

# Geographical

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## Local knowledge

SEEING AUSTRALIA  
THROUGH INDIGENOUS EYES

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RUNNERS**  
FROM SOURCE TO  
MOUTH IN GUYANA

**FOOD FIGHT**  
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# TELLING THE stories OF THEIR land

In Australia's tropical north, tourism is a crucial business. And in recent years, the Aboriginal population has become increasingly involved in the industry, drawing on traditional knowledge gained over countless generations to provide visitors with a unique perspective on their ancestral lands. **Nick Haslam** reports

**W**hen you talk about indigenous tourism, you have to remember that Aboriginal people have been tour guides since long before Cook came here.' The speaker is Neville Poelina, chairman of the Western Australian Indigenous Tourism Operators Committee (WAITOC) and a driving force for indigenous tourism in the Kimberley, the rugged, sparsely populated region in Western Australia's far north.

Standing on the shores of Roebuck Bay, he has just finished taking a small group of tourists around the area where he spent his childhood. 'I love this place,' he says, looking out over the mangroves and the flat sandy beach that extends for kilometres along the remote coastline not far from Broome. 'It was where I use to come as a kid to fish – and to skip school!'

Now in his 40s, Neville is a passionate advocate for the involvement of Aboriginal people in Australia's

tourism industry. 'We always were a hospitable people,' he says, picking small bait fish from the net he has just cast into the warm shallow water. 'When the first explorers landed here – the Macassans collecting sea slugs 1,000 years ago – we showed them around. Now we are the best guides to our land – we have a passion for it – others can't interpret the place as we can.'

#### OUT ON TOUR

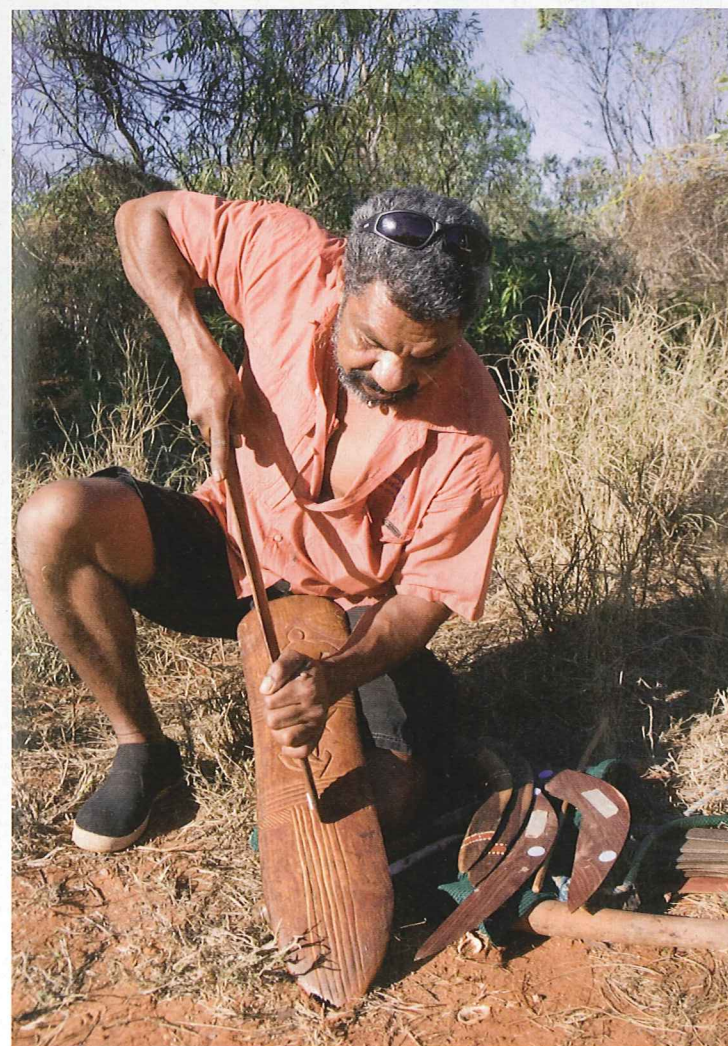
There are 365 indigenous language groups in Australia, with more than 66 in Western Australia, where Aboriginal people form 30 per cent of the state's population. In the Kimberley, a region the size of Germany but with only 40,000 residents, nearly 40 per cent are of indigenous origin, yet surprisingly few are found working in tourism, one of the state's major employers.

