

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE TIWIS

Australia's islands of smiles are home to the Tiwi people, whose culture fascinates with intriguing social norms and a strong arts tradition.

Nelissa Hernandez meets these modern-day Aborigines in their native land

PHOTOS EWEN BELL



There are two things my Tiwi tour guides, Ron, Romie and Brian, warned me against doing. As requested by the locals, we are not allowed to photograph the Tiwi children, whose infectious laughter punctuates the serene surrounds of the Nguiu community. That's an easy task. The second request – and by writing this, I'm deliberately being guilty of ignoring such warning – is to not highlight the fact that in Bathurst island, I'd seen, in Brian's words, "a baby dinosaur". But what's a travel writer to do when faced with such a rare piece of information?

The baby dinosaur is actually a frilled-neck lizard, which resembles a tiny *Triceratops*. Endemic to northern Australia, this lizard got its name from the frill on its neck that unfurls when it's frightened. Its brown body is well camouflaged in tree trunks, almost invisible to outsiders like me. But Ron and Romie, who used to hunt these when they were kids, can spot it from almost 5m away – even from our seat in the van! We were on a dirt road off

Nguiu settlement, driving into the afternoon sun with wallabies hopping happily in our peripheral vision, when Brian suddenly stopped the car. Ron and Romie swiftly got out of the vehicle and took careful strides to a nearby tree, and returned with the lizard swinging like a pendulum with its tail suspended from Ron's arm.

"This is a baby dinosaur!" he grinned triumphantly. We all smiled back in awe. The islands of smiles proved to be living up to their name.

CULTURAL IMMERSION

The stories of the Tiwi people are as equally compelling, if not intriguing, as that lizard we'd encountered. Located 80km off the north coast of Darwin, the Tiwis, comprising Bathurst and Melville islands, are home to the modern-day Aborigines who bear the same name. The Nguiu settlement in southeastern Bathurst, where most travellers visit and the focal point of my day trip, lies at the mouth of the Apsley Strait, the pristine waters that dissect the two islands.

