

TRAVEL

Australia: Top-notch culture classes in the Top End

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5 minutes to read



Top Didj art and culture centre in Kakadu.

Herald on Sunday

Ancient arts entrance keen young pupils, writes Caroline Berdon.

I'm keen for my daughters to connect with indigenous people in Kakadu but, as local artist Selome Djandjomerr explains his tribe's tradition when a family member dies, I'm worried he'll give them nightmares.

My 7-year-old Emmeline's question was innocent enough.

"What's that painted log for?" she asks, pointing to a beautiful, hollowed-out trunk in the foyer of the Crocodile Hotel in Kakadu's township of Jabiru.

"That's where we put the bones of our dead relatives," he explains, nonchalantly, as if telling her how he cooks dinner.

He tells her how they lay out the body so the flesh gets eaten, before crushing up the bones, wrapping them in paperbark and putting them in the decorated, hollowed-out log. It is then taken up to the escarpment.

"Then no one can go up there," he adds.

Emmeline looks confused more than anything, and I anticipate questions later.

Thankfully, the tour of his artwork then turns to the didgeridoos and we get a welcome demo.

Like most kids, Emmeline loves the didj. But she was taught in school that girls are not allowed to play it. She asks Selome why.

"Because they will have one too many babies," he replies.

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These girls have been brought up with western, factual thinking and taught to question everything. At no time is this more evident than now. Their logic is in stark contrast to the traditions, superstitions and stories passed on to indigenous children.

But there is something that unites all people: art.

And as Selome roles out his sheet and unpacks his paint and brushes, I see the excited smiles on the girls' faces.

He gently invites them to sit and they watch in wonder as he carves brushes out of water reeds with his pocket knife, cutting away the stem to reveal a five-centimetre length of fibre.

This special brush will be dipped in white, yellow or red acrylic and dragged along the canvas to create the borders and cross-hatching lines typical of the Top End.

Before long, Selome has cut Emmeline and 4-year-old Sasha their own mini canvases, distributed paint pots and brushes and they're all silent at work depicting lizards, snakes and turtles.

Two days later at Top Didj Cultural Experience and Art Gallery in Katherine, they have a much more formal art class from Dalabon tribal member Manuel Pamkal.

Standing in front of a small group, Manuel asks his students to choose an image — it was a turtle for Emmeline and myself and a face for Sasha — and he takes us step-by-step through their creation on canvas, Dalabon-style.

Creating straight, even lines with the long bristle of the water reed brush is harder than it looks, but he corrects our jolts with some black acrylic cover-up and we're all pleased as punch with our paintings.

Afterwards he teaches us how to throw spears and light fires with sticks, and tells us more about him and what makes his life as an indigenous Aussie different from ours.

Emmeline and Sasha are shocked to learn that he's never had a birthday party - he has no idea when he was born.

"I don't care about age," he tells them. "Some people ask me to share their birthday parties and eat cake, but it's not my thing."

He also explains how he refers to his family members: his father's brother is also his "father", like his mother's sister is also his "mother", his cousins are his "sisters and brothers" and his nieces and nephews are also his "sons and daughters".

Keen to show the girls some early examples of Aboriginal art, we take an easy bushwalk while we're in Kakadu to one of the world's most impressive rock art galleries.

Aboriginal artists have painted about their lifestyles on the sandstone rocks of Kakadu for more than 20,000 years.

Here at Nourlangie Rock, there are paintings on top of paintings. This is because the act of painting is generally more important than the final artwork for indigenous artists. It's a powerful way for them to connect with their ancestors.

The girls take great delight in picking out different animal shapes among the layers, and imagining people collecting plant dye before coming to sit under this rock so long ago.

They also love the paintings of spirit men, which, to the traditional inhabitants, all carry distinct personalities. Pictures of some "bad persons" are even banned from publication.

One spirit man looks like a cross between a beetle and a skeleton. This is Namarrgon, or Lightning Man, who local tribes believe still lives in the tall, pillar-like cliffs of the Arnhem Land escarpment above our heads.

We get a good view of the escarpment from a stunning lookout just 20 minutes further uphill. A sign says Namarrgon's home is a sacred place and if he is disturbed, there will be trouble.

The imposing rock face glows red as the sun sinks below the grassy plains and as the girls stare up at it, all wide-eyed and silent, I sense some Aboriginal superstition is starting to rub off on them.

CHECKLIST

Getting there: Kakadu and Katherine are both about three hours from Darwin by road.

Darwin is about four hours' flying time from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, and about

three-and-a-half hours from Perth and Adelaide - via multiple carriers.

Staying there: The **Mercure Kakadu Crocodile Hotel**, built in the shape of a crocodile, is in the remote township of Jabiru and exhibits work from local artists, including Selome Djandjomerr. Prices vary.

Playing there: **Top Didj Cultural Experience and Art Gallery** in Katherine holds two-hour sessions with indigenous artists.

Further information: See kakadu.travelnt.com and www.kakadutourism.com.

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