Neville is sure the problem stems from a lack of confidence and knowledge. 'Many have never been to a hotel

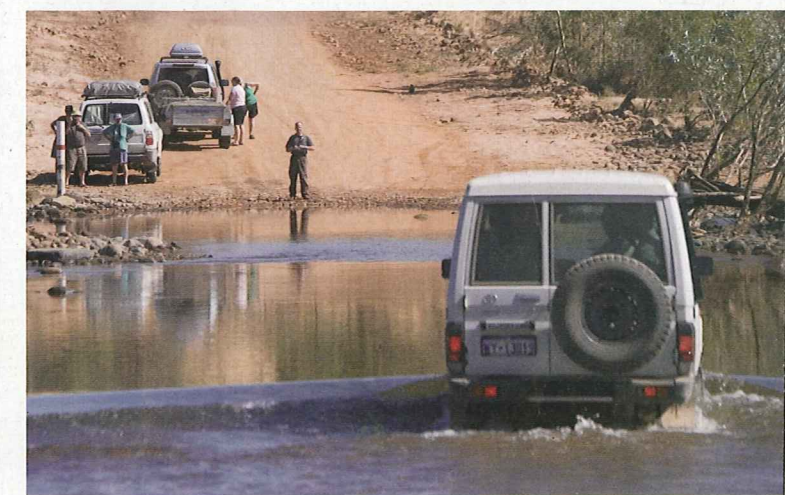
**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** trainee Cyril Yeeda musters cattle in the savannah of the Home Valley Station farm in Western Australia; **BELOW:** Vic Cooper, indigenous tour operator and guide in Kakadu National Park, stands on Ubirr Rock – one of the richest Aboriginal rock art sites in the Northern Territory, overlooking the Nadab wetlands of the East Alligator River; **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Jenny Hunter shows off the medicinal leaves of the andjudmi tree during a bush tucker walk. 'We have respect for this tree,' she says. 'If we want any fruit from it, we have to wait for it to hit the ground'; Cyril Yeeda checks steers being prepared for branding in the stock yards of Home Valley Station; four-wheel-drive vehicles on the Gibb River Road, the 700-kilometre track that runs through the heart of the Kimberley, cross the Pentecost River; Neville Poelina, indigenous tour guide and chairman of the Western Australia Indigenous Tourism Operators Committee, demonstrates fire-making techniques in the mangroves near Broome



*'We are the best guides to our land...  
We have a passion for it...  
Others can't interpret it as we can'*



NICK HASLAM (4); KEN EASTWOOD



or actually sat by a swimming pool and ordered a drink. We have to actually let Aboriginals have that experience so that they can then understand what is involved in working in the hospitality business.' He himself will often take young Aboriginal children from his home town on his tours to help out, and says the transformation in attitude can be quite remarkable. 'They get asked questions about the land and bush tucker, and of course they have the answers down pat. They often come home with a big smile and with their confidence really boosted – and that's what it's all about.'

But recent state government efforts

to increase indigenous involvement in the hospitality sector are beginning to pay off. In 2006, Tourism WA set aside AU\$1.5million (£839,000) over five years to train indigenous people in the hospitality and tourism sector throughout the state. For Jennifer Duffecy, Tourism WA industry development executive director, the training scheme has benefits at several levels: 'For many Aboriginal people, engagement with the tourism industry means much more than earning an economic livelihood. It builds pride in showing the world a living culture, provides jobs and role models, and maintains cultural and social values. The Aboriginal tourism

industry presents great challenges but offers even greater rewards, not only for Aboriginal people, but for the state in the point of difference it offers.'