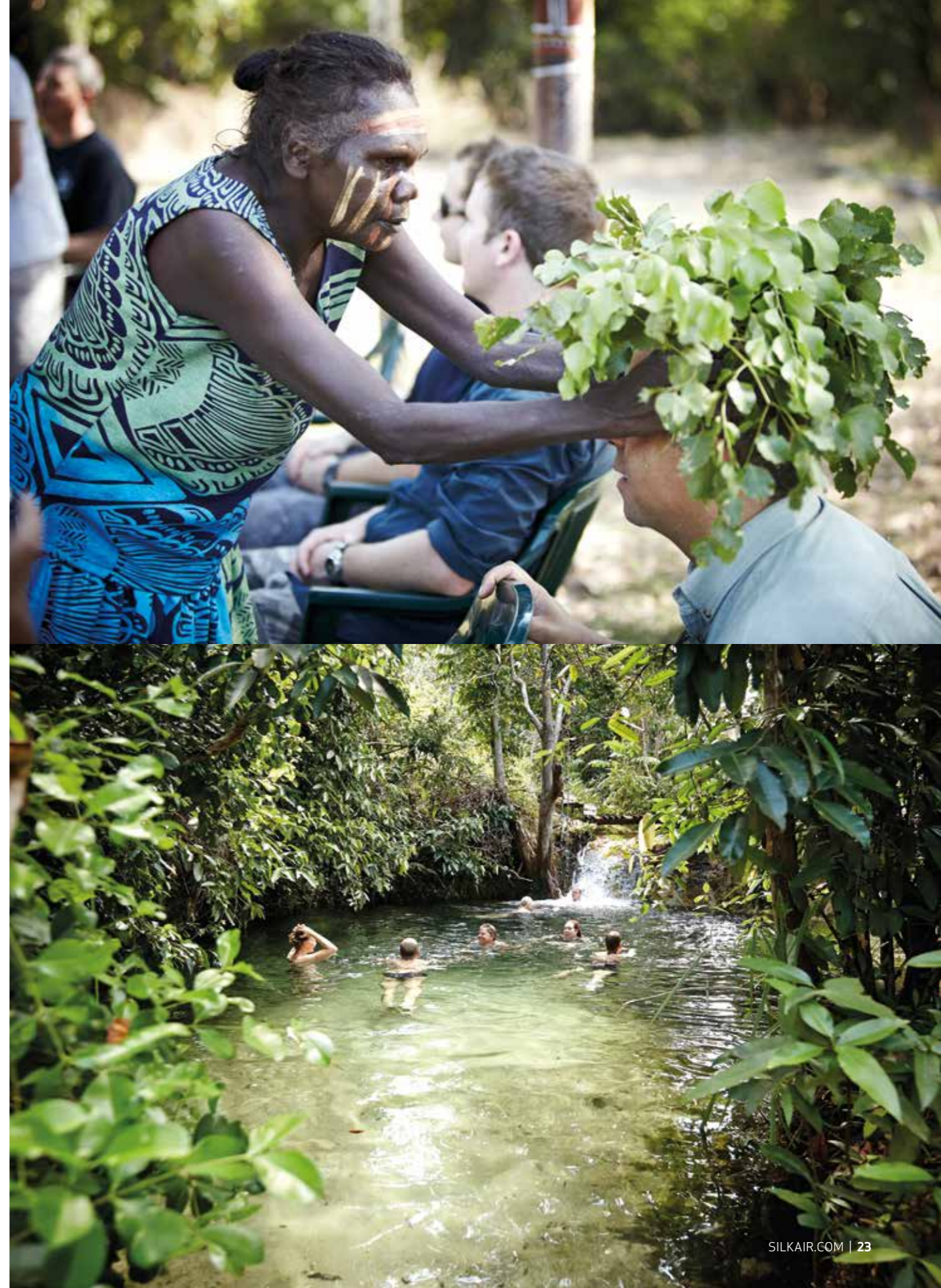
The Tiwi people have been isolated from mainland Australia since time immemorial, and their name, which translates to "we are one", reflects the seclusion. Modernity came to these islands when the Catholic Mission arrived in 1911, and now, a supermarket, a Thai takeaway, a social club, healthcare facilities and art centres are some of the establishments that serve the 1,500-strong Bathurst population. Their Aboriginal cultural practices, however, continue to this day.

"You're not allowed to talk to your mother-in-law? Ever?" My fellow traveller Kath turned to our guides. "That's a good thing, right?" I added, and everyone roared with laughter. We were about to start our quick visit to the Patakijiyali Museum – a treasure trove of Aboriginal carvings, tools and photos depicting their ancestral origins – when our indigenous guides thought a quick cultural introduction would be necessary.

"The Tiwis have four skin groups: Sun, Pandanus, Rock

Opening spread:
A Tiwi woman prepares some ironwood leaves for a smoking ceremony

Facing page,
from top:
Travellers are smoldered with smoked leaves to rid them of evil spirits; a hidden billabong in Bathurst Island





Facing page: The Tiwis' burial poles, called *pukumani*, are painted using natural ochres, with the patterns representing the deceased person's life

This page, from top: One of the tour guides performs his *yoyi*, or dreaming dance inherited from his father; a Tiwi woman decorates a shell of a mud mussel

and Fish," explained Ron. Non-related to skin colour, these tribal lineages are passed down matrilineally, and govern the rules of social interaction and marriage patterns. Anyone from the Sun and the Rock can only marry someone from Pandanus and Fish, and vice versa. Those who disregard this rule face penalty or punishment, which includes caning or pelting. The stringent practices also forbid speaking with one's siblings and relatives of the opposite sex once they reach puberty, thus explaining the non-speaking terms with one's mother-in-law for a male.

