



FIRE & STONE

The world’s oldest aquaculture site and a dormant volcano lead the way for vibrant Indigenous tourism in south-west Victoria.

WORDS BY JOCELYN PRIDE

This is eel country,” says Braydon Saunders, a Gunditjmara man and tour guide coordinator at Budj Bim Cultural Landscape. “My ancestors lived and worked here thousands of years ago.”

We take a moment to be still and gaze across the vast land surrounding us. Morning sunlight dances across rusty topped reeds fringing a narrow waterway, illuminates spider webs draped in tree branches, and creates light and shade patterns on the lava stones scattered across the ground. To add to the mystique, a fogbow appears low in the sky – a rare cousin of the rainbow that happens when tiny droplets of moisture are inside fog, creating a white ghost-like bow.

Gently breaking the silence, Saunders is proud to share his traditions and knowledge of

Australia’s most recent UNESCO World Heritage listed site and the first based completely on Aboriginal culture. Located in a south-west pocket of Victoria around 3.5 hours from Melbourne (not far from Allansford, marking the end of the famed Great Ocean Road), Budj Bim Cultural Landscape covers 6,300 hectares. It consists of three components (northern, central and southern) and is home to a creation story scientifically linked to the volcanic eruption of Budj Bim (meaning ‘high head’) at least 32,000 years ago.

“Budj Bim was our ancestral creator-being who saw how our people were struggling from living a nomadic lifestyle, unable to create resources for themselves, so he spewed his blood and teeth out across the landscape,” Saunders describes with dramatic

A GIN THING

Noodledoof is one of those words that sticks in your mind... as does the taste of their gin that perfectly expresses the vibe of south-west Victoria. The brainchild of two mates, Sam ‘Noodles’ Rudolph and Alex ‘Doof’ Carr, who launched their craft brewery and distillery from scratch in Koroit in 2019, Noodledoof is also starting to use native botanicals. “It’s awesome to work with the guys just up the road at Worn Gundidj. As well as the gin, we’re working on a native citrus liqueur and a wattleseed coffee liqueur,” says Rudolph. “We like to keep things as local as possible.” noodledoof.com

actions. “The serpent came through and created waterways and the lava clogged wetlands, forcing the water to seep through the cracks, forming springs, creeks and lakes.”

This was the turning point for the Gunditjmara people, whose engineering feat 6,600 years ago pre-date masterpieces such as the Egyptian pyramids, the Roman Colosseum and Stonehenge.

WRITTEN IN STONE

As we wander, Saunders explains how his ancestors managed the seasonal water flow from Tae Rak (Lake Condah), creating dams and weirs to herd kooyang (eel) into ponds before trapping them into gnarraban (baskets) woven from reeds and spear grass. “They then had an ongoing supply of food. Just like having a shop down the road.” This not only means they could stay put, but they could also trade. “Eel were perfect to trade because everyone wanted big, juicy, oily eels and we wanted whatever else we could get.”

In addition to witnessing the world’s oldest aquaculture system, the area is rich in remnants of stone huts the Gunditjmara people lived in for

Clockwise from opposite page, far left:

The Tae Rak Aquaculture Centre nestles into the landscape; Formed by a volcanic eruption, Tower Hill exudes an air of mystery; Sampling bush foods is part of the Worn Gundidj at Tower Hill experience; The seasonal calendar is one of the highlights of Budj Bim Cultural Landscape.

thousands of years. Since native title rights returned to the traditional owners in 2007, evidence of more than 300 huts has been recorded. Saunders talks through how horseshoe-shaped huts were built using stone for the walls and intertwined scorched branches rammed with mud and clay formed the thatched roofs. “Doorways always faced north-east. If you’ve ever experienced our southerly winds, you’ll understand why.”

CONSULT THE CALENDAR

As with any type of farming, the seasonal calendar was essential to the survival of the Gunditjmara people. The tour takes us to a beautifully sculptured calendar laid out in clockface style, covering six seasons – drying out time, big dry, early wet, big wet, flowering time and fattening time. Short phrases like ‘heavy dews’ (May), ‘brolgas dance’ (August), and ‘north winds blow’ (January) carved in stones

SOMEONE SAY ICE CREAM?