#### LIFE ON THE FARM

On the Gibb River Road, a rugged 700-kilometre driving track now popular with outback tourists, a new venture that gives indigenous people hands-on experience in both hospitality and farming recently opened its doors. Home Valley Station, a vast cattle ranch covering 2,490 square kilometres, was acquired in 1999 by the Indigenous Land Council (ILC), financed by income derived from leases

## Kakadu's hidden beauty

**Ken Eastwood** visits Kakadu National Park and discovers the deep Aboriginal connection to the land and its wildlife



Beside a brooding crocodile-infested billabong in Kakadu National Park, Aboriginal

guide Jenny Hunter sends shivers up collective spines as she describes catching aquatic file snakes as a child. 'They're really good eating, but the only thing is you have to get in the water – and it's women's work,' she says. The security measures against the deadly saltwater crocs were simple: 'We'd get in and slap the water.'

Once they found a decent-sized file snake, by walking around barefoot in the water and feeling for them with their toes, they would pull it out and bite it in the neck to kill it. 'That's how I was taught by my mother,' Jenny says.

The Northern Territory has more than 100 indigenous tourism ventures, including accommodation, art centres and guided tours. However, there are few better indigenous guides than Jenny, who was

awarded the Australia-wide 2009 Gnunkai Tour Guide of the Year. With a seamless flow of information born of thousands of years of wisdom, she waves her arms at the itchy bush, whose bark can be used as a fish poison, the andjudmi tree, with medicinal leaves that can be wrapped around sore limbs, and a mid-sized eucalypt, the Darwin woollybutt. 'This is a calendar tree to us – it tells us when to start burning,' she says.

Jenny and her family own Kakadu Culture Camp, a small ecotourism resort in the world-

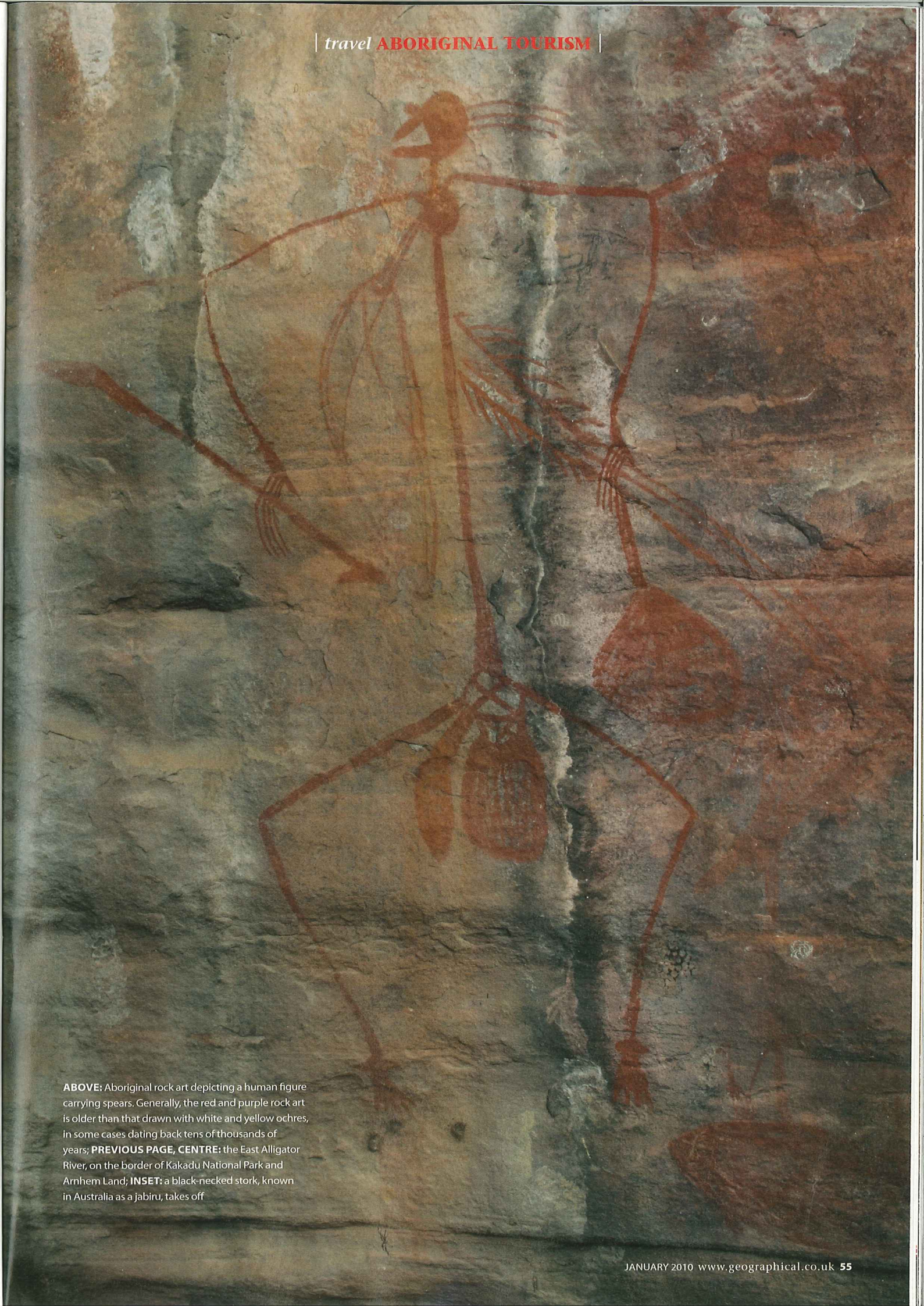
renowned national park. The camp has ten simple safari tents, and guests can choose to take part in a range of cultural experiences, including spear-throwing, didgeridoo-playing and munching on traditionally cooked kangaroo and barramundi alongside Jenny and her family. 'We're just casual – we have a drink with them, tell them stories,' she says, 'so people can spend time with an Aboriginal family, have fun.'

