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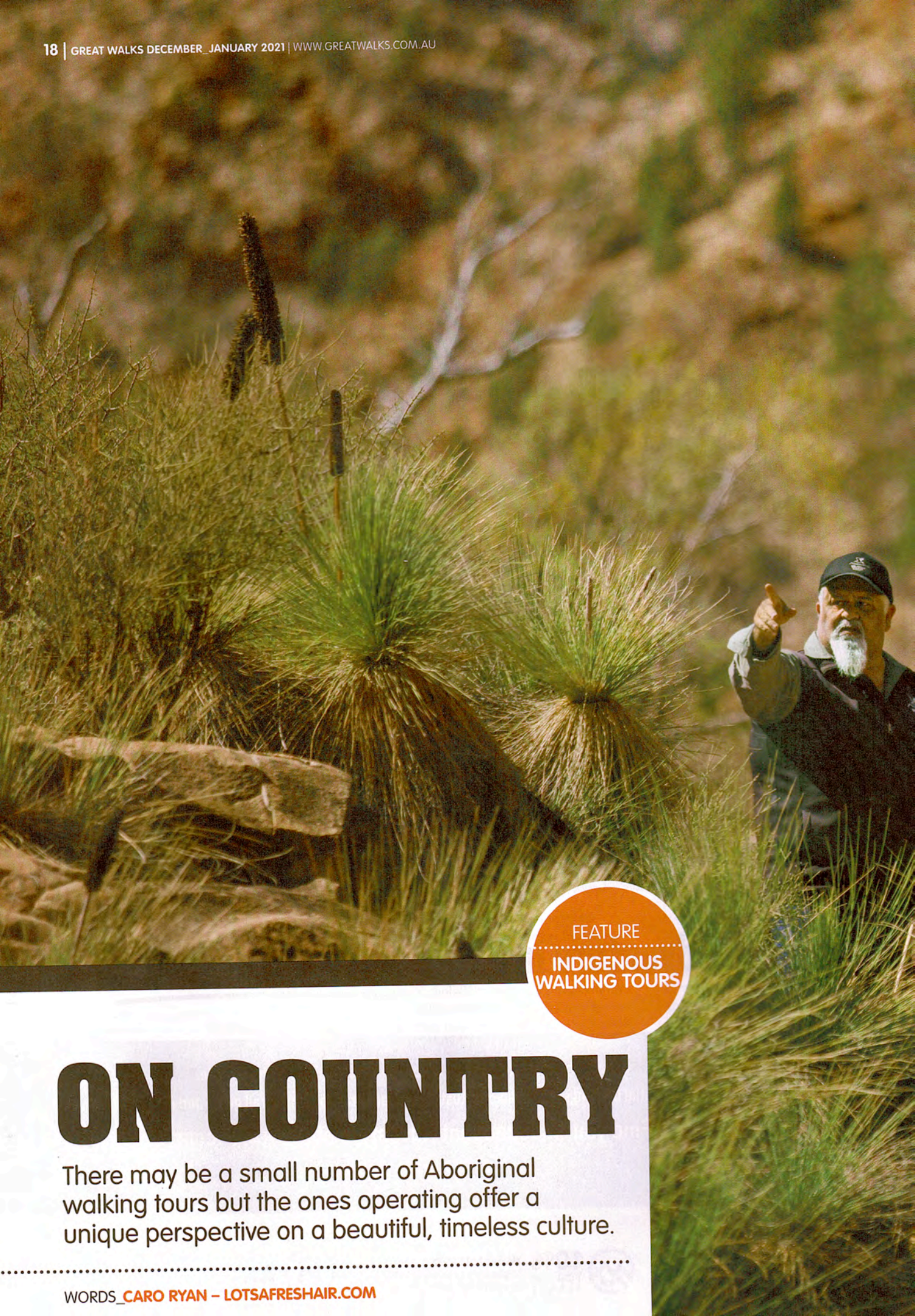
Mt Cobbler Walking Track,
Wukalina Walk, Lurujarri Heritage Trail,
Mount Kosciuszko, Overland Track

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FEATURE
INDIGENOUS
WALKING TOURS

ON COUNTRY

There may be a small number of Aboriginal walking tours but the ones operating offer a unique perspective on a beautiful, timeless culture.

WORDS **CARO RYAN** – LOTSAFRESHAIR.COM





“To have a cultural experience takes time – the more time the better,” says Dharug man Evan Yanna Muru from Blue Mountains Walkabout. “Traditionally, walkabout initiation started with one night out. Then, as you progressed to Cleverman stage, they could be a year long. If you want to get the most out of a multi-day aboriginal walking tour, start small with a half to full-day tour as a stepping stone. Get the foundations to prepare yourself mentally, physically and spiritually for spending longer on Country.”

