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# Art of Arnhem Land

## Cruising with Orion Expeditions

*Deep into Australia's remote north, cruising through extraordinary sun-kissed landscapes offers a unique opportunity to purchase stunning artworks.*

Stepping ashore in far-flung Arnhem Land, I'm standing on soil as old as Earth itself. Overhearing a fellow passenger asking an indigenous man at Maningrida how long he had lived here, incomprehensively he answers, 'since the earth was flat'. It is difficult to fathom just how ancient Aboriginal culture actually is. Far from the urban civilisation of Darwin, itself isolated from the rest of Australia, in the Northern Territory a nomadic connection between land and life is fundamental for indigenous Australians. Surviving 40,000 odd years in some of Australia's most remote country, ancient stories, songs and dance passed down through the generations are finding their way into the mainstream via contemporary art galleries. Despite, or perhaps because of, isolation, Arnhem Land is a breeding ground of artistic creativity.

Places such as Maningrida, Yirrkala, Elcho and Melville Islands all have thriving art communities. Tactile by nature, getting up close and personal, meeting the artists and curators is the best way to appreciate their raw beauty. Limited road access, wet season floods and a Government managed visitor permit system deter most travellers.

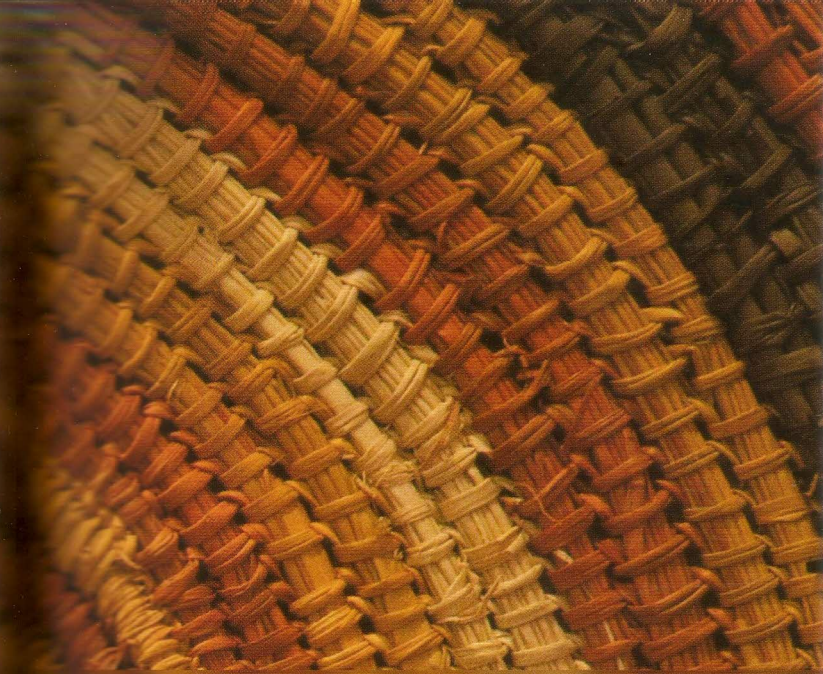
There is an easier way to visit Arnhem Land however. Departing Darwin onboard luxury expedition vessel Orion, (to be renamed National Geographic Orion in November 2013) we're bound for Thursday Island on the tip of Cape York. At 103 metres with capacity for around 100 passengers, Orion's ice-strengthened

hull is rather more accustomed to slipping through icy seas than balmy tropical waters, offering intimate cruising in opulent style. Fine dining, plush suites, some with bathtubs, many with French balconies, ensure that life onboard is rather luxurious, akin to travelling by private yacht.

Our first stop is Pirlangimpi on Melville Island, known for Tiwi ceramics and carved totem-like Pukumani funeral poles. A dance troupe greets us at Munupi Art Centre. Inquisitive dogs bounce around dancers' feet while further afield women laugh and clap, bashful children clinging to their skirts.

Maningrida was established in the 1940's as a trading post, though these days it's the Maningrida Art Centre that is most industrious. Attracting worldwide attention as a powerhouse of central Arnhem Land art, all works are created utilising bush materials sourced from the land. Bark paintings by renowned Maningrida artist John Mowandjuri are highly sought after, commanding significant prices. Babbarra Designs, an initiative of the Babbarra Women's Centre, specialises in colourful lino printed textiles depicting the landscape, dreaming stories, bush food and mythical spirits.

The Morning Star dominates life in these parts, tracking west across the Arnhem Land sky. Known as Banumbirr, Morning Star Poles are sacred objects, which have been replicated by artists. Outside the Elcho Island Art Centre in Galiwin'ku community, 76 year old elder, Gali Yalkarriwuy appears in ceremonial dress, his body elaborately adorned, carrying a Morning Star Pole. Tufts of white feathers at the top of the pole represent the star, coloured



feathers further down represent new life while coloured bands represent the changing light between night and day.

On the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria Buku-Larrnggay Mulku Art Centre at Yirrkala is one of Australia's premier indigenous art centres. Buku artists have picked up a dilly bag full of major awards in recent years. Significantly, Native Title legislation has its roots here with the Yirrkala bark petitions of 1963 the first documentary recognition of indigenous people in Australian law. Not a bad outcome for a bark painting: art is serious business indeed in these parts.

Visit [www.nationalgeographicexpeditions.com](http://www.nationalgeographicexpeditions.com) ♦

## Art Centres and Galleries

**Munupi Arts & Crafts Melville Island**

[www.munupiart.com](http://www.munupiart.com)

**Barbbarra Designs**

[www.babbarradesigns.com.au](http://www.babbarradesigns.com.au)

**Elcho Island Arts Centre**

[www.elchoarts.com](http://www.elchoarts.com)

**Maningrida Art Centre**

[www.maningrida.com](http://www.maningrida.com)

**Buku Larrnggay Mulku Art Centre**

[www.yirrkala.com](http://www.yirrkala.com)



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