

Have we found Australia's best ROCK ART?

Susan Gough Henly thinks we just might have.

I have crossed the Northern Territory's East Alligator River and gone deep into Arnhem Land. Now, sitting on a sandstone ledge at Mount Borradaile, I gaze at a mulberry red Tasmanian devil with jagged teeth underneath a large yellow sting ray. Nearby are two punishment spearings and a rainbow serpent creation ancestor. I can scarcely believe I am one of the few people to have seen this art since its rediscovery.

Davidson's Arnhem Land Safari's senior guide Clare Wallwork and her partner Roger Johnsson discovered these art-filled shelters just last year. Today, their excitement is still palpable as we walk along the escarpment pocked with the dogged roots of fig trees and spiky pandanas palms. A lime green wetland stretches to the horizon.

In 1986 Charlie Mungulda, senior Indigenous owner of the Ulba Bunij clan, asked former buffalo hunter Max Davidson to open a safari camp to show a select few white folk his country. Davidson and his guides have found more than a dozen rock art galleries that archaeologist Josephine Flood describes as "unrivalled in terms of artistic quality, quantity, colourfulness and excellent state of preservation."

Mount Borradaile is magical. The art in the rock shelters tells stories that plumb tens of thousands of years in a landscape that still brims with crocodiles, barramundi, and courting broilgas. It feels like you have pierced the curtain of the 21st century and returned to prehistoric times.

"It's so pristine yet Indigenous Australians

lived here for thousands of years," says Wallwork. "Aboriginal groups worked within the environment yet we Europeans seem to work against it. Everywhere you walk it feels like they left only yesterday."

"Rock art offers a window into the past," says Professor Paul Tacon, Chair in Rock Art Research

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at Queensland's Griffith University.

"It is all about the history of human experience and the imaginative telling of stories. It shows everything from what extinct animals looked like to how climate change impacted social life."

For traditional owners, the art tells the story of their country and their culture. More important than the paintings themselves, which are often superimposed on each other, the act of painting connected Aboriginal artists with their creation ancestors.

"Australian rock art is so remarkable firstly because there is so much of it," says Professor Jo McDonald, director of the Centre for Rock Art Research and Management at the University of Western Australia. "Australia is unique because

its entire occupation was by hunter gatherers and this history is beautifully recorded in the rock art." She adds, "The French promote their relatively few sites, such as Lascaux (whose art dates back 20,000 years), as part of their cultural identity. Australia has 100,000 known sites with incredible diversity and complexity yet few Australians know much about them."

Indeed, the enormity of the legacy of Aboriginal culture – its complexity and spiritual depth – is barely understood by most of us. From finger scratching deep in the Nullarbor caves and coded petroglyphs on the Burrup Peninsula to the vast swath of rock paintings across the continent, every type of artistic endeavour practiced by ancient cultures has been produced here.

"The detail, freshness, range of colour and age of Australian rock art make it unequalled worldwide," says Cambridge PhD, Jamie Hampson, who recently moved to the UWA Centre for Rock Art Research + Management because, "as an archaeologist with an anthropological approach to rock art, Australia is a wonderful place to work because there are still Indigenous descendants who can provide so much cultural understanding."

In spite of extensive studies, it is still extremely difficult to pinpoint the age of rock art because most organic pigments cannot be carbon dated. A rare charcoal drawing on the Central Arnhem Land Plateau has been radiocarbon-dated to 28,000 years, making it the oldest painting in Australia and among the oldest in the world with reliable date evidence – but the engravings are probably much older. ▶

See Arnhem Land for yourself: Mount Borradaile, which can be visited both in the wet and dry seasons, offers a remarkable body of rock art including an enormous rainbow serpent, expansive contact galleries, early naturalistic animals, dynamic figures and X-ray art (arnhemland-safaris.com). For a complete indigenous experience in Arnhem Land, visit the site of Injalak near the community of Oenpelli where Aboriginal guides describe the stories behind the great variety of paintings at Injaluk Hill. You can also buy stunning weavings and bark paintings at the art centre. Entry permit required (injalak.com).

Seven more amazing sites

1. Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory

All the academics agree that Kakadu holds one of the world's greatest concentrations of rock art; approximately 5000 sites have been recorded, a further 10,000 are thought to exist and these are just a sliver of the total body of art on the Arnhem Land Plateau. The paintings, estimated to range in age from 20,000 years (and probably a lot older) to the recent past, constitute one of the longest historical records of any group of people in the world – one of the reasons that Kakadu is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

At Nourlangie there is a terrific depiction of the Lightning Man Creation Ancestor Namarrgon, as well as his wife Barrginij and their children, the Alyurr (Leichhardt's grasshoppers).

Nanguluwur offers hand stencils, dynamic figures in large head-dresses carrying spears and boomerangs, a two-masted sailing ship and figures such as Alkajko, a female spirit with horns and four arms.

Apart from a painting of a Tasmanian tiger, which became extinct on the mainland about 3000 years ago, much of the art at the Ubirr site is less than 1500 years old with examples of x-ray renderings of fish plus contact art including white fellas smoking pipes with hands on their hips.

See it for yourself: All three sites have extensive signage and viewing platforms for self-guided tours. Ubirr and Nourlangie have free ranger tours. environment.gov.au/parks/kakadu/explore/tours.html

2. The Kimberley, Western Australia

There are remote rock art sites across the Kimberley; many are difficult to access. Kimberley rock art falls into two distinct categories: Wandjina and Gwion Gwion art.

