



essentials

Getting there: Mungo National Park is in the far southwestern corner of NSW. The roads heading towards Mungo from the north from either Broken Hill and Menindee, or from Wilcannia are the more difficult but interesting, while from the south Mildura and Balranald are only around 110km away. A 4WD is recommended.

Staying there: Options include Mungo Lodge (www.mungolodge.com.au), camping and a station stay (www.turleestationstay.com.au).
More: www.visitmungo.com.au

Where time travel is reality

AT MUNGO National Park, the phrase footprints in the sands of time takes on an almost literal meaning.

My own sneaker prints on the sand dunes of the park, in the southwest of NSW, were merely fleeting footprints in the blowing sands of that day.

But really, I was following in the 20,000-year-old footsteps of indigenous hunters as I walked along the strange barren dune-scape known as the Walls of China.

It was rutted and turreted, eroded and reformed along its 30km length.

An archeological find earlier this century showed the imprint of a tribe of men, on the hunt, who had been running along in muddy ground of the Lake Willandra region, as the Ice Age was ending and Lake Mungo was beginning to dry out.

The mud seeped through their toes, and the indentations they left in the mud, dried with Lake Mungo.

They became fossilised and were thus preserved for 20,000 years.

Late last century, the shifting sands and clays of the dunes, had yielded up the 40,000-year-old buried remains of Mungo

Mungo National Park offers a chance to venture into the prehistoric world and find a land that time preserved, writes **Marjie Courtis**

Man and the equally old, cremated remains of Mungo Lady.

Mungo Man and Mungo Lady, other archeological finds and this outstanding example in the earth's evolutionary history led to the region being inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1981.

So in 2011, the region is celebrating 30 years since its listing.

To mark the anniversary, the visitors' centre has been revamped and extra Aboriginal discovery tours from the local Paakantji, Ngyiampaa and Mutthi Mutthi tribal groups have been scheduled.

At the visitors' centre, you can see and touch reproductions of both the ancient footprints, and mega fauna such as the *Zygomaturus (Zyggy)*.

You can see ancient tools that were discovered in the 30km lunette of the dunes – skeletal remains of animals, commentary, ancient tools and soundscapes.

You can also download a guidebook to your mobile phone or tablet by way of Bluetooth.

The unseen remains of Mungo Lady are in a double-locked vault somewhere at the centre, with one key held by archeologists and the other by the indigenous people, reflecting the respect the elders expect for their ancestor.

The remains of Mungo Man are currently with the National Museum.

And the fossilised footprints have reportedly been covered with sand again, though fortunately not before 3D camera technology recorded them for reproduction.

Archeologist or not, there is still plenty for the visitor to discover and experience at Mungo National Park.

On the dunes we saw a lot more than just the fresh footprints of that morning's visits from a dingo, a bearded dragon or some native birds.

We also saw the skeletal remains of an extinct hairy-nosed wombat, aboriginal middens containing discarded mussel shells from Australia's pre-history, and charcoal-remains in layers of ancient cooking hearths, embedded within the clay.

ANCIENT LAND: The Walls of China (top), where erosion has sculpted the sand and clay into dramatic formations in Mungo National Park; Shearing Shed (below right) using drop log construction technique at the park, which is part of the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Region, NSW.

Pictures: Marjie Courtis

Close to the visitor's centre is the first link to the pastoral footprint left on Mungo National Park.

A drop-log shearing shed made of pine still smells of sheep 15 years after it was closed and you can almost visualise the workers in the Tom Roberts' painting *Shearing the Rams* in the late 1800s hard at it in a shearing shed like this.

The nearby remnants of old tanks, housing, sheds and an underground shelter with a year-round temperature of 23C on the old Zanci station give insights into a pastoral period before grazing ceased to be viable and the shearing stopped.

Everything in the park is protected – fossils, relics, shells, bones.

So in this ancient area of Australia, you are virtually bound by the traveller's principle of "taking nothing but photos and leaving only your footprints".

And to put your footprints on the Walls of China, you must be with an accredited guide.

The sunset – and in my case, the moonrise – over the Walls of China is not to be missed.

The colours change from drab grey to hues of warm pinks.

And if the roads are all open you'll be able to take a 70km drive around the Willandra Lakes Heritage area, past kangaroos and emu grazing among the grey green saltbush, spinifex and casuarinas.

In fact the landscape is constantly changing as the sands and clays of the dune-fields are washed away by rains and blown back again from the winds that blow across the empty basins that once were lakes.

The landscape may have constantly changed in the past 40,000 years but the impressions of ancient humanity are kept alive and strong in Mungo National Park.

I recommend visiting and letting your own footprints blow with the Outback winds.

