

OUTthere

Skywest



The in-flight magazine of Skywest
Autumn 2007



DISCOVER THE
REAL AUSTRALIA IN
A COUNTRY PUB

OPENING
THE DOORS
TO NOVOTEL
NINGALOO

A NEW PASTORAL
LINK FOR SKYWEST

Magic in the water

Diving with whale sharks in the Ningaloo Marine Park

ROCKING THE PILBARA

The landscape of this isolated West Australian region is unique; its indigenous history palpable.

STORY AND IMAGES: FIONA HARPER



ROCK ART AT DEEP GORGE ON THE BURRUP PENINSULA

By any number of yardsticks, 2500 million years ago is quite some time ago. It was around this time that fine-grained sediment was accumulating on the sea floor to form what we now know as Karijini National Park in the Hamersley Range. Over millions of years, further sediment layers combined with trapped water to form tough, well-bedded rock has transformed the iron-rich deposits. Millions of years later, erosion has sculptured the distinct geological formations that make up the unique Pilbara landscape we see today in the north-west of Western Australia.

In this context, 20,000 years is not so long ago. In a country that celebrates European discovery at a little over 300 years, the original inhabitants lived off this ancient land 20,000 years ago. Archaeological dating of rock art and artefacts indicates that Aboriginals have inhabited the Pilbara region for at least this long. When a European art lover asked a Pilbara indigenous artist how long they have 'been in Australia', the response was an incomprehensible 'since the land was soft'.

The Burrup Peninsula, or Murujuga (meaning 'hip bone sticking out') as the traditional owners call it, is recognised as having significant ecological and archaeological heritage. It contains one of the world's largest collections of petroglyphs, or ancient rock carvings. Numbers vary as to the exact number of rock carvings, as many have been destroyed or relocated as the resource industry moved in

during the 1960s, but it appears to be in the tens of thousands. Getting the balance right between the new industry and the ancient heritage is an ongoing challenge facing these industrial giants, and those supporting the traditional owners, the Yapurarra tribe.

In 2002, at a public rally at Hearson's Cove on the Burrup, Wilfred Hicks spoke on behalf of her people from the Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo Group, a group of families traditional to the coastal plains of the Pilbara, including the Burrup. Wilfred acknowledged the importance of development in the area to all Australians, black and white "in providing jobs, education and prospects for our young people" and emphasised encouragement towards the traditional owners' development. However, Wilfred noted that development must be planned carefully in such a way as to not "destroy our quality of life. We have a special duty also for this country, as the holders of its spiritual energies". It is the traditional peoples' duty to protect and pass on this heritage of art and culture to their own successors. In this same year Murujuga was listed on the National Trusts Endangered Places Register in light of the potential threats to the heritage value on the Burrup. There is currently intense discussion, and much local opposition, with further industrial development planned on the Burrup.

There are many opportunities for visitors to explore these ancient lands of the Burrup and

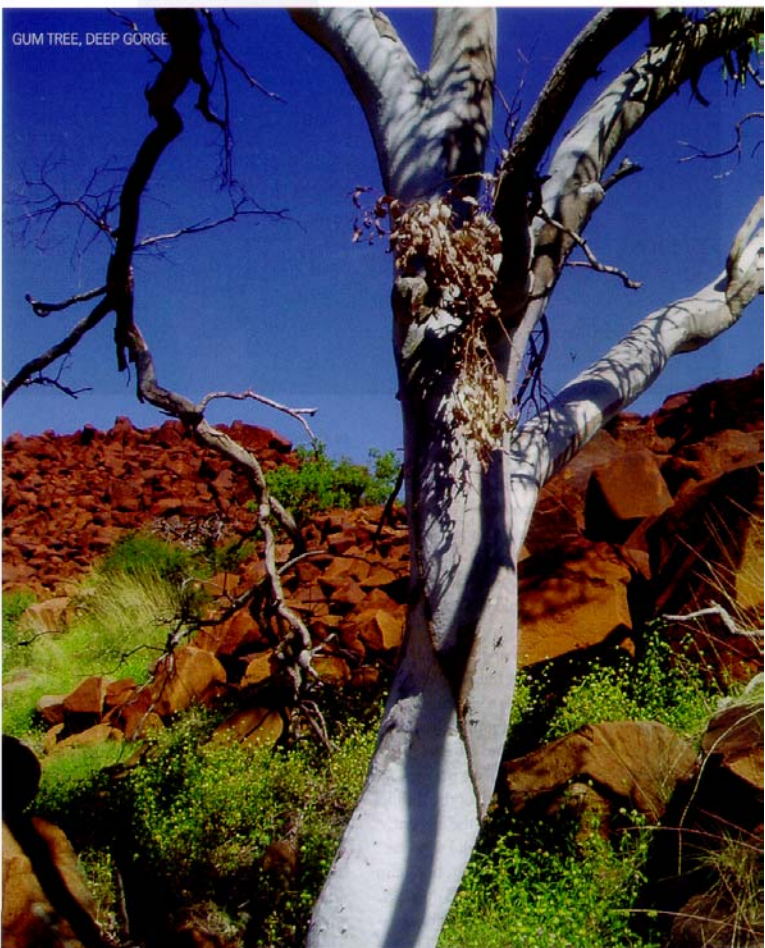


DEEP GORGE LIZARD BASKING IN THE SUN

I WAS UNPREPARED FOR SUCH HUSHED NATURAL BEAUTY. THE SILENCE HERE WAS PALPABLE.



