

Adventure out



Wangi Mia experience

Yanchep National Park

There's more to Yanchep National Park than kangaroos, koalas and kookaburras. At Wangi Mia, Alex Gore and his son, Luca, joined Derek Nannup for a unique Aboriginal cultural experience to learn about Noongar culture in Western Australia's south-west.

by Alex Gore





Beyond the freeway north of Perth, the winding Wanneroo Road gradually takes us from the urban fringe to the bush. The trees closely lining the route through the forest cast a shadow over the road. It's a beautiful early morning and the sunlight breaks between the branches catching the colour of the seasonal flowers.

As we turn off into Yanchep National Park, we drive up the long entrance and park up amongst a woodland of tall trees. It gives me a feeling of being small and insignificant but also part of a something bigger. There are kangaroos gently grazing, my son spots a Carnaby's cockatoo (*Zanda latirostris*), and we listen to the birds chatter. This is a special place.

We've come to discover more about Noongar culture from Aboriginal Cultural Experience host Derek Nannup. Noongar peoples have lived in the south-west of WA for thousands of years. Derek is a lively and charismatic guide with a strong connection to Country. He begins by welcoming us to Wangi Mia—or meeting place.



"A lot of people think our culture is a thing of the past but it's not. It's alive and it's all around us," Derek said.

Over the next hour, Derek intends to take us through the Noongar seasons, teach us Indigenous language and describe how ancient knowledge is passed from generation to generation. He will also show us tools such as spears and boomerangs, and demonstrate the didgeridoo.

ART IMITATING LIFE

The assembled group of around 20 patrons are gathered at Wangi Mia in front of a giant hanging Aboriginal artwork. Derek explains the colourful display is more than a traditional dot painting, it is a map of where we are standing.

At the centre of the painting is Yanchep National Park, or Yandjip, named after the bulrush reeds and lake which were thought to resemble the hairy mane of the dreamtime creature the Waugul/Wagyl, or rainbow serpent.

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Above left Derek draws animal tracks in the sand to illustrate a story.

Left Luca and Derek play musical instruments.

Photos—Alex Gore/DBCA

Main Aboriginal painting of Yanchep National Park.

Photo—DBCA

Inset A dried out banksia, traditionally used for carrying embers

Photo—Alex Gore/DBCA

The surrounding concentric circles and different colours represent birds and animals here at Yandjip, the different kinds of bush and the Country beyond. Derek explains how plants and animals bear great significance to Noongar people.

"Everything we've ever needed is provided by nature. We are a part of nature. And it is our responsibility to ensure the continuation of nature."

PROTECTING MOTHER EARTH

Derek's totem is the emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*).

"That means I can't eat the emu. And if others want to take emu eggs, they need to ask me how they can do this responsibly. I might say 'take four eggs, leave ten'. That helps ensure the continuation of the species. In our culture, we all have a totem, or specific animal to protect. And together we protect mother earth."

With such a special relationship with the environment, it is perhaps no wonder that Aboriginal Australians are recognised as the world's oldest continuous living culture.

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Do it yourself

Where is it? In Yanchep, 50 kilometres north of Perth's CBD.

Facilities: Restaurant and café, caves, golf course, campground, rope climb adventure, toilets, picnic areas, visitor centre, walk trails (no dogs permitted).

Experience: The 'Aboriginal Cultural Experience' at Wangi Mia is available as a public tour on Sundays and public holidays at 2pm and 3pm only. Private or group bookings can be arranged for other times.

Children are classified as 6–15 years, family rate consists of two adults and two children.

Bookings: Can be made online at exploreparks.dbca.wa.gov.au and search for Wangi Mia or Yanchep National Park or contact the park office on (08) 9303 7759 or email derek.nannup@dbca.wa.gov.au

Derek also occasionally hosts school vacation activity days at the WA Museum.



Derek explains how there is utility in nature and shows us a bag neatly created from western grey kangaroo (*Macropus fuliginosus*) skin. He demonstrates the miru—a spear-throwing device made from wood which can also be used for carrying things.

“Did you know Aboriginals invented the word ‘vegetarian’? It means ‘bad hunter’.” Derek injects subtle humour into the cultural experience, his eyes sparkling each time the audience gets one of his jokes.

“A boomerang is like a frisbee for someone with no friends,” he quips as he describes the serious survival business of hunting and cooking in the bush.

MAGICAL MOMENTS

For Luca, the most enjoyable part of the experience was watching how quickly Derek can create fire. No-one else who tries, can spin the fire stick with such speed and precision to produce hot embers. On Country, these embers could be carried in a dried-out banksia flower to the next campfire destination.

“By the fire, our Elders would draw a story in the sand or dust, passing on knowledge to the younger people to commit to memory,” Derek said, making shapes on the floor with his toes.

“At the end, they would dance over the story—the original Etch A Sketch!”

My personal highlight was listening to the didgeridoo. Derek has fantastic musical skill in recreating the sounds of nature—a dingo (*Canis familiaris*) howling or a kookaburra (*Dacelo novaeguineae*) laughing. As the deep tones reverberate around the park, a pair of willie wagtails (*Rhipidura leucophrys*) or djiti-djiti (pronounced chitti-chitti) in Noongar language suddenly swoop and dance with delight just above our heads, responding to the call. It is a magical moment.

At the end of this unique learning experience, it is time for reflection. Luca and I agree that we have both gained an improved understanding of Noongar and broader Aboriginal culture and that we are indeed part of a much bigger picture.

Far left Aboriginal tools showcased during the talk.

Above left Derek illustrates diversity of Aboriginal culture across Australia.

Photos – Alex Gore/DBCA

Below left Yorga Mia meeting place sign.

Top left Demonstrating how to make fire the traditional way.

Above left Yanchep National Park has some great trails.

Photos – Tourism WA

Above Luca handles a traditional wunda shield.

Photo – Alex Gore/DBCA

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