Moments in time

Boodjamulla National Park, in north-western Queensland, has a vibrant present and a past that stretches back into deep time.

STORY BY HANNAH JAMES PHOTOGRAPHY BY DON FUCHS
A JOURNEY INTO THE past can take a lifetime – or a heartbeat.

We’re walking into the unknown, up a hill no-one has walked for perhaps decades, perhaps centuries. As we skirt tussocks of spinifex and clusters of eucalypts, acacias and figs, aiming for a soaring red cliff, Jarrod Slater, an Indigenous ranger at Boodjamulla National Park, in north-western Queensland, is optimistic we’ll find fragments of the past we’re looking for.

“Life wasn’t that different back then – still had to eat, still had to drink water,” he says of his ancestors, traces of whose presence we’re searching for in this remote section of the park. “Instinctively, I’d go to that valley – there’s shelter, a load of food and water. We aren’t that different from the old people.” The place we’re heading for appears to have the essential elements for life – and more: “If you were camping up there, you’d feel pretty safe with an 80 or 90m cliff behind you. It’s a good lookout, too.”

We’re seeking evidence of Australia’s First People in an area of Boodjamulla where features are unnamed, except in the unofficial rangers’ argot (Gaffer’s Knob, the Great Wall of China). Our highest hope is to find art on the towering rock walls.

Bush-bashing into the wilderness, I feel like stout Cortez in the Keats poem, staring out “with a wild surmise” to find potential new realms of gold. But reality keeps intruding on the poetic ideal. Spinifex, as its name suggests, is very spiky. As we crash through clumps of the stuff, it’s this quality that most impresses itself painfully upon me, despite my guide’s enthusiasm for its other notable properties.

“We use spinifex resin for gluing stone tools together,” Jarrod says. “I keep some in my truck. I’ve done a lot of work with stone tools with an old man I worked with – once we had 30 men from Africa come out to see how it’s done.”

As we walk, he hands me a leaf: “It’s soapbush – here you go, rub a leaf of this between your hands and it lathers up, washes your hands.” I learn about the medicinal properties of certain eucalypts: “Crush the leaves, boil them in water and use it as antiseptic wash”, and of the sandpaper fig: “It eases skin irritations – you rub it on itchy bits.”

The bush isn’t just a medicine cabinet – it’s a larder, too. Jarrod points out bloodwoods: “There’ll be heaps of witchetty grubs in there,” he says. Then he sees some snappy gum: “You can soak the gum in water and eat it – that keeps you chewing for a while.”

He moves through the bush with easy grace and I glimpse an almost-vanished world where the locals’ deep knowledge of nature allows it to provide food, medicine, shelter and tools. “It’s a culture that’s run strongly for tens of thousands of years,” says Jarrod, a Wanyi man whose family is recognised on the native title of which Boodjamulla (formerly known as Lawn Hill NP) forms part. +
As we near the cliff, clambering along a rocky creek bed, we return to the present, scanning the wall for art and the base for artefacts or other indications of Aboriginal presence.

There’s a trickling fall of water clustered with ferns, and stones at its bottom that dam the flow to create a limpid pool. It isn’t clear if the stones were placed there by people or grouped by nature – and although we beat along the bottom of the cliff as far as we can, clambering around clumps of trees, over rocks and through bushes, dodging snakes and spider webs as we go, we don’t discover any other signs of habitation.

It’s a disappointment, but as we scramble back down the hill towards Jarrod’s ute, we’re not thinking of what we didn’t find, but what we did. “I can’t imagine anywhere I’d rather be,” Jarrod says. “It feels like I’ve found my calling.”

BOODJAMULLA NP IS A SPARKLING OASIS IN THE OUTBACK'S GULF COUNTRY, LOCATED 325KMS NORTH-WEST OF MOUNT ISA ON QUEENSLAND’S BORDER WITH THE NORTHERN TERRITORY. The spectacle of the glowing red sandstone of Lawn Hill Gorge, which 1.56 billion years ago was a shallow seabed, is what draws the 1.56 million visitors to this unique place. It’s a little Eden, a uniquely Queensland take on the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

The jade-green waters of the gorge are rich in calcite, which, when it flows over objects in its path such as fallen tree trunks or rocks, forms calcium carbonate, which in turn forms a brittle rock called tufa. Indarri Falls is made of tufa, as are the Cascades.

Gazing up the gorge in an electric boat is like entering a little Eden – a uniquely Queensland take on the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The roots of fig trees snake down to the chalky turquoise water; ghost gums, Leichhardt trees and pandanus squeeze into crevices, clinging to life. A sunbaking turtle slides off a rock as the boat approaches and climbs back on as if nothing happened.