Tucked into the hinterland behind the Great Ocean Road, Timboon Fine Ice Cream is already the go-to place for off-the-scale ice cream made with milk straight from the farm. Yet it’s about to add another dimension to the range – Indigenous flavours. “We’re thrilled to be collaborating with Kaleb Comolatti at Worn Gundidj to develop new flavours using bush foods,” says Tim Marwood. A third-generation dairy farmer, he established the boutique ice creamery in 1999 together with his partner Caroline Simmons as a ‘side hustle’. Launching this summer, scoops of selected flavours ranging from wattleseed, peppermint gum, Davidson plum and strawberry gum will be available at their home base in Timboon, their dreamy sea shop in Port Campbell moments away from the Twelve Apostles and the shop inside the Worn Gundidj Information Centre. timboonfineicecream.com.au

TAKE A TOUR

Budj Bim Cultural Landscape offers a range of two-hour to whole-day guided tours to the various components within the vast expanse of the UNESCO World Heritage site. budjbim.com.au Worn Gundidj at Tower Hill runs Indigenous culture and bush tucker guided tours twice a day from Monday to Saturday. towerhill.org.au

“THE TIME IS RIGHT FOR BUSH FOODS TO REALLY TAKE OFF.”

KALEB COMOLATTI

say it like it was (and still is). “When we were doing some fire burns earlier this year, it was cool to see them using this calendar to check which areas on Country to burn,” says Saunders.

Tae Rak is our last stop, where an unusual welcoming party greets us – hundreds of black swans floating majestically among the reeds in the shallow basin lake.

Drained by European settlers in the 1880s, the lake stretching across 4km by 1km was reflooded in 2010, and since then there has been an incredible recovery of water birds (including brolgas), eels and fish.

Overlooking the lake, the Tae Rak Aquaculture Centre stands as a symbol of marrying the past with the present. Against a backdrop of gums, superb architecture draws the eye in without being overpowering. In addition to the eel breeding and processing areas, the recently opened restaurant headed up by Gunditjmara chef Ricky North serves a bush tucker-inspired menu with buttery, sweet-tasting smoked eel the house speciality. For Saunders, seeing the various aspects of Budj Bim Cultural Landscape open to tourism is a dream come true.

“My dad was a tour leader and I’ve always known I want to represent my mob and be part of presenting our story. We want to extend the stories beyond the landscape,” he says.

Less than an hour away from Budj Bim Cultural Landscape, a volcano is also at the centre of another ingenious tourism experience.

It’s been more than 30,000 years since a volcanic eruption formed Tower Hill, but descending into the crater along a winding road where exposed striated rock faces jut out from the dense vegetation makes it feel like a journey into the centre of the Earth. At the base of Victoria’s first national park (1892), a series of lakes intermingled with islands line the 11km rim, creating a haven for wildlife. However, it hasn’t always been the idyllic setting we see today.

“The oldest tree in the whole of Tower Hill is 61 years old,” says Worn Gundidj guide, Rueben Smith. “After being stripped for farming in the late 1800s, there wasn’t a tree left by 1890.”

It’s the start of a two-hour culture and nature walk. Smith explains how it wasn’t until 1961 that a massive revegetation project was undertaken by Parks Victoria to restore the area to what it would’ve looked like when the Koroitgundidj, the local clan of the Gunditjmara people, lived here.

As we wander away from the visitors centre, a couple of emus look like they want to take over as guides, and a small group of kangaroos nibbling grass don’t even lift their heads as we pass. It also doesn’t take long to get into the native flora.

TASTE TESTING

“This is Prostanthera incisa, or as we like to call it – toothbrush,” Smith says, plucking a bunch of leaves from a bush and rubbing them across his teeth. Naturally we all follow suit, amid squeals of ‘Oh, it tickles’ and ‘Wow, it’s so minty’.

Continuing on we sample a range of other bush foods such as bower spinach, rich in Vitamin C and iron and tasting like snow peas; sea celery, where every part of the plant is edible; and my favourite, fern bracken, which feels a bit like having a caterpillar in your mouth, but tastes exactly like walnuts.

Later, over a brew of Yulu tea, a lively blend of wild lime, wild rosella, lemon myrtle and Davidson plum, we hear how Worn Gundidj is taking bush foods to greater heights through an onsite nursery managed by Kaleb Comolatti. “The time is right for bush foods to really take off, especially if they’re Indigenous owned,” says Comolatti. “We’re already selling botanicals to a local distillery and ice creamery, and have people interested in our bush foods as far away as France.”

And as a social enterprise, with profits going back into business, this helps employ Indigenous people, building on the knowledge of past generations while also paving the way for the future. 🍵

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DHUWA, pronounced ‘Dee-Wah’, means ‘to feel alive’ in the Bidjara language. We sit down with Shawn Andrews, who is celebrating his ancestry through his coffee brand, DHUWA. mindfood.com/indigenous-coffee