

Heartbeat of Kakadu

By Sue Farley

Across the Magela Creek from Jabiru the countryside changes. It feels a bit hotter, more humid and the mosquitoes more voracious. But it's also a gentler country - greener, more verdant - and the orange-streaked cliffs of the Arnhem Land escarpment frame the horizon in a flaming wall of sunset colours.

In the old days the aboriginal people in this far corner of the Kakadu National Park in northern Australia had no collective name - they had no need to name themselves as there were no others. Over time their language became known as Gagadju and although it is spoken fluently by very few, it still lives on today. The word Kakadu has come from that name which, in turn, names the national park as well.

As with other Aboriginal communities around Australia the Gagadju people believe the land was shaped by their spiritual ancestors during the Dreamtime. The land and its physical structure, the plants, the animals and Bininj (the people) were all created by this force, as were the ceremonies and rituals, the language and the culture. It was the perfect conception of a culture that has now been in place for at least 40,000 years.

My wanderings through Kakadu and along the edge of Arnhem Land took me through their ancient land. Although reluctant to go barefoot (all those snakes and spiders and things), at times I did, and was happy to feel the sandy red earth between my toes. Fine crimson dust rose in my face as I sought shade from the hot sun, but the flies and mosquitoes closed in as soon as I stood still.

All around, the bright green of the tangling vines, the fig and eucalypt trees, and the soft purple of the native tumeric flowers, lit the landscape. After the summer rains their growth was soft and rampant. As I climbed around the rock art site at Ubirr I wondered at how these primitive people must have lived all those hundreds, and in some cases, thousands, of years ago when these paintings were done.

Huge rocks and overhangs are decorated with their minimalist drawings. Pictures of strange long-legged people, similar to the Quinkin people in the northern Queensland rock art, stand out starkly against the soft red rock. The earth and ochre colours of the intricate x-ray style art typical of the Kakadu area blend softly into the surrounding landscape. Food, people, customs, legends and animals are all recorded in this very organic art gallery, with art ranging from ancient to quite modern.

From the Nardab Lookout at Ubirr, high above the East Alligator River floodplain, the lush wetland grasses glow intensely green. Tall paperbark trees with their striking white trunks showing through sheets of peeling bark line the edges of this vast plain and to the north the horizon remains open where it eventually reaches the sea, far out of sight. Clouds of magpie geese fly low across the plain and sea-eagles soar in to nest in the paperbarks.

People have lived in Kakadu for at least 35,000 years. Simple hand-prints on the rock walls have been dated to close that age. At Malangangerr archaeologists have concluded that Aboriginal people were living there 23,000 years ago by studying

layers of sediment in the cavern floor, the art work on the walls and the tools found lying in the dust. From that conclusion, it may well be the longest continuously inhabited place on earth as the Gagadju people only left Malangangerr in the 1970s.

Nourlangie, further south in the Kakadu Park, is a very accessible art site, complete with pathways and signboards. Delicate areas of drawing are protected behind barriers and steps have handholds to make the climb a bit easier. In the sweltering 40 degree heat of a sultry summer's day in Kakadu, every little bit of help is welcome.

Clutching my water bottle and a piece of paper to flick away the flies I wandered along the Nourlangie walkway. One site here, the Anbangbang Shelter, has been a seasonal home to the local people for around 20,000 years, the artefacts and art being ancient and not so well preserved. Further up the track, the Anbangbang Gallery has more recent paintings, some done as late as the 1960s. Although not having such great historical value, these later drawings vividly illustrate the style and method of the ancient ones and are definitely worth visiting.

Days later, as we floated along the shiny water of the Guluyambi River, which forms a natural boundary between remote Arnhem Land and the Kakadu Park, flocks of sulphur-crested cockatoos and the more beautiful red-tailed black cockatoos bounced around under the melaleuca trees beside the river, feeding noisily and jostling for attention. Long, sleepy crocodiles lay lazily under the banks, barely visible in the undergrowth. It would be easy to stand on one, and probably not survive to know what had happened.

Our guide, Max, edged the boat into the shore at one point. A huge sandstone rock was richly painted in the yam-style of Aboriginal art with a selection of local foods - apparently a bit like a takeaways menu for visiting tribes and families who came along the river. Although a little the worse for wear, the drawings showed that Aboriginal art was often more than just decoration but a serious form of visual communication.

In addition to recording hunts and customs, people and animals, art was also used to preserve the stories of the Dreaming, the Creation, and of the ancient spirits. Like at Guluyambi, where art was sometimes used to ensure that food would be plentiful, by drawing what was required through the next season or what was currently in use – a larder wish list for the coming year.

As we cruised further up this slow-moving river, with the blue sky reflecting intensely on the inky water and the glassy-white sand lighting up beaches along the river bank, I watched the distant Arnhem Land escarpment open out before us. Made from some of the oldest rock in the world, the sand and minerals have been leaching down into the lowland areas of Kakadu for thousands of years. It is these same brightly coloured clays and ochres that have gone into creating Kakadu's art treasures and been preserved to tell their stories to us now.