

Rock stars

Indigenous-led tourism experiences are central to getting a true taste of Queensland, discovers **Karen Edwards**



1— here's an 8ft-tall kangaroo looming over me. He's mid-hop, one eye focused on the horizon. I step closer to take in his unusually long hind legs and front paws sprouting six digits. His white body, most likely painted using kaolin, a chalky type of clay, dominates the cavern that shelters me from the scorching Queensland sun.

At least 450 images decorate the sandstone in an area aptly named Magnificent Gallery. I make out spirit figures, emus, possums, barramundi, turtles and wallabies. According to my guide, Johnny Murison of Jarramali Rock Art Tours, some date back 2,000 years and are being considered for Unesco protection thanks to their global and cultural significance.

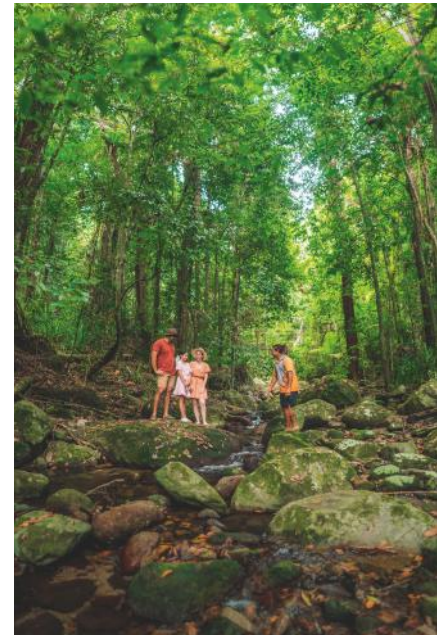
LAND OF MY FATHERS

I'm deep within the Laura Basin in Tropical North Queensland, where Quinkan rock art sites chronicle the lives of the Kuku-Yalanji people. Like most of Australia's Indigenous population, their story has been marred by forced removals, violence, disease and killings under British colonisation. At eight years old, Murison's great-grandmother was taken from ➤

Jarramali Rock Art Tours' Johnny Murison with visitors in the Magnificent Gallery PICTURE: Tourism and Events Queensland/Phil Warring



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Mossman Gorge; Daintree Rainforest; Walkabout Cultural Adventures tour; natural spa with Jarramali Rock Art Tours; Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre
PICTURES: Tourism and Events Queensland/Sera Wright, Phil Warring, Jason Charles Hill, Liam Brennan/PixelFrame



WHEN BOOKING AN AUTHENTIC INDIGENOUS EXPERIENCE

DO check out Tourism Australia's Discover Aboriginal Experiences list of verified Aboriginal-owned and run businesses at discoveraboriginalexperiences.com

DO ask if a tour is 100% Indigenous-owned before confirming a booking; this is usually clearly stated on the company website.

DON'T book a tour that's run by non-Indigenous stakeholders. It hinders the economic potential for Indigenous-owned businesses.

her home and brought up at a mission on Palm Island, off the Queensland coast.

A proud Kuku-Yalanji man, Murison has been guiding small groups of visitors to see the rock art on his ancestral land since 2017. There are, he says, 10,000 sites here; he's found a hundred so far. "I have a way to go, but I'd be happy to locate a thousand of them," he laughs. "I just hope I can bring more employment and opportunity to my family and community."

I'm among a group of four spending two nights with Murison on his ancestral land. As well as hiking to rock art galleries, we've been swimming under waterfalls and in rock pools, learning about the leaves and barks once used as food, medicine and shelter, and spotting wallabies forage in the bush. In the evenings, we sit around a fire watching blood-orange sunsets, grilling barramundi and sipping beer while having a 'yarn' about ancient medicine men. Each night, I've fallen asleep under a blanket of thousands of stars, listening to the calming hum of the cicadas. It has all brought me close to a culture and wildlife I never expected to experience.

DREAM MAKER

Heading east, I stop at Mossman Gorge on the outskirts of the 180-million-year-old Daintree Rainforest, where I opt to take a 1.5-hour guided Ngadiku Dreamtime Walk with Kuku-Yalanji guide Angelina Sipi. We begin with a traditional Welcome to Country 'smoking' ceremony, involving the burning of native foliage to ward off bad

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spirits. On the walk, Sipi dives into the Dreamtime stories steeped in this ancient rainforest, while identifying humpies (traditional shelters) and the vegetation that has customarily been used as medicine by her people.

The Daintree covers less than 0.2% of Australia's landmass, she tells me, yet is home to around 30% of the country's native frog, reptile and marsupial species. Our ears remain attuned to the distinct call of a golden bowerbird throughout.

When Sipi declares that we've all earned a sweet bush tea and pulls a tea-towel-wrapped plate of damper (campfire-baked bread) from her backpack, everyone is delighted. We finish at a creek in the river, where I slip under a small cascade and allow the cool, fresh water to soothe my tired shoulders.

INDIGENOUS LORE

Near Port Douglas, Juan Walker's Walkabout Cultural Adventures has been a trusted institution for Indigenous storytelling along the *jalun*, *bana* and *bubu* (sea, water