Roughly the size of Wales, Kakadu National Park is itself jointly owned and managed by Aboriginal people and the federal government, and there

are a growing number of indigenous-owned and -run tourism enterprises in the area.

Ex-park ranger and traditional land owner Victor Cooper has set up Ayal Aboriginal Tours, which helps European eyes see the hidden beauty of the park. About 80 per cent of Kakadu is savannah woodlands, or *an-behbeberk*, which can seem fairly dull to the uninitiated. But after a day with softly spoken Victor, you begin to see the food sources in the pandanus and grasses, the fleeting glimpses of rock wallabies on the hills and agile wallabies in the woodlands, and begin to understand the rich legacy of 1,000 generations of rock painters who've recorded so much on the overhangs and cliffs.

At Ubirr Rock, he points out images of the thylacine, or Tasmanian tiger, extinct in these parts for about 3,000 years, and other paintings located impossibly high up on the sandstone rock face. Perhaps, he suggests, spirits drew them by levitating or other means. 'They can take the rock face off, draw on it, and put it back on,' he says.



**ABOVE:** Aboriginal rock art depicting a human figure carrying spears. Generally, the red and purple rock art is older than that drawn with white and yellow ochres, in some cases dating back tens of thousands of years; **PREVIOUS PAGE, CENTRE:** the East Alligator River, on the border of Kakadu National Park and Arnhem Land; **INSET:** a black-necked stork, known in Australia as a jabiru, takes off

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS: KEN EASTWOOD

of Aboriginal-owned land. The farmstead has been given a AU\$13million upgrade and transformed into a luxury hotel and campground where visitors can gain an insight into the life of a working cattle station.

Many of the staff are indigenous trainees, and on a bright afternoon, under the high escarpment of the Cockburn Ranges where Baz Luhrmann shot scenes of his film *Australia*, I join John Rodney – JR to his friends – Home Valley's pastoral manager, and Cyril Yeeda, a young indigenous trainee from Darwin, as they check the stock. As Cyril rides off on horseback to cut out some young steers for branding, John says: 'I have a great respect for the Aboriginal people. They are sensitive and have a great affinity with the animals they work with – and with the land in general.'

Back at the station, Cyril marks the young steers with the station's distinctive 'HV8' brand, and JR talks of the history of 'local' people – as he prefers to call the Aboriginals working in the cattle stations. 'The original European pastoralists formed a great relationship with their local farmhands – who often worked for little more than accommodation, food and clothing for themselves and their families,' he says. 'But the Equal Pay Act of the late 1960s, although well intentioned, meant that most stations couldn't afford to keep their local stockmen employed. A whole generation left the land – but now we hope to turn things around. At Home Valley, the station couldn't exist without the commitment we have from our local staff – they're trainees but they turn up and work hard.'

