

# Between a rock and an art gallery

SAMILLE MITCHELL

**T**he rocks look blank at first, glowing burnt orange under the blaze of a noon sun. But then, as your eyes adjust to the brightness, the eerie pictures begin to materialise.

A kangaroo emerges on one giant stone, emu prints on another — ancient artwork that has survived the ravages of time to provide tantalising glimpses into early Pilbara Aboriginal culture.

The Burrup Peninsula, near Karratha, is home to one of the world's most diverse collections of petroglyphs, or rock art.

Here, around 20,000 years ago, Aboriginal people used a variety of artistic means to record hundreds of thousands of pictures on the rocks. Some estimate there are up to one million ancient pictures adorning the

rocks.

At some places these people used rock to chip out pictures in the stone. At other areas they used reliefs, like Egyptian hieroglyphs.

The result is a unique collection of ancient Aboriginal art.

You'll find it scattered throughout the giant piles of boulders which characterise the Burrup Peninsula.

These towering piles of rock appear as though they've been dumped there by a giant tip truck and are about 600 million years old. Imagine the people, the sunsets, the storms and the changes these rocks have witnessed over the millennia.

But it is the artwork among the rocks that is most intriguing.

It provides a hazy picture of evolution, showing animals like the Tasmanian tiger, an indication this

extinct creature must once have roamed here.

However, the Yaburara people who created the art are now all gone, taking the secrets of the rock art to their graves.

There is no one to explain the intrigue of the tiger, or the "climbing men" — common pictures which depict men climbing up a central post. There's no one left to provide answers to why this area was such a cultural hub.

While we can only puzzle at their meaning, such lack of knowledge adds a feeling of mystery to the works.

The feeling of intrigue is enhanced by the lack of signs or pathways to the art.

While this can make finding the

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artwork tricky, it adds an exhilarating feeling of discovery when you locate a piece, as if you're the first modern-day person to see the works since they were etched here all those years ago.

It really is exciting to clamber over the rocks and through the spinifex, scouring the rocks for art while lizards scurry underfoot and eagles soar above.

For directions on where to start your search, drop into the nearby North-West Shelf Venture Visitor Centre.

The centre features displays and information on the artworks. It also explains the massive natural gas venture that sits amid the ancient

art.

The centre overlooks the mammoth North-West Shelf Venture processing plant and explains how natural gas is extracted from deep beneath the ocean and transferred 134km through the sea to the plant on the Burrup Peninsula.

The Burrup Peninsula is also home to the pretty shores of Hearson's Cove. Here a white shell grit beach stands in stark contrast to brilliant red rock and a blazing blue sky.

You can also witness the spectacle of the Staircase to the Moon here at the right times. As the Moon rises, its glow is reflected in a series of tidal pools, like a stairway rising above.

While on the peninsula, also take the time to visit the memorial of the Flying Foam Massacre.

A plaque on stone commemorates the slaughter of up to 60 Aboriginals in 1868, the bloody revenge for the murder of a policeman.

A spectacle known as the Standing Stones can also be seen on a ridge here — stones oddly positioned to stand upright among the surrounding boulders.

With the sound of industry rumbling nearby, the peninsula still exudes a special feel.

While the Yaburara people have gone, you get the feeling they still look over this place and perhaps remember the gatherings, the dances, the stories and the art they once shared here.



**Gritty:**  
Hearson's  
Cove, with  
its white  
shells, red  
rocks and  
blue skies,  
on the  
Burrup  
Peninsula.

Pictures:  
Samille  
Mitchell



Old hand: Emu prints left by an Aboriginal artist about 20,000 years ago.

