
AN EXTRAORDINARY EXPEDITION INTO AUSTRALIA'S EAST ARNHEM LAND



If you've spent any time travelling in Australia, you'll be familiar with the tension between its Indigenous cultures and the non-indigenous population. This is a country divided in its views about the Traditional Owners of Australia, and the further you get from the state capitals, the clearer this story becomes. But in one remote pocket of the Top End of Australia, three failed European settlement attempts meant that one group of Indigenous communities was able to continue their ancient way of life, which was almost uninterrupted until the early 1930's – the Yolngu people of East Arnhem Land.

There are many excellent cultural tourism experiences available throughout Australia that allow travellers to learn from Indigenous groups across the country. But what makes *Intrepid's 7-day Journey into East Arnhem Land* such an extraordinary and rare opportunity is the chance it offers you to connect with a culture that has remained largely unchanged, less affected by centuries of colonial rule. Here are a people who have preserved their culture over thousands of years, who are still living in balance with nature. And what's more, they want to share that culture with anyone who is open, humble and ready to learn. Recently, I was lucky enough to be one of those people, to experience the trip for the first time.

Getting there

The expedition kicks off in Nyinyikay, in the Northern Territory. The easiest way to get there is via a 20-minute light aircraft flight. Passengers must pack light, as every kilo counts on such a small plane. After landing on the dusty red runway, travellers are greeted with a traditional 'Welcome To Country' from the Indigenous hosts.

It's difficult to convey the intensity and anticipation that builds throughout this experience, but rest assured that by the time the encounter is complete, you'll feel as though you've arrived in another time, ready to learn the ways of the Yolngu people.

Time is fluid in East Arnhem Land, so you'll be able to leave your itinerary behind. Ancient indigenous cultures work to the schedule of the land, and like our host and guide Marcus Lacey explains: "Time will tell you when to go hunting. Wind will tell you when to go fishing. Environment will tell us what is ready to collect. Welcome to the Bush University."



Food & facilities at Nyinyikay

The idea of bush tucker and native foods is excellent, but I wasn't entirely sure it would fill the endless vortex of my appetite, so I was relieved that we had food cooked for us by our guide as well. The Nyinyikay homeland has a number of small properties on it, so even if you're camping, there is full access to the kitchen and bathroom facilities. Our leader Marcus noted at one point that "our ancestors did it tough, they didn't live in houses – they did it the way the nature wanted them to live", but that now they have a good balance between basic comforts and facilities, and the ability to live entirely off the land.

Why you should travel to East Arnhem Land

When I arrived in Nyinyikay, I thought I knew what to expect. Having travelled to Uluru and Far North Queensland and spent time talking to Indigenous communities through my work – all amazing and uplifting experiences – I felt that East Arnhem Land would be a similar adventure.



But what I discovered here was different. In other communities that I have been lucky enough to visit, the heavy weight of history hangs over things like a chain mail, and you can never quite shake the feeling that your ancestors have done such terrible things to the place and its people. But in Nyinyikay, there is a sense of pride and a distinct absence of suspicion towards outsiders. Here in [East Arnhem Land](#) I felt almost as though I were being given a second chance, a chance to do what our European ancestors never did: to go there and be humble, to learn and to connect.

Time to reflect

The term 'transformational experience' gets thrown around recklessly these days, but I genuinely felt like the sand was shifting beneath my feet while we were with the Yolngu at Nyinyikay. There's a lot of things that you start to think about, big things: life, nature, the universe. Your mind starts ticking and you certainly feel a shift taking place in your perspective. The excellent thing about this trip is that after the time in Nyinyikay, the group heads out to Bremer Island to a remote wilderness eco-retreat named Banubanu. This offers the perfect opportunity to relax and let everything sink in. The luxury tented camp is a little piece of paradise, and you can spend time reflecting on your experience learning from one of the oldest living cultures on earth.

