

Hiking in Australia's healing lands

RACHEL LEES

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It's late in the afternoon and the fire flickers in its pit as our host hands each member of the group a small branch of peppermint gum leaves and instructs us to brush it over our bodies. "As you're doing it, think about who you are," says Danny Gardner, a 34-year-old Palawa (one of Tasmania's Aboriginal people).

Next, he demonstrates how to get our inner spirit into the leaves using a process that's a cross between spitting and blowing lightly. "We acknowledge Moinee, our creative spirit, our father spirit," he says, "and we acknowledge Mother Earth, our giver. And I want them to acknowledge me."

He's watched by his six-year-old son, Manala, named after Mannalargenna, a renowned 19th-century warrior and chief of the Trawlwoolway people. "As we walk this beautiful country," Danny says, laying his leaves onto the fire and scooping the resulting smoke over himself, "heal my body, heal my mind, heal my soul."

It's a month before the start of the pandemic, and our party of ten is participating in a smoking ceremony on the opening day of the Wukalina Walk, Tasmania's first indigenous-owned and guided trek. It's ordinarily a 22-mile, four-day trip, but we've embarked on a shorter, 12-mile, three-day version, starting from Wukalina (Mount William National Park) and ending in Larapuna (Bay of Fires) in northeast Lutruwita (Tasmania).

"It's an opportunity for us to share our culture and change views on what Aboriginal people are like. It also allows Aboriginal people to work and become more independent," says 27-year-old guide Djuker Willis Hart, whose blue eyes light up when he talks about helping visitors see his homeland from a different perspective. "I love showing people the abundance of food they walk past every day, and giving them bush tucker."

The land we walk is mostly flat, with the exception of a 45-minute climb up Wukalina itself, where 360-degree views of the park and Cape Barren Island can be seen from the 216m summit. We traverse bushland and pristine white-sand beaches, where granite boulders dusted in orange lichen are lapped by clear water.

While intrepid travellers could navigate the beaches solo, they would miss out on staying in the award-winning camp, Krakani Lumi (resting place), designed by the Hobart architects Taylor and Hinds.

Built from charred Tasmanian timber with one side open to the warm sea breeze, each hut is inspired by the traditional domed shape of the Palawa people's seasonal shelters, and comes complete with modern comforts such as white linens draped in quilted wallaby furs, and a zip-up mesh layer to keep out insects. The eco-friendly communal building also houses a 12-seat dining room with hot showers.

They would also miss out on the extraordinary wealth of knowledge provided by Wukalina's guides — not least what to do if confronted by one of the island's three species of snake, all of which are deadly.

As for the bush tucker — if there's food out there, I struggle to see it. Yet on day two, Djuker forages as we walk along Cod Beach, offering us a taste of saltbush, which is used to add salty flavouring to meat; sea spinach, eaten as salad leaves; and sweet little white berries known as native currants.

Once we can identify these plants, we notice them everywhere. Tonight, their flavours will infuse our dinner of barbecued native wallaby and mutton bird, which fly from Siberia to Tasmania to breed each year. Both have been delicacies of the Palawa diet for tens of thousands of years.

Seafood is a popular staple, too, with an abundance of oysters, mussels and abalone just beneath the waves. Our female guide, 19-year-old Carleeta Rose Helen Thomas, wades into the water armed with only a snorkel and mask and vanishes for an inordinate amount of time. Swimming in the wake of her female ancestors, who were expert free divers and sealers, she emerges with a small feast of scallops.

At an age when most are out having a good time, Carleeta walks a more difficult and meaningful path. “I want to help people understand that we are reviving our culture,” she says. Carleeta is a descendent of Mannalargenna and Fanny Cochrane Smith (1834-1905), whose wax cylinder recordings of songs are the only audio recordings of Tasmania’s original indigenous languages.

Carleeta leads us around a 10,000-year-old midden on the beach, a site where her ancestors discarded the shells and bones of their meals as a record for the next visitors, to allow for the sustainable harvesting of food. She recounts tales of Tasmania’s violent colonial past — the history is horrific and largely unknown, even by most Australians.

