

The Arrilla Circle



A quarterly communicate exclusive to Arrilla Digital, where authors of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent share their life experiences in order for us to walk in the shoes of another.

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First Nations tourism: the perfect enabler to listen, connect and reconcile



With a growth in authentic and immersive First Nations tourism experiences in all corners of the country, Noongar man and Tourism Australia's Head of Indigenous Affairs, Phil Lockyer, highlights how tourism can connect all Australians with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures.

Living in Australia we know we live in the most beautiful country in the world. Despite any challenges we may face as a country, most of us feel proud and fortunate that our island nation's amazing landscapes and natural beauty has been cared for by First Nations people for more than 65,000 years.

It is this pride in our nation that makes us such great hosts for visitors from around the world to come and have a holiday here. This is where Tourism Australia comes in, as our role is to promote Australia to people in the 16 markets we operate in to come enjoy a break with us.

My role as Head of Indigenous Affairs at Tourism Australia is to ensure that we place First Nations cultures at the heart of our campaigns, content and events – so that those considering a trip to Australia know that they can experience the warmth, humour and generosity of First Nations cultures in all corners of Australia.

Our Reconciliation Action Plan forms the foundation for our First Nations initiatives. It includes cultural learning, promoting First Nations tourism operators, showcasing First Nations talent across our campaigns, and advocating for and collaborating on First Nations cultures and reconciliation across the tourism industry.

Interest in First Nations tourism is strong, and growing

We know there is growing interest for both Australians and international visitors to participate in First Nations experiences when they travel.

Based on data from Tourism Research Australia in 2023-24, there were three million trips incorporating a First Nations activity, of which 63 per cent (around 1.9 million) were by domestic travellers, and 37 per cent (around 1.1 million) by international visitors.

There is an incredible diversity of First Nations experiences that international and domestic travellers can experience in Australia that are about much more than just dot paintings, dance and a fella playing the didge and a trip to red desert Country.

There are immersive experiences such as urban walks in our cities, multi-day hikes in Tassie, rainforest walks in the Daintree, paddle boarding on the NSW Coast and bush food tasting in Margaret River.

Tourism Australia's own research highlights the top three First Nations experiences that Australians seek are:

- watching First Nations painting, art and craft demonstrations;
- enjoying First Nations food/cuisine; and
- cultural hikes.

This diversity of experiences is reflected in our [Discover Aboriginal Experiences](#), more than 200 authentic and insightful experiences that showcase the world's oldest living cultures in an environment of fun and adventure. Every experience is conducted by leaders in Aboriginal tourism, and all led by Aboriginal guides – Australia's ultimate storytellers.

How do First Nations people benefit from tourism?

For First Nations peoples, tourism is an enabler of wellbeing and provides opportunities to live and work on Country and be close to family and community, while running their own business and employing their mob. First Nations tourism operators often see their primary role not as a tourism operator but a custodian keeping culture strong and Country healthy – keeping the stories shared by their Elders, the stories of their Songlines alive for all Australians to understand.

Being able to keep language going and revitalise and strengthen it is an important benefit of First Nations tourism.

First Nations tourism enables reconciliation and truth-telling

Participating in a First Nations tourism experience goes to the heart of what reconciliation means. Reconciliation Australia describes reconciliation as being about 'strengthening relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples, for the benefit of all Australians.'

This strengthening can only take place when non-Indigenous peoples can connect with First Nations peoples, and the best place to do that is on Country on First Nations terms.

Being able to sit, listen and walk with a Traditional Custodians or knowledge holder is how non-Indigenous Australians can not only understand culture, but also connect with the Australian landscape.

Most non-Indigenous Australians don't know a First Nations person and often have very little connection with First Nations peoples in their day-to-day life. Their views are potentially formed via negative media reports, and their knowledge of First Nations cultures is often limited to a Welcome to Country and some dancing they may see in the workplace or at an event.

They hear terms like Country or Songlines or more likely the Dreamtime but don't connect with them or really understand what they mean. They may not have had the opportunity to engage with First Nations cultures in a more meaningful way. Some may believe it's too far away – that the only way to experience First Nations cultures is to go 'out bush' to the desert, to Uluru.

An important element of a First Nations tourism experiences is hearing the stories of historical truth or 'truth-telling.' Many Australians say they never learned about First

Nations peoples in school as a way to shield their ignorance about the truths around the treatment of First Nations peoples. Truth telling is an important pillar for reconciliation and allows guests on Country to hear a 'Blak' history of Australia in a relaxed and open environment. Gaining this understanding from First Nations guides about their personal, family and community experience of the impacts of colonialism creates a safe space for meaningful discussion and greater cultural awareness amongst travellers.

Our First Nations peoples are the custodians of the oldest continuous living cultures on Earth and tourism offers a great opportunity to share that, while also enabling mob to stay on Country and care for communities whilst sharing our story with the world and helping to build a stronger path forward for reconciliation.

Inspired? Visit [Discover Aboriginal Experiences](#). It's a great way to identify a First Nations tourism experience suited to your interests.

