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EXPLORE
OCTOBER 1-7 2011



Take a giant step

DISCOVER **MUNGO**, ONE OF OUR BEST-KEPT SECRETS, WRITES **MARJIE COURTIS**

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 the state, were merely fleeting mementos in the blowing sands of that day.

But what I was really doing was following in the 20,000-year-old footsteps of indigenous hunters as I walked along the strange barren dunescape known as the Walls Of China. It has been rutted and turreted, eroded and re-formed along its 30km length.

An archaeological find earlier this century showed the imprint of a tribe of men on the hunt who had been running on the muddy ground of the Willandra Lakes region when 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 brought up the 40,000-year-old buried remains of Mungo Man and the equally old, cremated remains of Mungo Lady.

Along with other archaeological finds, this discovery led to the region being inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1981. This year, 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 the ancient footprints and mega fauna such as the zygomaticus.

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



You can also download a guidebook for your mobile phone or tablet via bluetooth.

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

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.

Archaeologist or not, there is still plenty for the visitor to discover and experience at Mungo National Park. On the dunes, we saw the

fresh footprints from a dingo, a bearded dragon or some birds left over from the morning's visits.

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

Close to the visitors' 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 Tom Roberts' painting, *Shearing The Rams*. Painted in the late 1800s, the workers are toiling in a shearing shed just like this one.

The nearby remnants of old

Timeless landscape: Erosion has sculpted the sand and clay into dramatic formations (below) the shearing shed



BEST weekend

Daily Telegraph



**tracey
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Holiday's no cakewalk

We all live in a state of self-deception. Every day I wake up and think, "I'm only going to have one coffee today. In the morning. Like the Italians". After all, being a middle-aged mother-of-two hunched over a computer, wearing trackie dacks and thongs is so Sorrento.

By 3pm — after taking the kids to school, racing off to work, nearly having a car accident (or similar catastrophe) — I inevitably crumble.

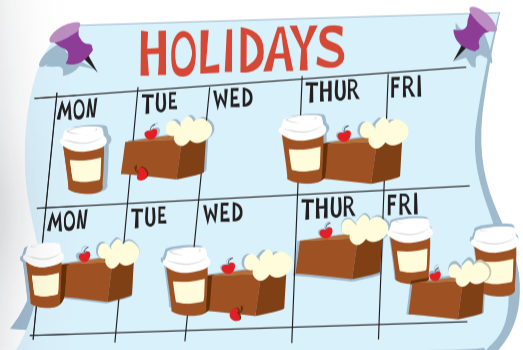
"Well, I'll just make myself one with half a shot or order a weak cappuccino or have a cup of tea instead or eat this sugary biscuit," I say to myself. I deceive myself into believing I'm a one-coffee-a-day girl — which clearly I'm not.

Yours might not be coffee. It could be alcohol, cake or cigarettes. Or exercise. The same negotiation goes on in the gym.

"OK, I'll run at 10.5 km/h on the treadmill today because I haven't done anything all week. Actually, I'm feeling a bit tired and might be coming down with something. Better just walk. Ooh, that level three incline is making my back twinge, better make it flat."

But the worst self-deception comes during the school holidays. If you're a working parent, you are desperate to spend time with the little buggers ... until you start spending time with the little buggers.

Because you're unaccustomed to hour upon hour of needy whining, you reach for the gin bottle as soon as the little hand reaches the five.



You're not an alcoholic — technically, it's cocktail hour. If you're a stay-at-home parent, you mistakenly think that this is going to be a holiday for you as well. The kids fail to understand that going to play centres, video arcades and crowded museums isn't your idea of a good time.

If you're without children, you have to put up with the aforementioned whining and crowding in your favourite coffee shop, cinema and art gallery. Welcome to our world.

Self-deception during the school holidays begins with: "I'm going to take the kids to a whole lot of lovely places where they'll learn stuff and be enriched and we'll look like one of those families in the magazines."

It ends with: "Right, I've spent a fortune on you kids and all you do is want more, more, more. Go and play in the traffic while Mummy has a gin/coffee/piece of cake."

Once they're back at school, we deceive ourselves into thinking it's all been *The Brady Bunch*. Which it never is. So I say, let's drop the expectations. During the school break some days are diamonds; some days are stone.

It's spending time together that matters ... and that requires extra coffee and cake.

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water tanks, houses, 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.

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 travel across the empty basins that were once lakes.

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

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



essentials

GETTING THERE:

Mungo National Park is in far southwestern NSW. The roads heading towards Mungo from the north — from either Broken Hill and Menindee via Pooncarie or from Wilcannia via Ivanhoe — are more difficult but interesting. To the south, Mildura and Balranald are only about 110km away. Travel on unsealed roads is required and a 4WD is recommended.

STAYING THERE:

Options include the Mungo Lodge (mungolodge.com.au), camping and a station stay (turleestationstay.com.au).

MORE:

www.visitmungo.com.au

Another world:
(top) sunset at the Walls Of China; Mungo Lodge and camping at Mungo National Park (above) and Vigars Well sand dunes (left)

All pictures: John Fotiadis

