to take these animals for food.

After lunch, Val and Filamena decided it was time I learnt how to split pandanus leaves for weaving, while some of the group went out with the spears again. I tried and tried to split the leaves but it was a lot harder than it looked. Some of the boys had a go as well, and we agreed that it was something that obviously comes with years of practice.

This eco-cultural tour had been great fun for all, and the locals were so proud and happy to teach us about their land. I was sad to say goodbye to them, especially Val. It was a fantastic experience and a day we would never forget.

The art of weaving a mat is one that takes many years to master, as the author found out!



Josh was a big hit with the group on day 2 — and he loved to have his photo taken.

Aboriginal Eco-cultural Tours

In conjunction with the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge offers a range of fascinating eco-cultural tours with Maningrida Aboriginal custodians as guides.

On these tours, you can expect the unexpected! You are joining the world of your hosts not vice versa so it is important to come with an open mind and be prepared to go with the flow.

Packages are two, three or four days based on the following tours:

Traditional Bush Tucker Tour

A day out with local Aboriginal people with an emphasis on gathering bush tucker, or possibly the raw materials for weaving/ painting/carving. Perhaps lunch on one of our lovely Arafura Sea beaches or by a shady river. Join in or be a spectator; the choice is yours.

- Not physically demanding and not too uncomfortable.

Traditional Hunting Tour

A day out with local Aboriginal people with an emphasis on hunting. Activities will vary according to the season and the tides. This may include scrambling through mangroves hunting crab or negotiating muddy swamps spearing barramundi. Lots of opportunity for active participation.

- More physically demanding and you must be prepared to be uncomfortable at times.

Aboriginal Rock Art Tour

A full day out with your Aboriginal hosts to a rock art site where you will have a unique opportunity to see a variety of rock art accessible to only a few. Your drive to the site will take you through a variety of country ranging from woodland to floodplains as you are driven by comfortable 4WD to a Kuninjiku clan estate. There may be a chance to have a refreshing swim on your return journey.

- Involves a minimum 1½ hours drive each way.
- Not physically demanding.

Aboriginal Island Life Tour

Enjoy the comfort of Djelk tourist boat with extensive shade canopy. Travel to First Island and perhaps Second Island if conditions permit. Activities include sightseeing, fishing, eating oysters off the rocks, bird watching, and cooking your catch over the coals on the beach.

- Not physically demanding.

Tours can also include a Maningrida town tour, and a visit to the Djomi Museum and Maningrida Arts and Culture.

Combination Fishing & Eco-cultural tour packages are available, including for couples where one member goes fishing while the other goes on an eco-cultural tour.

For further information, phone 08 8983 1544, fax 08 8983 1914, email eco@hotspot.com.au, www.barralodge.com.au