Boodjamulla’s ranger-in-charge, Jason Bruce, needs to be a man of many talents, from fixing fences and utes to planning controlled burns.

As Boodjamulla’s ranger-in-charge, Jason is responsible for the management of the entire 2820sq km park, as well as the safety of its many visitors. “We’ve got 18 canoes at the moment to hire out, and one electric boat. That’s plenty – I don’t want to spoil the ambience,” he says. He’s an outpost Santa, white beard and all, a big man with a laugh that can surely be heard across the length and breadth of the park. He’s a Jackson-turned-carpenter-turned-park ranger, who as a child was once found poaching eel by a stranger. Terrified of being punished, little Jason told the man to bugger off. That stranger happened to be American country music legend Johnny Cash, come to play a gig.

Jason is full of homespun sayings, many gleaned from his gran-dad, who he remembers was always “staring at you over the top of his bifocals with his log-cabin durries, drinking hillbilly tea.”

It’d be nice to get more archaeologists interested – I don’t think Boodjamulla is famous for the art sites that do exist there. It’s forbidden to take photos at the Wild Dog Dreaming site, but it consists of several artworks, one of hundreds of dots within circles along a smooth, glassy cliff. It’s another fascination of Jason’s.

The common understanding is that it represents women’s breast, “he explains, “but one of our rangers, Gaffer, came up with the theory that it might be a map – this area was a trading route. Do the dots represent permanent water? We need to fill that gap.

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But fire management is just one of his interests. He wants the park to have more scientific input, with more studies carried out within its bounds. “I want uni students coming out here to do their theses – there are antechinus, funnelwebs, pebble-mice – plenty to study,” he says.

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NLY IN AUSTRALIA could you own a property for decades without realising it has a spectacular feature like Cobbold Gorge. Despite his family living at Robin Hood Station, near Forsayth, far north Queensland, from 1964, Simon Terry didn’t know of the gorge until 1994. “We first came up here in a friend’s old tinny. But they left, and we had no boat, so we used to come in a plastic cattle trough. They make a good boat,” Simon explains, recounting a story that typifies his outward practicality and love of this mysterious country. “It’s almost still a frontier — there’s still stuff out here that white people haven’t walked over. There’s 8,000km of sandstone there. I’ve only been up a handful of gorges — it just takes so long to discover it all.”

Driving the Savannah Way is a good start. Explore it in sections or drive its length from Broome, in north-western WA, to Cairns, north-eastern Queensland. A popular section is Cairns to Burketown. Covering epic landscapes from tropical ocean, through mountainous rainforest and rich volcanic agricultural land to the savannah of the drive’s name, the road takes in history, culture and natural beauty.

A historic highlight is Normanton, a goldmining town that’s home to Tjapukai man Patrick Wheeler, a traditional owner who runs tours covering everything from natural history to the gold rush to tales that got left out of the history books. “I want to tell everyone everything from natural history to the gold rush to tales that got left out of the history books,” he says.

Burketown is the base for Yagurli Tours, Gangalidda man Rodney Kum Sing will take you on a river cruise, bush Tucker tour or four-wheel-drive tagalong. You can explore salt pans and hear about the local Dreamings, giant grubs and bluestone lizards, or head to Gin Gin Creek where Rodney might catch a terrapin prawn and cook it for you on a riverside fire.

Two historic trains cross the Savannah Way, the Savannahlander and the Gulflander, which rolls at a stately 30km/h from Normanton to Croydon (see page 62). For more information: savannahway.com.au

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Rodney Kum Sing, of Yagurli Tours, catches terrapin prawns in Gin Gin Creek, outside Burketown.

Gangalidda man Rodney Kum Sing, of Yagurli Tours, catches terrapin prawns in Gin Gin Creek, outside Burketown.

Driving the Savannah Way

A ride-along with Jason to the furthest reaches of the park, to just those last, dry outback spots, is an eye-opening experience. The cold metal of his rifle — which ends up coming in handy — nudges up against my leg during the whole stifling day in the ute. We drive along boundary lines and check flood fences, ever alert for feral pigs or stray cattle from the neighbouring stations. We visit the ‘Great Wall of China’, an unofficial rangers’ name for a vast sun-bleached cliff of tilted layers of quartzite. “It’s just awe-some how it splits into those rectangular blocks,” Jason says, then adds, with a sly smile, “It took us a lot of time to put them there…”

We stop for a morning tea break at Ridgepole Waterhole, one of a series of waterholes that Aboriginal people used when travelling for trade. It is starred with waterlilies and edged by trees and has been a place of solace for Jason: when he started the job in Boodjamulla, his wife and three children were living in Charters Towers, where the children went to school, nearly 1000km away.

