

Living with Ancestors

BY WENDY BRUERE

Australia might be best known around the world for kangaroos, surfing and beer-drinking, but a small group of people with a sense of adventure and quest for knowledge have seen another side of the country.

In a remote corner of Arnhem Land, an 11-hour drive from the nearest city, Darwin, the indigenous Yolngu community, the Mapuru, allows cultural tours to visit several times each year. “Yolngu” is the term indigenous Arnhemlanders use to describe themselves – it means “person” in their language. The tours give people the opportunity to live with the small community, usually for around 10 days, and learn traditional skills.

Weaving tours for groups of women, which have been running for eight years, include learning about collecting barks, pandanus and plants to prepare and dye before weaving or spinning the fibres. Participants can also join expeditions to collect traditional foods such as mud crabs, shellfish, fish and other game and vegetable staples.

The different roles of men and women in Mapuru mean that weaving tours are only offered for women, but this year, men’s cultural tours began for males keen to learn about hunting, fishing and living off the land.

The concept for the tours were driven by the Mapuru Elders, sisters Marathuwarr and Bambalarra, partially in response to what they saw as unhelpful interference from Australian bureaucracy trying to direct how they lived. The Arnhem Weavers website details the sequence of useless trainings which were foisted upon the Mapuru by outside agencies with little knowledge of Yolngu culture, and the damage it did to the dignity of the Mapuru. The website says that the idea of forming a programme where the Yolngu could teach white people (known as ‘Balanda’ in Yolgnu language) was developed as way to restore self-esteem to the population.

John Greatorex, who teaches Yolngu Languages and Culture at Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory, and assists in organising the cultural tours on a volunteer basis, supports this view. He has been involved with the Mapuru for over 30 years and said his interest in the community partially stems from a desire to “reverse the constant flow of service providers”.

He said he sees the cultural tours as providing an opportunity for the Mapuru to teach people from outside their community – and an opportunity for outsiders to benefit from a millennia of accumulated knowledge and wisdom.

Greatorex said that one of the key benefits for the community was that having outsiders actively want to learn from them and visit their homeland helps restore dignity, as in the past, ‘visitors’ to the community were only there as service providers or through

public agencies. The tours, however, allow the Mapuru to be seen as autonomous and self-managing. And although the money is great, Greatorex said that what is far more important is that they “feel recognised and visible despite a government push to take away their autonomy. They are determined to make a future for their children on their land.”

Daniel Zwolenski, 32, an IT professional, who went on the first men’s cultural tour said he was told they were the first group of Balanda men to come to learn from the Mapuru – indeed, they were the first Balanda men to visit who weren’t government officials or only there to do maintenance.

Zwolenski said on the cultural tour they were taught how to butcher buffalo and make spears, and they spent five days of the tour living off the land on a wilderness survival trip with a group of Yolngu men. He described the experience as “unique, exotic and captivating”.

Greatorex said the participants in the tours come from a range of backgrounds – students, middle-aged women, professionals and “people who want to see a side of Australia that is invisible”.

Kate Rydge, 31, a survival skills instructor, based in New South Wales, Australia, assists in organising and taking groups to the Mapuru. She became involved out of a desire to learn about traditional Australian skills and wisdom.

“My partner and I were studying primitive skills in the US and were looking for a community in Australia that still had a continuous connection to their land,” she said.

“As soon as I saw the picture of the woman in charge on the internet, I knew that they had integrity and I wanted to get involved,” Rydge said. She added that she doesn’t earn any money from her involvement – the business belongs solely to the Mapuru – and that she sees herself more as a participant than a tour operator.

Rydge said she was amazed by how welcoming the Mapuru people were. She said, “They have an unbelievable openness, generosity and love – they accept you into their lives.” She added, “That openness is quite amazing given the amount of genocide and interference that has occurred.”

The warmth the Mapuru have is seen in the all-encompassing kinship system of the culture – kinship is highly important in relating to other people, and respectful newcomers are always adopted into the community.

“When you go up there, you have to be adopted into the family system, it’s not a fake adoption, it’s real adoption,” Rydge said. “I now have mothers whom I speak to often up in Mapuru – they are a very special, welcoming and loving group of people.”

Mara Chambers, a 51-year-old personal carer, joined the women’s



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Photo courtesy of John Greatorex

cultural tour in June. She said she was inspired to join the trip because of her desire to learn more about indigenous Australians.

