

# Mystery in the desert

With all the ingredients of a thriller – government cover-ups, local rivalry and intrigue – the story of the Marree Man geoglyph in South Australia is enduringly fascinating.

STORY BY HANNAH JAMES

**O**N A REMOTE AND EMPTY desert plateau, on the banks of Kati Thanda–Lake Eyre, South Australia, is the world’s second-largest geoglyph.

Unlike the 1000-year-old Nazca Lines in Peru that hold the title of the biggest geoglyph, the artwork that became known as the Marree Man is of more recent origin. Located 60km north-west of the tiny town of Marree, it was first spotted from the air by a local pilot in 1998. Investigations were immediately launched into the work, which is 4.2km long and shows a man hunting with a stick.

Local pub-owner Phil Turner bought the Marree Hotel seven years ago partly on the strength of the Marree Man. “I got carried away, like everyone else, with the myth, the mystery and the intrigue, the fact they couldn’t find the people who did it,” he says. “The Marree Man was such an attraction – scenic flights were helping business – and it was part of our decision to buy the pub.”

Theories about who created it sprouted and grew in all different directions. Investigations centred for a while around the US Army, thanks

**Marree Man** bestrides the desert plains of far north SA. Its outline is 24km around, and its lines are broader than a city street, at 80m wide. It’s a magnificent work of art – and an intriguing mystery.

to the Man’s proximity to the joint US–Australian defence projects of the Woomera Prohibited Area, and the sending of press releases purporting to be written by its creator that included US terminology. In 1999 a plaque was discovered near the Man’s head showing a US flag, and another flag was found in a nearby pit, although it’s been suggested both were red herrings. Inevitably, someone also proposed a theory that it was the work of aliens.

Another possibility is that it was created by SA artist Bardius Goldberg, reported by the *Adelaide Advertiser* to have told friends he’d been commissioned – and paid \$10,000 – to create an artwork visible from space. However, Goldberg died in 2002, and with

him the possibility of discovering the truth of that theory.

Phil Turner has his own idea. “In 1998 that land was being fiercely contested for native title claims by a number of Aboriginal groups,” he says. (The Marree Man is located on land held under native title since 2012 by the Arabana Aboriginal Corporation.) “The hair and the headband on the Marree Man, that was not an Arabana practice. That was more associated with someone from the Musgrave Ranges. So why would there be an image of someone from the Musgrave Ranges in Arabana territory? ‘This is my land and I’m going to claim it.’” He thinks the actual execution of the figure, which would have been enormously difficult

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before the widespread availability of GPS, could only have been done by those with the rare, expensive equipment, knowledge and skills required – he guesses a mining corporation, or even the Department of Defence.

When pressed about the Marree Man’s origins, Phil says, “Do we really want to know who did it? It’s full of myth, mystery, intrigue. It’s important as art, and as one of Australia’s greatest whodunnit stories.”

**W**HETHER PUT IT THERE, Marree Man attracted sorely needed tourists to the town, whose only other drawcard was the occasional flooding of Kati Thanda–Lake Eyre. So when natural erosion began fading the work, locals were concerned.

Phil knew the figure needed to be preserved. “When you’re at the coalface and you get visitors not just from Australia but from all over the

▼ Local publican Phil Turner acted to restore the Marree Man when it began eroding away – and nearly faced a huge fine.



world wanting to see the Marree Man and it’s slowly being eroded, it seemed to me we shouldn’t let this resource fade away,” he says.

He received initial support from the SA government, but soon, “I just kept running into brick walls,” he explains. “They did a costing on it for restoration at about \$368,000.” So in 2016, he formed a group to take matters into their own hands. They secured permission from the Arabana Aboriginal Corporation and hired a grader operator to redraw the figure’s 80m-wide lines around the whole of its 24km outline. Their DIY approach cost just \$6400. “So I figure we saved the taxpayer a lot of money.”

The restoration was a huge task, says Phil. “We had wonderful help from a surveyor who crunched all the data he could find on the internet and through his professional contacts. But the best he could get, using all the spatial data and resources available to him, was an accuracy of about 10–12m.” But then Phil was anonymously emailed an intricately detailed line drawing of the Marree Man. “Seems like Marree Man is full of miraculous things,” he ponders. Astonishingly, when the team checked the drawing against what remained of the original figure, it

# Earth works

Humanity has been etching figures into the ground for millennia.

was accurate to within 150mm of the original. So they used the mysterious drawing to retrace the Man.