While social interactions are determined matrilineally, the Tiwis' song lines and dances are passed down from one's father. The *yoyi*, or dreaming dance, represents the land where one's father is from, and is performed in celebrations and mourning ceremonies. To better understand the beauty of the *yoyi*, we were treated to a lively demonstration of a smoking ceremony by our guides.

We sat in a semicircle as our guides and two Tiwi ladies collected heaps of ironwood leaves for smoking, and proceeded to present their *yoyi*. The swift movement of a shark, the territorial stance of a water buffalo, and the quick mouth-snapping action of a crocodile – all these are characterised in their dances, which we watched



in admiration while the smell of burning leaves wafted in our midst. The ladies grabbed some of the branches and smoldered all of the travellers with those leaves to rid us of evil spirits.

ART HAVENS

Our Tiwi guides later serve a morning spread of freshly baked damper bread and tea brewed in a traditional black Billy tin. Once we had our fill, we took a quick drive around the community, which revealed the island's thriving arts scene and strong art enterprises. We stopped by the workshop

of Ngaruwanajirri, the ceiling of which is filled with murals by indigenous artists. Established in 1994, it provides employment for Tiwi people with disability, and is a well-regarded centre that produced works previously selected for the National Aboriginal Art Awards.

In the Church of St Therese, a longstanding reminder of the Catholic mission in the early 20th century, the interiors are decked in artwork that melds Catholic influences and Aboriginal art. A painting of a warrior wearing a loincloth and holding the Baby



GETTING THERE

Travellers to the Tiwi islands require a permit, but tours can be arranged from Darwin city. AAT Kings offers a day trip to the Nguu settlement, which includes visits to art centres and a burial site, and a chance to witness a smoking ceremony. Tours start from AUD375, with an additional fee for the 20-minute return flights from Skytour terminal (Mondays-Wednesdays) or the two-hour ferry (Fridays) from Cullen Bay. australiasoutback.com.sg; aatkings.com

Facing page, clockwise from top: The rugged coastline of northern Bathurst; Tiwi painters use natural ochres, sourced from cliffs 100km away from Nguu; see the locals' pandanus weaving tradition

This page: A dirt road winds through the Tiwi bush

STAY

Skycity Darwin, nestled in a 30-acre garden, is a good base for exploring the city. Its location by the Arafura Sea makes it a perfect spot for watching the sunset, and if you happen to stay on Thursday or Sunday night (from the last Thursday in April to October), the famous Mindil Beach Sunset Market is right at your doorstep. Pick a Lagoon Room, which has direct access to the swimming pool. skycitydarwin.com.au