Wandjina art, dating back over 3000 years, depicts creator ancestors who control the storms heralding the wet season. These ghost-like creatures have large mouthless faces with huge eyes flanking beak-like noses. Their heads are usually surrounded with outward radiating lines depicting lightning.

The thin, elongated and elegantly drawn Gwion Gwion, dated to at least 17,000 years, are painted in hematite ochre that has bonded with the rock and appears as stains with no trace of any surface pigments.

See it for yourself: King Edward River Crossing (Munurru) has two excellent sites with Wandjina and Gwion Gwion figures. The walk to Mitchell Falls features two un-sign-posted shelters, one with Gwion Gwion figures up high and Wandjina figures down low, and the other (tucked behind a curtain of water at Little Merton Falls) shows remarkably naturalistic animals. "To say this is a menu board for hunting is a very simplistic reading of this art," says Chris Brown, nicknamed

Brown, who has worked with the traditional owners here for many years. "I think of this place like an Indigenous cathedral, a place of contemplation, and that these figures are some of the creation deity."

You can explore Munurru and the Mitchell Falls walk on your own or on an Outback Spirit tour with Brown as a guide (outbackspirittours.com.au). Or you can take an Indigenous-guided tour through remote Kimberley country (wundargoodie.com.au/rock-art-safari and wandjinatours.com.au). Orion Cruises, True North and Aurora Expeditions offer on-shore tours of rock art at Raft Point.

3. Quinkan Country, Laura, North Queensland

Professor Paul Tacon of Griffith University recommends the large body of Quinkan rock art, dating between 15,000 and 30,000 years old, on the sandstone escarpments around Laura. Quinkans are spirit beings unique to this region, made famous in the children's book *The Quinkins* [sic] by Percy Trezise and Dick Roughsey. The Quinkan and Regional Cultural Centre features an interpretive display explaining the art, registered on the Australian Heritage Commission and which manager Lex Bloomfield says is the best-kept secret in Queensland. The rock art galleries feature figurative paintings, stencils and engravings.

See it for yourself: You can do a self-guided tour of Split Rock, take a three-hour Indigenous-guided walk of the Split Rock and Yalangi galleries, or take a guided 4WD tour to the Quinkan Galleries, Mushroom Rock and Giant Horse Gallery (quinkancc.com.au). The Trezise family also offer guided tours to the Brady Creek site, Emu Dreaming and Giant Wallaroo rock shelters at Jowalbinna Rock Art Safari Camp (jowalbinna.com.au).

4. Nitmiluk National Park, Northern Territory

The environs of Nitmiluk National Park have some of the oldest art found in Australia. While some of these sites are not open to the public, there is still some fascinating rock art including a women's business site and a boy's initiation site, both of which feature the whole sweep of Arnhem Land painting styles including naturalistic, dynamic and x-ray art.

See it for yourself: The Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation-owned Cicada Lodge offers two different tours by helicopter to the women's business site and the Nipbamjarn boy's initiation site. Both include a guided tour of the rock art shelters, a swim and gourmet picnic (cicadalodge.com.au). There is also rock art to be seen on the Nitmiluk cruises in Katherine Gorge (nitmiluktours.com.au).

5. Flinders Ranges, South Australia

The Flinders Ranges is home to the Adnyamathanha or 'rock people' and has several publicly accessible ancient rock art sites according to Joc Schmiechen, rock art researcher and Aboriginal tourism consultant. These include ochre paintings at Arkaroo Rock, which depict the creation story of Wilpena Pound; engravings of circles, tracks and goannas at Mount Chambers Gorge; and art at Yourambulla Caves.

See it for yourself: There are interpretive signs for self-guided tours of Arkaroo Rock, Mount Chambers Gorge and Yourambulla Caves. Indigenous-guided tours of engravings at Red Gorge and ochre paintings at Malki are offered by Iga Warta Experience (igawarta.com).

6. Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, NSW

Professor Jo McDonald says there is a huge amount of rock art on sandstone platforms all around Sydney with around 400 rock art sites – mainly engravings – in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park alone. While there are more than 20 whale paintings in Ku-ring-gai Chase, the most accessible rock art is along the Basin Track, with 50 engravings of almost life-size humans as well as deities and animals such as wallabies, fish, penguins, kangaroos, eels, fish and a man with an axe at the Resolute Engravings Site.

See it for yourself: There are interpretive signs for self-guided tours of the Basin Track shelter and Resolute Engravings Site. Go in the early morning or late afternoon for best visibility. Discovery tours with Indigenous guide Les McLeod are offered intermittently to learn the stories behind the art. guringaitours.com.au/tour

7. Grampians National Park, Victoria

With around 250 rock art sites spread across five spectacular sandstone ridges, the Grampians National Park (also known by its Indigenous name Gariwerd) has 90 per cent of the rock art in Victoria. Highlights include a large red and white ochre painting of the Bunjil Creation Ancestor, ceremonial dancing figures and large white (European) figures on horseback in Ngamadjidj Aboriginal Art Shelter, which the indigenous people thought were ghosts, plus hand prints and Giant Emu footprints at Gulgun Manja, a boy's initiation site.

See it for yourself: Take the Bunjil Creation tour or the Six Seasons Tour with an Indigenous ranger from Brambuk Cultural Centre. brambuk.com.au/tours.htm

For people seeking in-depth rock art experiences, *Diverse Travel Australia* has the expertise and insider connections to create custom-designed tours. diversetravel.com.au ■