“Because my family only moved out to join me here six months ago, it’s been a challenge living alone,” he explains. “This is the place where I put my head back on my shoulders when I’m feeling homesick.”

But he only loves it by day. “Once I tried to camp out here, but I had no pack up all my gear and leave at about 7.30pm — I got such a bad feeling. It is a culturally sensitive area, and — I don’t know, but I feel there was a massacre here.”

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Another of his favourite places is at the bottom of a terrifyingly steep, twisting, bare rock descent to a viewpoint that looks out over wide grey plains dotted with trees and hills, mesas of red rock looming behind.

“Then I do fencing inspections, I can just go for a walk and find some spot and think, am I the only person who’s ever been here? But then you can put your hand in a rock and find a tobacco tin, and realise it was some swaggie’s spot, too.”

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“This is Doherty’s Track,” Jason says, once we’re safely down and I’ve relaxed my death grip on the car seat. “To me it’s one of the most special parts of the area. It’s a place where you feel the need to take your hat and boonie off and put your feet up and just have a bit of a look. And pray to a different deity!”

Outback rangers don’t just need prayers, but practicality, too. As the site jolts over evenly spaced ridges (“You can always tell when you’re in black soil country,” Jason says, with a grimace) and rattlepods thwack into the windscreen, we chat about how tough these sites have to be to survive out here — and how many running repairs need to be carried out.

We stop to clear grass seeds from the radiator and Jason hauls the rifle from its spot next to me. He fashions a makeshift radioantenna (the site is open to the public) and we tune in to another end of the valley, where Hannah James, the field guide, is camped. He says, “I once had a signal!”

We turn a bend in the track and can see its end already — and the day’s first star. It’s an exercise in perspective. “You need to take your hat and boots off and put your feet up and just have a bit of a look. And pray to a different deity!”

The Demon Duck of Doom, for example, a 2.5–3m tall bird that weighed 250–300kg, whose closest living relative is a duck, has left a coy knee and leg bone in the limestone, can-canning its way into the history books.}

T THE DAY WE search for art sites in Boodjamulla is my birthday and the rangers throw me an impromptu celebration barbecue, complete with balloons, roast pork, home-brewed beer — and a birthday card handmade by one of Jason’s daughters that reads, “Have a very Boodjamulla birthday.” As the evening wears on, our laughter rings out across the valley, and the stars wheel round in the sky. I realise I’ve staked a tiny claim in the 1.56 billion-year history of this place. Perhaps it’s an epiphany — or perhaps it’s the home-brew — but this feels like a moment in time that’s worth holding on to.

Guiding us through these incomprehensibly vast stretches of time is Phil Clucas, who works with the Savannah Guides. He takes us out to D Site, the only one of Riversleigh’s 300 sites that is open to the public. The fossils here date mostly from a mere 25 million years ago, when Riversleigh was a rainforest, and the first animals that became the Riversleigh fossils were variously crawling, running and flying through the canopy. But we have a couple of stops to make that are deeper in the past.

Phil vanishes to a secret spot around the back of the hill at D Site and returns with a beaudale-like stromatolite, a fossilised lump of cyanobacteria. Western Australia has stromatolites that are up to 2 billion years old. This Riversleigh example is a youthful 1.3 billion years old. As we wind our way up the rocky outcrop of D Site, Phil points out the rounded stacks of rocks dotting the hills beyond us. “They’re Cambrian pancakes,” he explains. “They’re rocks that are 530 million years old. There aren’t any fossilised bones in them — because when they were formed, there were no animals with bones.” He continues, “It’s made up of ancient sea creatures. And when this rock washed into fresh water, it became Riversleigh limestone.”

The hill we’re climbing, which was once a lake bed, is limestone. When animal bodies ended up in the lake, they were fossilised by the high calcium carbonate content of the water and lake-bed mud. Riversleigh has yielded fossils of bats, rodents, thylacines, platypuses and many other creatures so peculiar that baffled researchers initially named one simply Thingomonta (Thing with Tenths). Tree-climbing crocodiles, 2m-tall carnivorous kangaroos and manouriaps with elephantine trunks are among the stranger of evolution’s bygone experiments, but the fossils you can still see at D Site are odd enough.