

"From Mapuru and Back again" by JJ Bruce

It has been a year since I visited Mapuru, a small Aboriginal settlement on the far north east tip of Arnhem Land. I was welcomed to this community last year to participate in a 5 day men's trip. At that stage I didn't know what I was in for, but now with my second trip imminent I have cause to reflect upon my experience last year. An experience that has been formative in the way I define myself as an Australian.

My companions, the other men who shared this experience with me travelled to Darwin, then drove to Mapuru (I love a sunburnt country). We brought with us all our food and other camping paraphernalia piled high on the roof rack, making the 4X4 look like an old duff snail. As we turned off the Nhulunbuy highway and headed in to Mapuru, anticipation and excitement filled the car. How would we get by in a place where English was the second language. Would there be any bitter sentiments towards us as 200 year white aggressors....

And when the road worn tyres of our hired Land Cruiser stopped in a swirl of fine red Mapuru dust, anticipation was dispelled and replaced by bewildered amazement as we were surrounded by a mob of smiling interested kids, come to check out the new arrivals. It was like arriving at the relatives farm for Christmas, for over the next few days in camp, as we orientated ourselves and made ready for our five days men's trip, we were adopted into various family groups. We were proud new members of very old, rather large and somewhat widespread families and as members of those families, we now had siblings, parents, grandparents, and children to look after us, make us feel welcome and to teach us.

As we travelled around Mapuru during the men's trip, we visited many places that were amazing in terms of their remote outback integrity, truly breathtaking country. Seeing this land would have satisfied me just being out there and waking and sleeping on that land would have made the entire trip worthwhile.

Being welcomed as family into the land, I found that through my adopted family, I shared in an established cultural relationship with the physical land and its plants and animals. Those places and biology which to me would have otherwise been just, this place or that place, this thing or that thing now had an identity. I was introduced to my surroundings in this way and it added a profundity to my experience.

When I got back, I put a power point presentation together for the local primary school, so I could share my experience with them. I called the presentation "To Mapuru and Back Again". And it strikes me now that I've come from Mapuru and I'm going back again.

About the author: JJ lives in North-eastern NSW. Since graduating with Honours from Southern Cross University in 1996 has run a successful environmental consultancy.