

ART IN ITS PLACE

Delving into Australia's remote art centres while travelling by rail and sea offers a unique opportunity to experience stunning landscapes and buy unique artworks at source. By Fiona Harper.



Clockwise, from top left: Pirlangimpi in the Tiwi Islands is home to Munupi Arts and Crafts; *Orion* anchored in the turquoise waters of Jensen Bay; Katherine Hot Springs is a refreshing natural waterhole for The Ghan passengers; The Ghan crosses Australia through the Red Centre between Adelaide and Darwin.

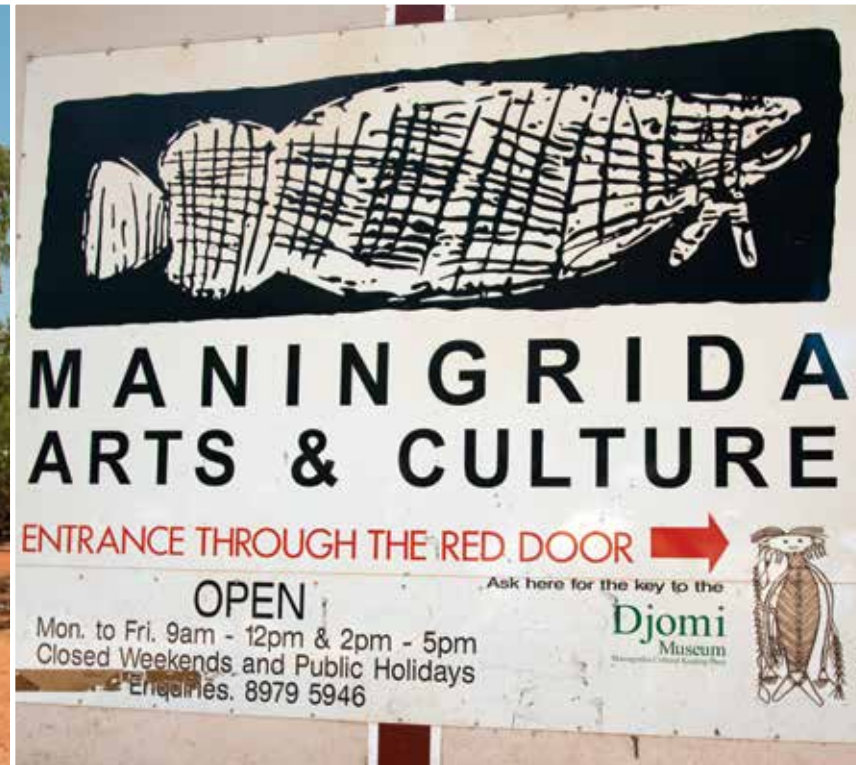
Far from urban civilisation, in the Northern Territory a nomadic connection between land and life itself is fundamental for indigenous Australians. Surviving 40,000-odd years in some of Australia's most remote lands, ancient stories, songs and dance passed down through the generations are finding their way into the mainstream via contemporary art galleries. Despite, or perhaps because of, its far-flung location, Arnhem Land in particular is a breeding ground of artistic creativity.

Multi-award-winning musicians Yothu Yindi, with their powerful blend of indigenous and modern music, hail from Yirrkala in northeast Arnhem Land. Their name translates to "mother and child", depicting a kinship connection that Yolgnu people have with each other, whether freshwater or saltwater people. This yothu yindi belief underpins much of the creative works coming from Arnhem Land. Singer Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, from Elcho Island, blind since birth, captures this emotive spirit of country with his high tenor voice. His appearance on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine last year did much to propel Arnhem Land culture into the mainstream.

But it is the artworks emerging from this remote land that are capturing most attention among collectors and galleries across the globe. Places such as Maningrida, Yirrkala, Elcho and Melville Islands all have thriving art communities supported by community art centres with tendrils that reach far and wide. Most have comprehensive online galleries, though one-dimensional photographs rarely show the exquisite nature of artworks. Tactile by nature, getting up close and personal, meeting the artists and curators, is the best way to appreciate their raw beauty. Limited road access, wet-season floods and a government-managed permit system deter most travellers.

Disembarking from an uber-luxe Platinum cabin onboard The Ghan train, before taking in the Darwin art scene, I've joined Orion Expeditions for a rare opportunity to explore coastal and island Arnhem Land communities. Boarding in Darwin and bound eastwards for Thursday Island, my fellow passengers are an intrepid lot, many of them seasoned expedition voyagers. At 103 metres long and catering to a similar number of passengers, *Orion's* ice-strengthened hull is rather more accustomed to slipping through icy seas than the balmy tropical waters of northern Australia. But that doesn't make her any less suited to the task of navigating the shoal-strewn waters of northern Australia. Indeed, *Orion* offers intimate cruising in opulent style. Fine dining beneath a tropical sky or in the air-conditioned Constellation Restaurant, plush suites, some with bathtubs, many with French balconies, ensure that life aboard is rather luxurious. Impeccable attention to detail distinguishes Orion Expeditions from other small-ship operators, offering an experience akin to travelling by private yacht. Fine points include bar staff who not only recall your name but also your and your partner's preferred tipple. Or wait staff who instinctively understand human dynamics, knowing which guests have built friendships, seating compatible guests together when appropriate.