Not only that, but they also improved it, putting in windrows so the lines will catch the rain and promote plant regrowth. “We’ll hopefully end up with a green Marree Man in years to come,” says Phil.

The restoration only increased Phil’s admiration for the original artist. “It’s an amazing feat. The plateau itself isn’t sensitive to the Aboriginal people, they never went up there. Whoever did it knew that. And it’s perfectly positioned on the plateau. The Marree Man is left-handed – why? My surveyor found an image in a book that’s identical to the Marree Man [and was probably used as the model], but he’s right-handed. But if Marree Man was right-handed, he wouldn’t have fitted on the plateau. So they just reversed the image.” In all, he believes, “It’s quite a staggering work of art and needs to be immortalised as such.”

The government didn’t agree. The Department of Environment launched a nearly two-year-long investigation into Phil’s guerrilla public art restoration that involved seizing his computer and all his documents on the Marree Man. He could have received a fine of \$100,000 for destroying native grasses.

“I was shocked, mortified,” he says. “I believe I did everything right. We did it with the full approval of the Arabana Aboriginal Corporation. We used an environmentally certified grader, and we believe we did the restoration not only true to the original creator but also in a manner that promoted revegetation.”

The investigation was closed in April with the change of government, and Phil can relax at last. “It cost me \$50,000 in legal fees. Am I a happy chappy about that? No, I’m not, but if you ask me if I’d do it again – yes, I would. It was the right thing to do.”

Having done it, he’s ensured the Marree Man can come of age in peace, a sleeping giant bringing life to the desert.



## NAZCA LINES, PERU

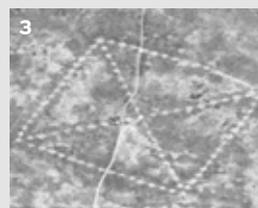
In southern Peru lie artworks that can only be understood from the air. Yet the Nazca Lines were created between 500BC and 500AD. Depicting animals and geometric shapes, the images cover 450sq.km and were found in the 1920s. They may have had astronomic significance.

## UFFINGTON WHITE HORSE, UK

For 3000 years, a white horse has been galloping across an English hillside. Cut into the chalk of Oxfordshire downland, the 100m-long Uffington White Horse has been there since the Bronze Age, and is re-cut every year by volunteers.

## BLYTHE INTAGLIOS, USA

Three human figures, two animals and a spiral lie



across a Californian mesa, the biggest 52m long. Etched into the landscape between 2000 and 450 years ago, the human figures represent Mastamho, the Creator, and the animals are Hatakulya, a hybrid mountain lion/human who helped Mastamho create life, according to the local Mojave and Quechua Native Americans. They marked a location for dances to honour creation.

## STEPPE GEOGLYPHS, KAZAKHSTAN

We have Google Earth to thank for the 2007

- 1 Nazca Lines
- 2 Uffington White Horse
- 3 Steppe Geoglyphs



discovery of more than 50 geoglyphs on a treeless steppe in northern Kazakhstan. The rings, crosses, squares and one swastika-like symbol could be as ancient as 8000 years old.

## ELK GEOGLYPH, RUSSIA

Another geoglyph discovered by satellite imagery, this animal has probably lain on a hillside in the southern Urals for 6000 years. The 275m-long figure was meticulously constructed by an entire community, probably including children, as suggested by the small tools at the site. It seems they dug out trenches and filled them with stones, outlining the edges with larger stones. It’s not clear why the elk (or deer) was built.

## Reward to solve the mystery

**ON THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY** of the Marree Man’s discovery in June, businessman (and AG founder) Dick Smith offered a \$5000 reward to anyone who could discover who created the artwork, after his own two-year search proved fruitless.

“It’s highly complex and one of the most mysterious things,” Dick has said. “After two years of meeting people, I’m realising that probably one or two weren’t telling me the truth... I reckon

some blokes were in a university or a government department and said, ‘We want to test this software, let’s go and put a giant like Cerne Abbas [a chalk figure in Dorset, UK] in the desert.’”

But he’s open to keeping the artist’s identity to himself. “If somebody rang me up and said, ‘Dick, I want the \$5000 but on the understanding you won’t tell anyone’, and then gave me the evidence,” he said, “I’ll give them the \$5000 and keep it secret.”