The original inhabitants of Lutruwita were enslaved, brutalised and massacred. Exact numbers are hard to pinpoint but it’s estimated there were thousands of indigenous people living in Tasmania when British colonists invaded in 1803.

One woman, Truganini, who died in 1876, was considered by the colonists to be the last full-blood Tasmanian Aboriginal. “But 46 had survived on Wybalenna [Flinders Island] after being detained there,” Carleeta says. In 1881 Cape Barren Island Reserve was created for the descendants of indigenous women and European sealers, and today about 70 Palawa people live on the island.

Carleeta was the last baby born there, and she speaks with deep affection of her remote island home. It was there that she gathered the mariner and cockle shells she uses later that afternoon to demonstrate the art of making traditional necklaces. However, it’s clear that working as a guide on the Wukalina Walk has paved the way for a different kind of homecoming, one that sees her return to the original land and ways of her ancestors.

“Learning how to weave and make necklaces, reconnecting with my country and sharing that awareness with people means a lot,” Carleeta tells me.

And so it should. This is her country. Always was, always will be.

ENDS

The Bay of Fires, Tasmania



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The Wukalina Walk is Tasmania's first trek that's indigenous owned and guided — and it's spectacular, says **Rachel Lees**

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They would also miss out on the extra-



Eddystone Point lighthouse at the Bay of Fires



A hut at Krakani Lumi

Need to know

Three nights' full board from £1,425pp, including transfers within 5km of Launceston and gear including a backpack, jacket and walking poles (wukalinawalk.com.au). Fly to Hobart

ordinary wealth of knowledge provided by Wukalina's guides — not least what to do if confronted by one of the island's three species of snake, all of which are deadly.

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10 Travel Journeys



Launceston, northern Tasmania. Below: a wallaby and her joey

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4 more Aboriginal experiences

Culture in the crater

The Worn Gundidj Aboriginal dining experience at Tower Hill Wildlife Reserve, Victoria, demonstrates the customary uses for native plants — and teaches you how to throw a boomerang — inside an enormous dormant volcano crater. If you leave without spotting kangaroos and emus over the course of the two-hour tour, you must have had your eyes closed. Just one element of Freedom Destinations' escorted tour.

Details Ten nights' B&B on the Taste of Southern Australia itinerary from £4,080pp, including flights, transfers and some extra meals (freedomdestinations.co.uk)

What a yarn

With the campfire flickering the storytelling starts at the Yuin Retreat. Run by Ngaran Ngaran

Culture Awareness near Narooma on the New South Wales coast. The yarnning circle is just one element in a two-night cultural immersion, which also includes guided walks to the spiritual Gulaga mountain and traditional takes on wellness treatments — as well as smoking ceremonies, dancing and didgeridoos. Dinner is all about native ingredients, prepared by the Yuin people.

Details Two nights' full board from £466pp (ngaranaboriginalculture.com). Fly to Canberra

Join the dots

In Aboriginal dot painting every marking has a meaning. On this tour, an Anangu artist will explain the symbolism in the shadow of Uluru and create a new story with a paintbrush. You'll also get the chance to paint your own life story. Build it into

Australian Sky's self-drive trip. **Details** Three nights' B&B on the Red Centre Discovery tour from £419pp, including car hire; dot-painting experience £39pp extra (australiansky.co.uk). Fly to Alice Springs

Forage for a feast

Kuku Yalanji Cultural Habitat Tours runs a bush-food experience with a difference. You'll spend the day scouting the coast in far north Queensland, where you'll learn about traditional uses for plants and try your hand at mud-crabbing, fishing with spears and foraging in the mangroves. It's one of several indigenous experiences on this trip. **Details** Sixteen nights' full board on the Exploring Australia's Aboriginal Culture tour from £9,830pp, including flights (originaltravel.co.uk) **David Whitley**

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