to view its scattered rock art galleries. Take the Woodside Rd out along the Burrup to begin your quest. On the Hearson's Cove Road, two poles on the left indicate a track to the right, marking the Deep Gorge turnoff. The first thing I noticed, walking the short distance from the car park to the gorge, was the quietness. Having passed a large ammonia factory just two kilometres away, I was unprepared for such hushed natural beauty. The silence here was palpable. As I neared the gorge, the sound of gently running water replaced the silence, as the clear water bubbled over the rocks beneath the magnificently smooth white trunks of eucalypts. Looking up into the towering scree slopes on either side of the stream, I could see scores of engravings carved into the shattered pre-historic rocks. I took a few more steps and looked up again. Everywhere I looked I saw engravings carefully pecked into the rock. Armed with a basic guide to rock art I was able to identify many figures. Predominant were kangaroos and wallabies, (or 'macropods' according to my guide), but I also saw footprints in the form of arrow groupings, marine creatures and human figures. Absorbing the enormous gallery of carvings, and trying to get my head around the





PILBARA ARTIST KATHRYN NANGALA NJAMME

incomprehensible age of the art I was seeing. I was reminded of Wilfred Hicks' words: "The spiritual force is alive in the thousands of rock engravings that surround you here. We can hear and see this energy when we are among them. It ties us to the land and the land to us." As I rested on a large shady rock beside the stream, I closed my eyes, and felt I could absorb some of this spiritual energy.

King Bay is home to another significant rock art site. Although lacking the natural beauty of Deep Gorge, there is a significant collection of engravings here. From the rough unmarked track I looked skyward into the mass of ochre-coloured basalt. Soon my eyes adjusted to the task as I searched for the distinct lighter-coloured lines that marked the ancient engravings. The most beautiful work I saw was of a pair of birds scratching in the dirt, but I also saw human figures, spears, turtles and dugongs. Viewing rock art in its natural surroundings is nothing like visiting a structured gallery. There are no signposts to indicate where to find the art, and no plaques describing what to look for. The only way to absorb it all is to stand still and allow the eyes to linger over the rock.

Today's Pilbara artists have benefited from the focus on the enormous resource sector, according to Pilbara Art Gallery director Susan Shirtliff. Susan noted that "The art produced by Aboriginal artists of the region have been developed without the influence of tourism and other influences. As a result the 'visual voice' of the people is simultaneously contemporary and speaks in a unique voice of the Pilbara."

The gallery has established that there is great demand for work produced by the Pilbara artists, with local, national and international exhibitions. In February 2006, at the invitation of the city fathers of Florence, a group of six artists undertook the long journey to this spiritual home and birthplace of western art,

to showcase the art and culture of the Pilbara. This exhibition, *Antica Terra Pulsante* (roughly translated means 'ancient land still pulsing'), aimed to increase the demand for artwork produced in the Pilbara. One outcome of the exhibition was to draw attention to the defiantly primordial age of the land, the continuous habitation of this area by Aboriginal people, and the fact that, even in 2006, the culture of the region remains relevant, creative and vibrant.

The historic town of Cossack, settled in 1863, has recently undergone major restoration and is now well known for the Cossack Acquisitive Art Award, held in July/August each year. Recent judges have included Archibald prize-winner Geoff Dyer in 2003, and Tim Storrier in 2004. The old Bond Store, built from local stone in 1895, hosts regular exhibitions throughout the year featuring the best of Pilbara artists. Cossack also houses the gallery and workshop for the Bujee Nhoor Pu art group. This initiative was established to intervene in the cycle of offence and incarceration of local indigenous people, providing art training, as a way of offering self-determination and employment for the participants. Visitors are able to wander through the workshop and watch artists at work, with all work available for sale.

While some of the artists who travelled to Italy have temporarily gone to ground after enthusiastically embracing the culture of Florence, others have drawn inspiration from their experience. According to Susan Shirtliff, there is a definite vibrancy and confidence in the choice and use of colours, structure and an effortless meld of ancient culture with contemporary themes being produced. Keep an eye out for the Pilbara artists Kathryn Nangala Njamme, Clifton Mack, Murinba, Loreen Samson and Simon Hubert. For today's Pilbara artists, their bright future is in their own talented hands. ■

FASTfacts

GETTING THERE: Dampier is located just 20 kilometres from the regional centre of Karratha with its bustling airport built on reclaimed salt flats between the two towns. Skywest flies regularly from Perth, although flights are often heavily booked by the resource and mining industries. Booking early is highly recommended in order to take advantage of discounted airfares.

ACCOMMODATION:

Accommodation in Dampier is limited to the Dampier Mermaid Hotel & Motel, overlooking the islands of the Dampier Archipelago. The main bar of this coastal hotel has a somewhat dubious reputation, and is known by locals as 'the swinging arms'. A better option may be to stay in nearby modern Karratha. The 4.5-star Karratha International Hotel is just a short walk from the main shopping and entertainment district. With diverse dining options this is the hotel of choice, however, the giant resource companies who fly staff in from Perth often book it out. Well-known regional brands like The All Seasons, Best Western and Comfort Inn are also located in Karratha.

MORE INFORMATION:

Karratha International Hotel,
Cnr Millstream & Hillview Roads,
Karratha, (08) 9185 3111.

Dampier Mermaid Hotel & Motel,
The Esplanade, Dampier,
(08) 9183 1222.

Pilbara Art Gallery,
1079 Searipple Rd Karratha,

(08) 9185 6021;
www.pilbaraart.com

Karratha Visitor Centre,
Karratha Rd, Karratha,
(08) 9144 4600;

www.thecentralpilbaracoast.com.

Shire of Roebourne,
www.roebourne.wa.gov.au.

Cossack Historic Town,
Phone caretaker (08) 9182 1190.