Why the choices appear limited

I would love to tell you that I Googled, ‘Aboriginal hiking tour’, and was spoilt for choice. That this wasn’t the case, points to a much bigger issue and raises the question of why. I thought it would be easy to find a good collection of indigenous owned and operated businesses to support throughout Australia, where we can spend time on country, walking with the local custodians, listening and learning. Surely.

“As an Aboriginal man, I would love to take people on to country but there’s too many barriers.” says Gundungurra man, David King also from the Blue Mountains, NSW. He witnessed first-hand some of the challenges in remote communities, whilst working as liaison alongside the local custodians and organisers of the 2016 Big Uluru Trek (100km SA border to Uluru) which *Great Walks* attended.

“I really think it should be all traditional custodians. But people don’t realise the barriers and what’s needed long term to deliver that,” he says.

Issues from deep within Australian history

Setting up a business anywhere demands confidence, finances and fluency with administrative tasks, as well as the ability to navigate policy and access. “I’m the first one who made it to uni, my mum didn’t even get to school. People don’t want to recognise the condition of their First Nations people,” says David.

“There were Aunties who joined us at night on the way to Uluru who cried as they told us stories on country because they hadn’t been out there for years. They don’t have access (to these places) because of social implications, they don’t have the opportunities.”

In this, David exposed one of the key reasons why there aren’t more commercial Aboriginal walking tours in Australia. “In so many cases, it’s just too hard, so people choose not to.”

Another angle to the story is the disconnect between what a whitefella tourist (like me) perceives to be the reality. I think, “I’d like to go walkabout on country and learn with a local”, however, the reality of modern life in communities can be quite different.



THERE is an exciting research project underway at the Australian National University, called *Mayi Kuwayu* – The National Study of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing. An impressive group of scientists and researchers have come together to create the first national study of the long-held anecdotal belief of the benefits to First Nations physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of time spent on country.

Whilst I’m not of First Nations heritage and can never fully understand the life-giving, powerful force that is an indigenous person’s deep connection to country, as a bushwalker I can appreciate the science-backed benefits to spending time in nature and feed my desire to learn about the other.

A country of countries

So whilst travel to overseas countries is off limits, now is the perfect time to discover and learn about the hundreds of different nations (estimates are between 350-500) that we have within our own borders. These places are big – big enough to want to spend more than just an hour on an interpretive walk, popular with tourists or travellers with tight schedules. These stories, these countries deserve time to listen, time to learn, time to go deep to try and understand them.

Top: Daintree Dreaming Tour, FNQ. TOURISM AUSTRALIA

Above: Ngaran Ngaran Culture Awareness, Callala Bay, NSW. TOURISM AUSTRALIA



“IT’S ABOUT THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE COMMUNITY AND BUILDING SOMETHING LIFE ALTERING FOR BOTH SIDES.”

“There’s a reason a lot don’t walk through northern Australia. It’s the taipans, conditions and the heat. It’s just not the best way to experience country. I wouldn’t walk further north than the Larapinta.” says Barry Weare, Director of Operations for Cooee Traveller, a team of indigenous tourism professionals, and proud Gimuy Walubara Yidinji man. “Up north, you’re more likely to find that authentic homestay experiences or remote 4WD tours, with short walks to go fishing and immersing yourself in daily life, are more common.”

“In many parts of the country, the seasonal window for multi-day walks is small.”

He continues, “There’s significant set-up and operational costs in establishing a new walking product. If the business can only operate for a few months of the year, it’s viability becomes a challenge.”

This leads me to think about how long-term established hiking companies, like Trek Tours, Park Trek or Australian Walking Holidays, balance their economic sustainability by running trips in Tasmania in summer and Central Australia in winter. For them, it’s a year-round operation. This

could be a challenge for aboriginal tour guides, as the person who owns the story, tells the story. It’s connected to a specific place.

Partnerships with non-indigenous operators

For many indigenous communities, dipping their toe in the water of tourism by hosting workshops within established non-indigenous operated tours, such as Arkaba Walk’s family itineraries, is one way of sharing their story authentically, without the burden of setting up a whole business.

Another, Crooked Compass, a small group tour business that has been working internationally with remote tribes since 2014, believes it needs to be a positive experience for both. “Everything starts with a face to face meeting. It’s all about authenticity, intentions, partnership and support,” states founder Lisa Pagotto. “It’s about the best interests of the community and building something life altering for both sides.”

Their new Australian itineraries, introduced since COVID-19, to the Pilbara/Karajini NP and outback Queensland, include several days walking with local indigenous guides. She is also

able to tailor private multi-day walking tours through traditional homelands. This option isn’t cheap as she says that permits in Arnhem Land can cost \$1000 per person, per day. It’s important to manage budget expectations when it comes to accessing the more remote areas.

