



Fabrics, football and fishing

IT'S AN UNLIKELY COMBINATION. ADMITTEDLY, IF YOU TOOK OUT THE FABRIC COMPONENT YOU'D HAVE WHAT COULD OTHERWISE BE ANY 'BLOKEY' LONG WEEKEND. BUT, TOSS IN SOME FABRIC (OR MORE PRECISELY ARTISTIC CREATIVITY) AND YOU'VE AN INTRIGUING NEW TOUR IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY'S TIWI ISLANDS.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS **FIONA HARPER**



Football is a big deal in the Tiwi Islands. Almost 35 per cent of the population plays, fielding eight teams in the local Tiwi Islands Football League. In these parts heroes wear footy boots and there are few stars more revered than Michael Long. He learnt his deft skills on Tiwi Islands' red dirt before going on to become a dual Essendon premiership player. His nephew Cyril Rioli plays for Hawthorn, adding to the clan's collection of Norm Smith Medals in the recent 2015 AFL Grand Final.

So it's quite an honour to be met by 'football royalty' Kathy Long, brother of Michael, mother of Cyril, when we arrive at Bathurst Island's dirt airstrip at Wurrimyanga. As Kathy shows us around, talk switches between football and art. 'Cyril is number 33', Kathy states proudly for the benefit of those in our group who don't follow AFL. It's the local art though that's brought us to the Tiwis. It is everywhere. The airport's concrete toilet block and terminal building are daubed in it. Passing burial grounds as we drive through town, Kathy points out carved and painted ironwood totems that encompass the spirit of those who have passed. At Ngaruwanajirri, the Keeping House, an arched ceiling is adorned with art in a sort of Tiwi Islands version of the Vatican's Sistine Chapel. The paintings are exquisite.

At the entrance to Tiwi Design Art Centre we're greeted with a riot of colourful dots and lines enhancing rippled corrugation iron. Inside, bolts of colourful fabric are piled high, their distinctive Tiwi designs prominent. Pinned out on a long table, a strip of silk is being transformed with a Jock Puautjimi design which will retail for around \$1600. Whoopi Goldberg and Olivia Newton-John are both fans of Tiwi textiles. A faded newspaper clipping showing a Tiwi Design-clad Goldberg is proudly pinned to a board near the door.

After a traditional smoking ceremony followed by lunch with the artists (damper is served with a smoky campfire aroma), screen printer Vivian leads a printing workshop, explaining how to achieve sharp lines as ink is squeezed through tautly framed silk. Departing with a custom printed length of fabric, I resolve to turn my unique souvenir into a skirt when I return home.

With the introduction of this three day Ultimate Tiwi Island tour, visitors are given an insight into Tiwi Islanders' customs and cultures. Operated by Sealink in partnership with traditional owners through Tiwi Island Adventures, guests spend two nights at Bathurst Island Lodge. Travel between communities is by boat, 4WD or light aircraft. The pace is leisurely, with plenty of time to relax into 'Territory time', ►



Sure and steady with a delicate touch for the traditional Tiwi designs.

soak up the relaxed vibe of the islands and chat with locals. Football is a popular topic with everyone wanting to know "who's your team?"

Formerly the haunt of sports fishermen whose needs barely went beyond a bed and cold beer, a \$2m upgrade to Bathurst Island Lodge has raised comfort levels significantly. A new commercial kitchen dishes up menus tailored around the catch of the day. Plump sofas dotted across an expansive deck create a convivial hub for conversations, coffee or beers. There's not a cloud in an implausibly blue sky. Coconut palms swish above sun-bleached sand. Despite its enticing location, host Karen advises us to avoid the beach and "stay on the deck as there's plenty of crocs". Later, we admire a fat-bellied 3 metre specimen from the safety of our tinnie while on a fishing expedition. Tell-tale slide marks are spotted during a Guided Beach Tour on a flat-bed trailer towed by host Lyndsay on his tractor. The trailer is utilised to enable guests to move between fishing boats and the lodge, avoiding the need to wade ashore in croc-infested waters.

Departing Bathurst by light plane bound for Milikapiti, pilot Brent gets us airborne from a cleared strip of dirt little wider than a suburban street. Below, a network of snaking mangrove-lined creeks clashes with burnt-orange roads dissecting pine plantations. Jilamara Art Centre and Muluwuri Museum are our destination after lunch at Melville Island Lodge. We're joined by some of the island's artists on a verandah cooled by ocean breezes. Brian Farmer's work has been lauded globally. He says his work is inspired by stories his parents shared around campfires as he was growing up. "Sometimes there is a story I follow to keep the memories alive", he says. "Like a journey of growing up, going through all the stages to manhood, like initiations." A soft-spoken handsome man with a luxuriant grey beard, Farmer's 2014 Hobart exhibition was a sell-out.

Despite his gentle voice and humble nature, Farmer has the ability to command a room as he explains the striking canvases behind him. It's a fascinating insight into stories revolving around family and ancient customs. Whether artist, footballer or fisherman, Tiwi Islanders are in tune with the land, guided by traditions handed down through generations. A short distance from downtown Darwin, Tiwi Islands culture is honest and authentic. And it's thriving. Get there soon. •

TRAVEL FACTS

Getting there

The three day Ultimate Tiwi Island Tour runs from June to September 2016. Prices start from \$2425pp including Sealink ferry transfers or flights from Darwin, scenic flight to Melville Island, accom., meals, non-alcoholic beverages and all tour activities. A four day Tiwi Island Tour is priced from \$3225pp. More info [\[@\] www.sealinknt.com.au](http://www.sealinknt.com.au) Stay in Darwin before or after your Tiwi Islands tour at the all new Elan Soho Suites.