

Cultures unite in healing

With international holidays still on hold, Australian travellers are exploring their own backyards and pursuing a host of immersive experiences close to home



Joe Collard and Mandi Nelson. Picture: Michael Wilson

Penny Thomas



Birrdiya managing director Joe Collard and his long-time friend Mandi Nelson are helping to spread a better understanding of Aboriginal culture by bringing people together.

The duo are hosting an Aboriginal Culture and Yoga Retreat in Pinjarra next month that is designed to help people connect with one of the world's oldest living cultures, while stepping away from the hustle and bustle of daily life for a time of rejuvenation and reflection.

Combining an immersion into Noongar culture with daily yoga, Collard says the seven-day retreat is all about healing and returning to country.

"As we will be connecting the past to the present and doing a lot of truth-telling, there will be some confronting moments during the retreat," he says. "Recognising these painful or confronting moments is how we heal."

As a yoga teacher and transformational retreat facilitator, Nelson will run daily yoga and meditation sessions during the retreat.

"Yoga helps to cleanse and clear energy systems, the debris if you like, enabling deeper connection and alignment to truth, internally and externally," she says.

"It helps practitioners become



Kerry-Ann Winmar from Nyungar Tours.

more aware of their consciousness, therefore assisting with spiritual and emotional growth."

Being a Biboolmirn Noongar man, Collard says holding the event in Pinjarra is a key part of the overall experience.

"Pinjarra is my home, my Boodja," he says. "It is my galyagab, my tribal homeland of my maternal grandmother."

Although a place of great significance, there is a sad connection between Collard and Nelson's ancestors that occurred at Pinjarra back in 1834.

After retracing her family history, Nelson realised one of her relatives took part in the Pinjarra Massacre that killed a number of Collard's ancestors.

"This was a devastating discovery for myself," she says. "I didn't know how to tell Joe, especially because I was working with him on the Displaced Voices documentary at the time. I felt ashamed and no longer felt like I could work on the film."

Although it was not easy for the two friends to come to terms with this history, their strong friendship meant they could talk openly and deeply about what had happened, and ultimately helped them begin their healing journeys together.

They now share a sibling-like bond and want to help other people heal in the same way by bringing them together in a meaningful and respectful way. Aside from regular yoga and

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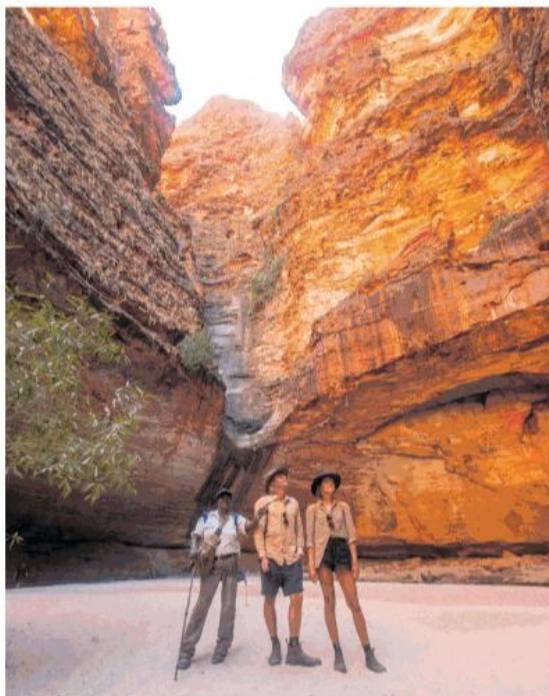
Set amid the lush backdrop of the Darling Range, the Aboriginal Cultural and Yoga Retreat is happening between November 12 and 18 at Fairbridge Village, about 5.5km north of Pinjarra. Tickets start from \$2200 for a shared room with meals included. To find out more, visit australianculturaltravel.com.au

meditation sessions, the upcoming retreat will include cultural ceremonies, bush tucker experiences, Indigenous art and handicraft workshops and a number of recreational activities.

Helping facilitate the event is Kim Burton, who recently set up an online platform called Australian Cultural Travel.

"While Joe and I have worked together on a number of programs and events throughout the years, Kim from Australian Cultural Travel has played a big role in bringing the retreat to life," Nelson says.

"Platforms like Australian Cultural Travel, Welcome to Country and WAITOC are great initiatives to promote Indigenous cultural tourism."



Clockwise from top: Kingfisher Tours. Picture: Monique Garget-Bennett Yagan Square with Djurandi Dreaming. Waringarri Aboriginal Art and Culture Tours.

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CONNECTING TO COUNTRY

There are many Indigenous owned and operated tourism businesses across WA and Australia waiting to be discovered.

Following a post-launch pause in operations due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Welcome to Country — the national not-for-profit online marketplace of First Nations cultural experiences — is going from strength to strength, and has built up 160 Aboriginal experiences since 2019.

In Western Australia, Welcome to Country has brought 16 First

Nations operators on to the platform, which together operate a diverse and exciting range of 46 cultural experiences including inner-city guided walks, bush pharmacy tours, canoeing, mangrove exploring, hunting and fishing, walks, pearl farm visits and diamond mining.

“Since the advent of the pandemic in 2020 and campaigns like Tourism Australia’s Holiday Here this Year which have encouraged Aussies to discover their own backyard, we’re seeing a real upswing in interest in Aboriginal experiences,” Welcome

to Country CEO Jason Eades says.

“The tours are a great way for First Nations people to establish economically sustainable businesses while keeping their culture and stories alive, and travellers enlightened and entertained.”

Designed to be accessible, engaging and easy to use on the go, Welcome to Country’s online platform connects travellers with exceptional First Nations cultural experiences around Australia.

For Perth locals looking for an enjoyable weekend activity, there are a number of Indigenous

cultural experiences and activities right on our doorstep.

For example, discover the traditional stories of Whadjuk Country with Nyungar Tours on a South Perth Cultural Walking Tour. Or join Djurandi Dreaming in the city centre and learn about Yagan, a local Noongar warrior and heroic leader of his people.

Further afield, adventure awaits with a swag of Aboriginal cultural experiences available across our vast State, from a bush tucker tasting and talk with Noongar elder Dale Tilbrook at Mandoon Estate winery in the Swan Valley, to watching the sun set over ancient ranges in the sacred land of Miriwoong Country in Kununurra with the Waringarri Aboriginal Arts tours.

Whether you want to visit Aboriginal sites, hike through the outback, learn to hunt for fish or spend three days camping in the bush, these extraordinary experiences offer a deep connection to ancient lands, Aboriginal culture and sacred traditions.

For more information visit welcometocountry.com.