Cyril is full of praise for the station. 'It was difficult to get it together and come up here from Darwin,' he says. 'But now I'm doing my certificates with TAFE [Technical and Further Education] and reckon I'll get some qualifications and go on with this kind of work.' TAFE courses are run in purpose-built classrooms at Home Valley, and Regina Sebastian, a 26-year-old trainee from Broome, is working in reception to complete a course in hotel administration. 'My life hasn't been easy,' she tells me. 'I had three daughters by the time I was 21 – but they're with my mum now.'

For Regina, the major problem was the demands placed on her by other

## ▶ AUSTRALIA ◀ CO-ORDINATES



### When to go

The tropical north of Western Australia and the Top End of the Northern Territory have two distinct seasons: the wet (October–March) and the dry (April–September). The former brings humidity, rain, electrical storms and temperatures in the high 30s; the latter is sunny and dry, reaching 24°C at night to 32°C during the day, so is more comfortable for visitors.

### Getting there

Emirates ([www.emirates.com](http://www.emirates.com)) flies from several UK airports via Dubai to Perth; return fares start from around £860. Internal return flights from Perth to Broome or Darwin start from about AU\$350 with Skywest ([www.skywest.com.au](http://www.skywest.com.au)).

### Further information

For more about Aboriginal tourism, visit [www.waitoc.com](http://www.waitoc.com). Go to [www.aboriginaladventures.com](http://www.aboriginaladventures.com), [www.kakaduculturecamp.com](http://www.kakaduculturecamp.com) and [www.homevalley.com.au](http://www.homevalley.com.au) for details about the indigenous businesses mentioned here.

members of her clan. 'They always wanted money and never worked – it's awful to have nothing to get up in the morning for.' She has been living at Home Valley for more than a year and relishes the station's isolation. 'Out here, I'm free of those family pressures and can build a new life. I want to be like everyone else and be independent.'

Home Valley has won an award for its training programmes and for Shirley McPherson, chair of the ILC, it means the investment has paid off. 'Trainees are developing transferable skills and knowledge, working on their country and participating in full-time employment,' she said at the awards ceremony.

'The training and work programmes are also delivering noticeable improvements in health, financial wellbeing and self-esteem.'

### FROM BUSH TO BUSINESS

Across the border in the Northern Territory, where around half of the land and the majority of the national parks are indigenous-owned, there is a similar growth of Aboriginal involvement in the tourism sector. There are now 42 indigenous-run tour businesses in the Territory, with more on the way.

In Kakadu National Park, Fred Hunter, now in his late 30s, started work as a trainee ranger in the park before joining his sister's successful tourist business on Kakadu's border with Arnhem Land. 'It's hard work,' he says. 'When it's busy, you're working day and night.' He takes groups of tourists on bush-experience treks, learning about survival in the park's rugged terrain, and on nocturnal crocodile-watching expeditions on the East Alligator River.

The Hunters' eco-camp now has five state-of-the-art family safari tents and is powered by a solar energy plant that cost more than AU\$100,000, all of which they bought themselves. 'It's good: we get to keep our old skills, but we're also doing business and staying on the land,' he says with a shrewd smile.

I ask him about the number of non-indigenous guides I've seen working in the Northern Territory. He shrugs and says: 'Some of them do a good job, but if you don't come from here, you don't really feel the land – and you'd get it wrong.' Gesturing to the jagged escarpment of Arnhem Land, he smiles. 'This country is in our blood and we know and can interpret it best.'

For Neville Poelina, the future for Aboriginal participation in tourism has never looked so good. 'My mother used to wear a dog tag so that she could prove she was allowed to stay in Broome after dark,' he says. 'Now, one day I'm down in Canberra lobbying the minister for the environment wearing a suit – the next I'll be back in the bush, half naked, with my son, hunting with a boomerang and spear.'

'I think that Aboriginals are realising now that we can have a foot in both camps, and that people really want to hear the story of the land from us – the original caretakers.'