



# AUSTRALIA



An ochre arc of land in the Northern Territory is home to the Yolngu people, who belong to various clans scattered across northeast Arnhem Land. These are among the world's oldest continuous living cultures, practising beliefs that have endured for thousands of years. A little over a decade ago, the Yolngu began opening their private lands to the outside world in order to share the traditions of their deeply sacred home

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The Yolngu have a saying: “We have a library in the land... The land is full of more knowledge than you can imagine.” There are around 50 indigenous homelands scattered across this vast, untouched corner of the country, and to the Yolngu, this burnt orange landscape is everything: their supermarket, their chemist, their university. A stay at Bawaka or another homeland offers travellers an understanding into how the landscape is entwined with Australia’s first people. Lirrwi Tourism is an Aboriginal-owned company and runs private, multi-day tours led by Yolngu guides; there’s no itinerary or set times for these excursions, just the ebb and flow of living with a culture who listen to the land.



Nyinyikay Homeland welcomes visitors during the dry season (April to November), when the rust-hued earth glows like fire at sunrise. Respected leader, Randy Yibarbuk (pictured on p114) shows guests how the Yolngu follow the seasons by ‘reading’ a stretch of land known as ‘the needle’, so-called for its long, sharp, pointed end. A plant flowering might signal it’s time to go spear fishing, for instance, or to hunt sharks. He also shares his knowledge as to which plants are safe to eat and which ones are used medicinally. Yolngu women, meanwhile, invite guests to join them in dyeing pandanus leaves using naturally coloured bush roots. When dry, the leaves are woven into all kinds of usable items.







Aboriginal story poles are a colourful addition to the Nyinyikay Homeland, carved and painted with elaborate scenes. It's not only art that features in local storytelling — music, too, is important, with the didgeridoo (known as a 'yidaki' in Yolngu) a distinctive sound of the Yolngu. The world's oldest wind instrument, the hollow pipes are tuned to different notes and are played by men during Dreamtime, when ancestral knowledge and values are passed down to younger generations through soulful songs and interpretive dance; tribal law strictly forbids women to use them.







Balma Homeland is home to around 30 Djarrwark people and is located near the Koolatong Sinkhole, a pool of water formed more than 100,000 years ago. Men and women have equally defined roles in Yolngu society; each is beneficial for the greater group. Dorothy, a strong and welcoming matriarch of the clan, upholds 'women's business', a tradition where clanswomen get together to gather bush foods, keep the home fire burning, make baskets and jewellery, and paint shells depicting ancestral stories. 'Men's business' involves hunting large game — kangaroo, emu, possum and turtle are all on the menu. Children, meanwhile, are never far away, learning from their elders.







A tradition stretching back over 40,000 years, Yolngu artwork is an important cultural portal into their history. Local wall art in Yirrkala depicts portraits of land right activists from the Rirratjingu clan. It's a stark reminder of the time when Yolngu tribes fought to remain custodians of a region that was rightfully theirs. Today, the Yolngu remains one of the most intact Indigenous groups in Australia, living, bathing, hunting and dancing in a landscape considered so spiritual it's treated like family. ▣

