

Where #SHARKBAY #CULTURE country talks

With Western Australia borders open and Indigenous experiences in the spotlight across Australia, a range of immersive experiences are at hand to connect and learn from the world's oldest living culture. *By Lynn Gail*

IT'S NEITHER NIGHT NOR DAY. NEITHER NOISY NOR hurried. The sun momentarily hangs over the fading landscape, swapping places with a crescent moon. One by one, stars flick on as fingers of firelight spread across Gutharraguda Country – the Malgana name for Shark Bay, on the Coral Coast of Western Australia – reaching out to roots holding this ancient land together.

Darren 'Capes' Capewell, owner of Wula Gura Nyinda Eco Tours, says, "Grab some of that red sand, rub it slowly through your hands – it will connect you to the desert, to Nhanda and Malgana Country."

Wanting to understand the complexity of the world's oldest continuous living framework, I've arrived early for a nighttime 'Didgeridoo Dreaming' experience at Little Lagoon in the heart of Gutharraguda (Shark Bay). I'm keen to know if we can reconnect with Mother Nature's foundations.



OPENING SPREAD: Shark Bay's staggering beauty. CLOCKWISE, FROM BELOW: Learning the various uses of native plants is part of a Francois Peron National Park 4WD Tour; giving nature a natural hand; crystal-clear waters beckon on the Coral Coast. All images © Lynn Gail



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**TRAVEL
FACTS**

GETTING THERE
The scenic roadtrip to Shark Bay takes around nine hours from Perth. Rex Airlines flies to Monkey Mia (Shark Bay) several times a week. rex.com.au

STAYING THERE
heritageresortsharkbay.com.au

EXPERIENCES
wulagura.com.au

INFORMATION
sharkbayvisit.com.au
australiascoralcoast.com



Capes sings out to the land in a language I don't understand. It is not for my benefit. He's paying respect to his ancestors who walked here before him. It's as though he's saying, "I'm home, I'm bringing people to learn our ways."

AGE-OLD CULTURE

"Where we sit is where our old people sat, right here, living off the land," Capes tells our group of 10 as we settle around the fire under a ceiling of crisp constellations. "I'm going to fill you mob with so much information, it'll make your head spin."

We learn how family members receive their animal spirit name depending on which of the six seasons they were born in, and how they are forbidden from eating that creature – keeping a balance in nature so people are not consuming the same foods. Family members from the same moiety are not allowed to marry, keeping bloodlines pure. It's a yin and yang synchronicity; looking after Country dates back more than 60,000 years.

"Does anyone know what the term, 'walkabout' means?" Capes asks us.

"I recently heard it's a derogatory word, a white person's saying," Elle, one of the guests, replies.

Dancing flames cast light over Capes as he reflects. He explains how the term gives non-Indigenous people the idea tribes walk aimlessly, with no purpose. "It's an initiation, we follow Songlines, and cultural law," he says. "Sometimes

elders entrust you with a song to hold, to pass on to younger generations."

SOUNDS OF AUSTRALIA

This cultural tour runs on request and includes a bush tucker and seafood meal cooked over an open fire. As our fish is placed on the coals, the men in our group are handed didgeridoos; the women clapsticks – tribal law forbids women to play didgeridoos, believing the instrument causes infertility. At best, it's a comical out-of-tune orchestra akin to gastric noises as the men test their lungs and the women attempt to keep tempo, tapping away. Time all but stops when Capes plays, however. Soul-stirring sounds travel through the bush as he sings to the rhythm of the night.

OUTDOOR PANTRY

I rejoin Capes in the morning for another Wula Gura Nyinda adventure: the Francois Peron National Park 4WD Tour. The day unfolds like a pocket guide to all things Indigenous as we bounce along red-dirt tracks, stopping to jump out into nature's classroom. Capes pushes acacia needles into his forearm demonstrating how bush plants kill warts; they are also used for acupuncture. The tree's skin is also mixed with water to brew tea for high blood pressure. Grind the seed when it's dry and you can make damper.

I fast realise how Nhanda people survived here for millennia – this landscape is their supermarket and pharmacy, a library lined with volumes of information.

"From the outside it looks like nothing's here," Capes says while preparing lunch at a pristine beach edged by a sheer backdrop of ochre curtains. "But we've got everything here, where the desert meets the ocean – food, water, shelter. Look after Country, and it will look after you."

Capes tells us that this part of Western Australia is celebrating 31 years as a World Heritage Site, boasting four standout criteria: abundant marine life, exceptional natural beauty, unique plant species and wildlife refuges. To me, each is obvious, and staggering: I swim in water the colour of limes, and soak up age-old beliefs, imagining life here before Europeans arrived.

It's a pin-sized portal into a complex system, and I've barely peeled the first layer. Like keys on a well-tuned piano, the land continues to play harmonies, showing the way to nature's nourishing pathways.

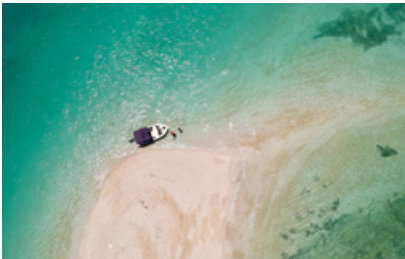
Stop and listen. You might just hear the music, too. 🎧



**OTHER IMMERSIVE
INDIGENOUS TOURS**



Spend time with Yolngu people in northeast Arnhem Land, touring their traditional Northern Territory homelands. Lirrwi Tourism offers day, multi-day and women's-only tours. lirrwitourism.com.au



Join guide Terry Hunter, a fourth-generation pearler and Bardi man from Borrogoron Coast to Creek Tours, to learn about the culture and pearling industry in Cygnet Bay, Western Australia. cygnetbaypearlfarm.com.au



Wadandi man Josh Whiteland of Koomal Dreaming shares his knowledge on a range of tours along the Cape-to-Cape region of Western Australia. koomaldreaming.com.au



Culture Connect in Queensland offers a range of day, multi-day and private tours in several locations across Cairns, Port Douglas and Cooktown. cultureconnect.com.au