According to Lisa, price isn’t the only expectation that needs to be altered when it comes to travelling on country. “Working with indigenous communities takes time. It’s not quick – don’t expect a quote the same day.”

Experience living country

A good example of how time is treated differently on country is reflected in the words of the pack-free 9-day Lurujarri Heritage Trail, near Broome, WA. “In walking the trail our ultimate aim is ‘to arrive’ and to experience ‘living country’ – we are not conquering a trek!”

Goolarabooloo Community Leader, Daniel Roe explains, “Visitors come wanting to know how to connect to the old world (Dreamtime) to the land with its people. At first it takes some time for walkers to settle in and begin to realise their surroundings and each other.

**Clockwise from left:**

Experience Qld's remote views and indigenous culture with Crooked Compass.

Nyinyikay Yolngu Homeland,
East Arnhem Land.
TOURISM AUSTRALIA

Learning about basket weaving on the Wukalina Walk.
ROB BURNETT



We walk together as a clan or tribal group of people, learning the stories of all the sites we pass through and their meaning.

It's our hope that walkers gain an understanding and an appreciation on how indigenous people connect to country through the Dreamtime ("Bugarigarre", in local language) and for individuals to have their own personal life-changing experience with their inner intuition. A sense of respect for our natural environment and to learn the stories of the Bugarigarre for the area walked."

So whilst the achingly slow-moving wheels of the policymakers and powerful are agitated along by everyday Australians hungry to see real change in areas of systemic barriers to more indigenous tourism businesses, there are courageous and proud First Nations trailblazers telling their stories and opening parts of their country and hearts to share – hearts of the oldest living culture on earth.

Some of these experiences are owned and operated by enterprises within local communities, others are partnerships with non-indigenous businesses based on relationship and respect.





Western Australia

Lurujari Heritage Trail (Broome)

9-day (pack free) coastal walk with Goolarabooloo Community, along traditional songline, sharing the rich, cultural knowledge handed down to great grandfather Paddy Roe OAM (deceased).

goolarabooloo.org.au

Pilbara & Coral Coast (Burrup Peninsula, Murujuga NP, Karijini NP, Ningaloo Reef)

After a traditional Welcome to Country, explore Murujuga NP, which has the highest concentration of rock art in the world, dated to over 40,000 years old. Visit the Flying Foam Massacre Site (part of a larger tour).

crooked-compass.com/tour/discover-the-pilbara-coral-coast/

Wirruwana – Dirk Hartog Island/Francois Peron National Park (Shark Bay)

Wula Gura Eco Cultural Adventures offer customised pack-free hiking itineraries up to 12km in Francois Peron NP.

wulagura.com.au

Tasmania

Wukalina Walk (Bay of Fires, Mount William NP)

This Palawa people owned and operated, 4-day experience, immerses walkers in the history, story, food, medicine and spirit of the spectacular Bay of Fires area. Aboriginal guides seek to connect walkers with a deeper understanding of country, whilst enjoying comfortable accommodation in bespoke domed huts.

wukalinawalk.com.au

Northern Territory

Custom Tour Itinerary

With enough lead time and a generous budget, a custom itinerary can be developed for you in conjunction with local communities and there are many possibilities. Want to walk from Darwin to West Arnhem Land? Crooked Compass can do all the legwork for you.

crooked-compass.com

Queensland

Indigenous & Wild QLD

(Tropical North QLD and Mount Isa)

For a bit of luxury and glamping on top of an escarpment, this 10-day tour combines the blue/green contrasts of Port Douglas and Cairns, with the outback ochres of Mt Isa and beyond. Trip includes half and full-day walks on the Pinnacle Trail and River View Walk led by local indigenous guide, Johnny. “The most rewarding part of my job is when people get us.”

crooked-compass.com/tour/indigenous-wild-qld

Walkabout Cultural Adventures (Mossman and Daintree)

Kuku Yalanji is the country where the rainforest meets the ocean. Home to Juan Walker, he can organise half or full day private tours that include guided walks and cultural experiences including food, medicine, hunting practices and collecting shellfish.

walkaboutadventures.com.au

New South Wales

Gulaga Creation Tour (Narooma)

Extinct volcano Gulaga (formerly Mt Dromedary), holds secrets and stories from the Yuin people of Mother Mountain – a woman’s place. Over three days, you’ll hear stories and learn first hand from Ngaran Ngaran Cultural Awareness guides. A deeply spiritual tour, this isn’t just about a walk up a mountain, but a sharing and yarning – a ‘life-shifting experience’.

ngaranaboriginalculture.rezdy.com

Bundji Aboriginal Tours (Wagga Wagga, Riverina)