Our first stop is Pirlangimpi, on Melville Island, known for Tiwi ceramics and carved totem-like Pukumani funeral poles. Far from the regular tourist route, a dance troupe has been assembled in anticipation of our arrival at Munupi Art Centre. Performers and onlookers seem to enjoy the loosely choreographed dance more than the visitors as howls of laughter reverberate across the grass. The Crocodile Dance sees some performers doubled over with laughter while audience participation depicting the bombing of Darwin during World War II



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Dhambula Community on Elcho Island sits on the shores of the Arafura Sea; artists from Maningrida Arts & Culture Centre utilise materials found on the land; Elcho Island boys are taught traditional ways, their classroom the Arafura Sea. This page, clockwise from top left: Pandanus leaves are dyed and woven into intricate patterns; Morning Star Poles are sacred to Dhuwa clans of the Yolngu people; Elder Gali Yalkarriwuy performs a Morning Star dance.



has everyone in hysterics. Inquisitive dogs try to get in on the act while, further afield, women laugh and clap, bashful children clinging to their skirts.

Further east, Maningrida was established in the 1940s as a trading post, though these days it's the Maningrida Art Centre that is most industrious. Attracting worldwide attention as a powerhouse of central Arnhem Land art, all works are created utilising bush materials sourced from the land. Don't expect to find any works on canvas here. Though you will find ceremonial dilly bags and baskets, circular mats woven from pandanus leaves, bark paintings and wood carvings with intricate designs depicting land and sea influences. Bark paintings by renowned Maningrida artist John Mowandjuri are highly sought after. His delicately detailed works seem to shimmer pearl-like as complex patterns catch the light. Don't forget your platinum credit card, though, as some of Mowandjuri's paintings command tens of thousands of dollars. Next to the art centre, Babbarra Designs is an initiative of the Babbarra Women's Centre, specialising in colourful lino-printed textiles depicting the landscape, dreaming stories, bush food and mythical spirits.

The Morning Star is an important element of life in these parts, tracking west across the Arnhem Land sky, setting in the west just before dawn. Known as Banumbirr, Morning Star Poles are sacred objects which have been replicated by artists. Outside the Elcho Island Art Centre in Galiwin'ku community, 76-year-old elder Gali Yalkarriwuy appears in ceremonial dress, his body elaborately adorned, carrying a dilly bag and a Morning Star Pole. Tufts of white feathers at the top of the pole represent the star, coloured feathers further down represent new life, while coloured bands represent the changing light between night and day.

To the east, the Wessel Islands delineate the Arafura Sea from the Gulf of Carpentaria. We take a zodiac ashore to now uninhabited Marchinbar Island, where Terry Yumbulul spent his childhood. "Welcome to our country", his wife Clely says, her eyes crinkling into a smile as she swabs my forehead with white and ochre lines. Terry lightly swats my chest and back with a smoking leafy branch he's pulled from the fire as he ushers me into his former home, little





Above: Ancient rock art in the Wessel Islands. Opposite page, clockwise from top: elaborately adorned memorial poles showcase talented Yirrkala artists; Arnhem Land galleries display dilly bags and bark paintings; Buku-Larrnggay artists have picked up a swag of awards.

more than an overhanging rock above a sand floor. Overhead, paintings that were here long before Terry's family moved in depict crocodiles, snakes, fish and turtles. Terry tells us that Dutch sailors were also here long ago, as evidenced by an ancient square-rigged sailing ship painted in ochre.

"There were six families living here in this cave," he says, recalling a childhood that was mostly spent fishing from a canoe. Some family members are buried nearby, reminding us that Terry's former cave dwelling was not only a home but a sacred church. "I started travelling in a dugout canoe with my father. The morning star guided us home," he says. What kid wouldn't love this existence? Beyond the shaded haven of this weather-ravished island, sun-bleached beaches are kissed by a turquoise Arafura Sea, while a nearby billabong provides a water supply. In describing his country as "just a piece of dirt surrounded by salt water", Terry is underselling a landscape that oozes rugged charisma.

On the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria, Buku-Larrnggay Mulku Art Centre at Yirrkala is one of Australia's premier indigenous art centres. Buku artists have picked up a dilly bag full of major awards in recent years. Particular specialties

include exquisite bark paintings, intricately adorned memorial poles, printmaking and sculpture. Significantly, Native Title has its roots here with the Yirrkala bark petitions of 1963, the first documentary recognition of indigenous people in Australian law.

But if you visited the Northern Territory and simply hugged the coast you'd miss the pulsing heart and soul of this wild landscape. The Red Centre is the ying to Arnhem Land's yang, complementing the connection to land and place. Following the ancient camel's route, The Ghan travels almost 3,000km north from Adelaide before terminating in Darwin three days later. Whistle Stop Tours at Alice Springs and Katherine allow further explorations of indigenous art and culture before hopping back on board for an indulgent amble through the Simpson Desert. Disembarking The Ghan in Darwin before boarding *Orion* for Arnhem Land connects the dots between land and sea, saltwater and fresh. Just as indigenous Australians have been doing for tens of thousands of years. 🗨

Fiona Harper was a guest of Orion Expeditions, Great Southern Rail and Skycity Darwin.