“I have always had an interest and empathy for the aboriginals,” she said, adding that over her life, she has often encountered racism against aboriginal people from white Australians and felt that media coverage of indigenous issues tended to be biased.

“Years ago, I saw a poster for an Australia day holiday or event. It may have been the one celebrating 200 years [the 1988 bicentenary of Captain Cook landing in Australia and claiming it for Britain]. There was graffiti on it saying, ‘We have been here for thousands of years.’ That moment shifted my perspective and I saw the incredible injustice of the story white people were perpetuating. I declared to myself that I would not keep that story going in me anymore.”

Chambers said that a few years ago, after leaving a 32-year marriage, she decided it was time to broaden her horizons and learn about things that had interested her for so long.

When she joined the cultural tour to the Mapuru, she said she was awed by the openness of the Mapuru people, and was quickly adopted into a family. In her days in Mapuru, apart from learning how to turn plant matter into baskets, she said, “I realised how little I know about an ancient nationality so close to where I live.”

Since the tour, she has stayed in contact with her adopted family in the Mapuru through regular phone calls and they have also sent gifts to each other.

“I plan to continue to develop a stronger connection with my family in the Mapuru,” she said.

“I plan to enrol in Yolgnu Studies at Darwin University early next year as this language and cultural studies relate to people in the Mapuru. I will visit again next year for 10 days, for another basket making workshop, and I’ll immerse myself in exploring the culture. My Ngandi [mother] Linda wants to send her daughter to billet with me for a few weeks next year too.”

Over her days in the Mapuru, Chambers said one of the highlights of the trip for her was getting bogged in a car with 10 other people and being rescued by a Yolgnu grandmother who “chopped down two trees and made a bush jack”.

She said another favourite moment was when “on the last day, the whole clan danced and sang to an impromptu didgeridoo session”. She added that her adopted family taught her how to dance as they did and “looked really proud of my attempts”.

Chambers said that after staying amongst the Mapuru, she feels that she has the knowledge and confidence to argue with misperceptions and racism she said she sometimes encounters in Australian society. “I can now relate a positive experience first hand. I can question the validity of statements mindlessly given by so many,” she said. “[Yolngu] culture does not need fixing – it’s not broken.”

Another key distinction of Yolngu culture and life is how strongly they are tied to their land – land they have lived on for countless generations. This ongoing connection to their land gives them a deep and spiritual understanding of their homelands.

Greatorex explained, “People on homelands are living on the land their ancestors lived on, that’s why the Mapuru have the knowledge and the authority they do... They cannot do what they are doing now if they are moved off their ancestral estates.”

This is partly why outside intervention has been so misguided and destructive. “The white government keeps forcing the Yolgnu to live



under white structures without recognising traditional indigenous governance structures,” Greatorex said.

Rydge described her background in survival skills, or ‘nature philosophy’ as a way to connect to the earth in a profound way. This is what she said she saw, and wanted to learn from, in Mapuru culture. “It’s a deep ecology-style awareness around living on the land,” she said. “It’s not just about survival skills, it has – it has to have – a very strong spiritual experience and connection with the earth. It’s a spiritual understanding of what it is to survive closely to the earth.”

She added, “The elders have the most amazing knowledge and presence. It’s very rare to be able to sit and develop such a close relationship with someone who holds such native wisdom.”

“They run some of the best tours you’ll find, and they do it for their grandchildren, for the good of the community. The money is shared and [through seeing outsiders learn traditional skills], the younger ones can see the relevance of their culture to modern society,” Rydge said. “Because there are four generations of women involved in the weaving workshops, there is a sense of purpose.”

The income generated by the tours is important as it plays a huge role in giving the Mapuru independence. “It allows them to create their futures away from meeting the government, who tell them what to do,” Rydge added.

She said the tours were extremely unique and that she would encourage anyone to go. “The first time I went, I took my mother. She’s 60, she had never camped before and she just loved it! It broke through a lot of barriers,” Rydge said. “People experience complete cultural immersion. We get a lot of people [joining the tours] who want to experience native culture and wisdom and see how they can incorporate it into their lives back home afterwards.”

“People [who do the cultural tours] feel they have a new and positive experience of the multi-nations in Australia. They have seen a welcoming, warm spirit and feel sincerely and genuinely accepted for who they are,” Greatorex said.



WENDY BRUERE is an Australian writer, currently based in Asia. She has previously worked for NGOs in Timor Leste, Indonesia and Bangladesh. She recommends for details about Mapuru cultural tours, visit www.arnhemweavers.com.au