Wiradjuri man, Mark Saddler, is not only a passionate tour guide, but he is also an excellent teacher. He can arrange private full day and multi-day walking tours on Country, to such iconic places as The Rock (Kengal Aboriginal Place) as he unfolds the story, culture and significance of Wiradjuri country.

bundjiculture.com.au

Blue Mountains Walkabout (Blue Mountains, NSW)

Former Aboriginal Discovery Ranger for NPWS, Darug man Evan Yanna Muru runs an award winning 5hr walking tour from Faulconbridge in the Blue Mountains. Through rainforest, beside waterfalls and beside caves, Evans connects people to Country, culture and ancient wisdom.

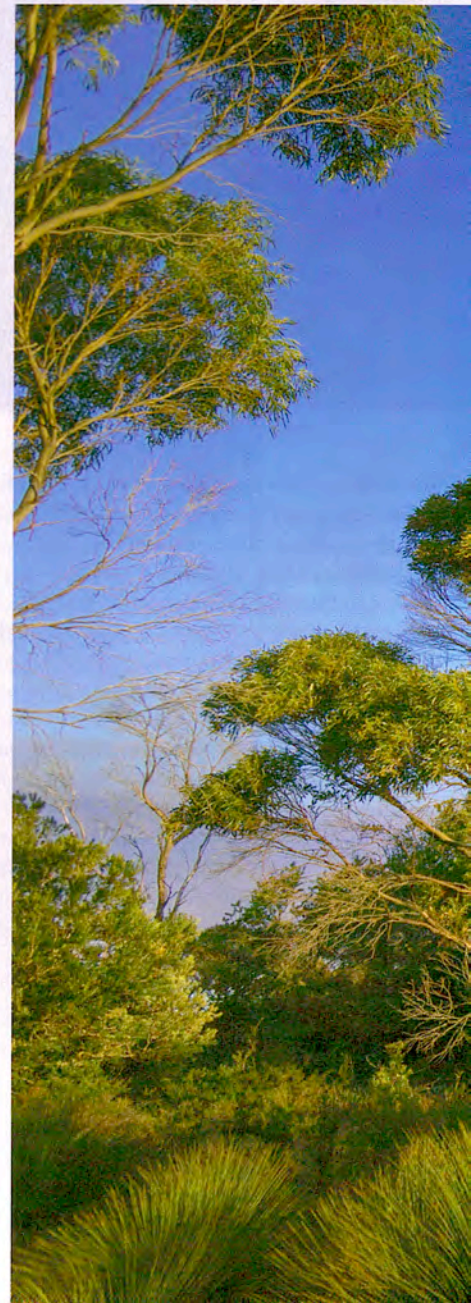
bluemountainwalkabout.com

Other Tours / Experiences

Lirwi Tourism (East Arnhem Land, NT) Homeland tours

Slow down to the speed of the seasons and community life by immersing yourself as a welcome guest on a homeland tour. Walk barefoot through the shallows looking for crabs, experience fishing, weaving, walking, bush foods and cooking.

lirwitourism.com.au



Wadjemup (Rottnest Island, WA)

2hr introduction to Wadjemup. There is no better way to start your 3-day Wadjemup Trail self-guided walk, then to be welcomed onto the island by a Noongar guide and to learn about the history and culture, all before you take your first step. Wadjemup in Noongar language means 'place across the water where the spirits are'.

gocultural.com.au/our-tours

Cape to Cape (South West WA) – (Introduction to country)

Before you step out onto the iconic Cape to Cape walk, get an introduction to Country on the 'Kaya' Cape Experience. Learn about the seasons, flora and fauna, and begin to see things with different eyes. (Custom and private tours available).

koomaldreaming.com.au/cape-cultural-tours

Kakadu (NT)

7-hour safari that includes wildlife, bush tucker gathering and an introduction to aboriginal culture, culminating in a sunset cookup and dinner. Perfect before heading out on your own multi-day Kakadu hike.

animaltracks.com.au

Wilpena Pound (Ikara-Flinders Ranges, SA)

Wilpena Pound Resort is an indigenous owned and operated business and is the perfect gateway to the region. Whilst St Marys Peak is at the heart of the Adnyamathanha creation story and best not to climb, they offer two different walking tours.

wilpenapound.com.au/do/cultural-tours/

The writer acknowledges the lands of the Gundungurra and Dharug nations, where this article was written. 🌀

“WILPENA POUND RESORT IS THE PERFECT GATEWAY TO THE REGION”

Left: Learning about the Dreamtime at Wild Bush Luxury, Arkaba, SA.

Below: There's plenty to experience on the Wukalina Walk, Tas. Rob Burnett