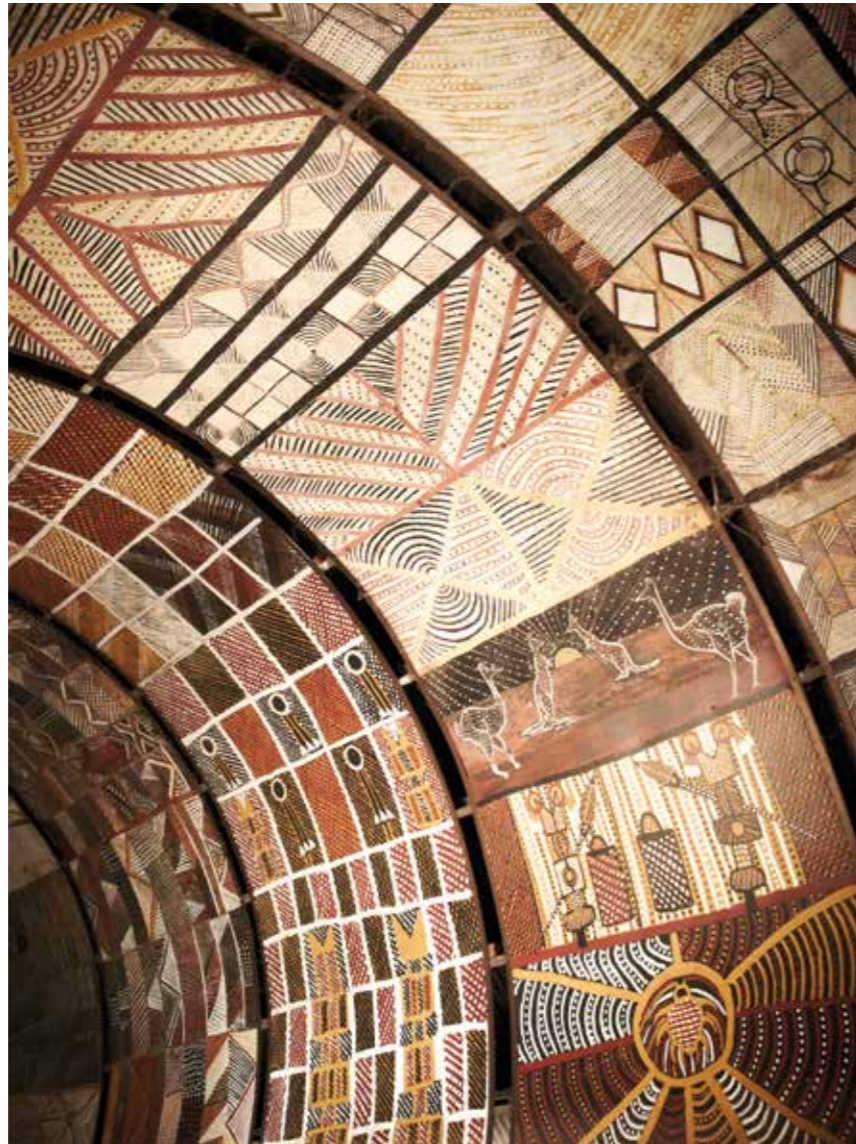
Jesus is at the centre of the altar, surrounded by depictions of mudcrabs, birds, butterflies, among other animals.

But the most ubiquitous manifestation of the Tiwis' creativity are the 2m-high *pukumani* burial poles. There are no boomerangs and didgeridoos present in these islands, instead the *pukumani* poles figure prominently in its artistic history.

Legend has it that the first *pukumani* pole was created by the Tiwi ancestor Purukuparli for his child, and the locals followed his lead. Thus, despite the presence of Catholic crosses on the graves, the Tiwis still erect these poles to honour the dead. The geometric and abstract patterns painted using natural ochre on these ironwood poles are representative of the deceased person's life, and are drawn by someone who knows the departed. It is believed that the soul of the dead reaches the spiritual land once these poles fall to the ground.

TO THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

"Have you been on a dirt road?" asked Brian, but it was more of an




announcement than a question, as the van we were in zoomed past the trees into the Tiwi bush later that day. We found ourselves at Tarntipi Beach at the southernmost edge of Bathurst. Save for the crashing waves, the beach is a quiet place, so clean we'd be forgiven for imagining that we were one of the first few who had stepped on it – apart from the infamous crocodiles, of course. The majestic cliffs in the distance and the stray shells on the shore provided a shot of colour against the blue breadth of the Arafura Sea.

On our drive back to the airstrip at the end of the day,

Romie shared the stories of the Mission days, when the early Aborigines were just starting to learn English, and their undeniable penchant for rather hilarious names. "My Dad is called Teabag and my mom is Sugar!" Kath asked if it were a joke. "It's true!" quipped Romie. "And Biscuit is my uncle!" Laughter filled the van. I then nudged the trio to give a name for themselves.

"We are the Tiwi Cool," said Ron, his shades glinting against the afternoon sun. I can't help but agree.

Above: The ceiling of Ngaruwanajirri's workshop highlights the stunning geometric patterns prevalent in Tiwi art

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