

In the mud with Mungo Man

The West Australian MARJIE COURTIS The West Australian
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Mungo: Ancient footprint.

Marjie Courtis

My sneaker prints on the sand dunes of Mungo National Park are merely fleeting footprints in the blowing sands.

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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 variously 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 along in the muddy ground of the Willandra Lakes 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 preserved for 20,000 years.

Late last century, the shifting sands and clays of the dunes yielded up the 40,000-year-old buried remains of Mungo Man and the equally old cremated remains of Mungo Lady.

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

So in 2011 the region, which includes Mungo National Park, celebrated 30 years since its listing.

To mark the anniversary, the Visitor Centre has been re-vamped and additional Aboriginal Discovery

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tours from the local Paakantji, Ngiyampaa and Mutthi Mutthi tribal groups have been scheduled.

At the Visitor Centre, you can see and touch reproductions of both the ancient footprints and mega fauna such as the zygomaturus ("Zygy").

You can see ancient tools that were discovered in the 30km lunette of the dunes, study skeletal remains of animals or listen to commentary and "soundscapes".

You can also download - via Bluetooth - a guidebook optimised for mobile phones or tablets.

The unseen remains of Mungo Lady are in a double-locked vault somewhere at the Visitor Centre, with one key held by archaeologists 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.

The fossilised footprints have reportedly been covered with sand again, though fortunately not before 3-D 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 not just the fresh footprints of that morning's visits from a dingo, a bearded dragon or some birds, but also the skeletal remains of an extinct hairy-nosed wombat, Aboriginal middens containing discarded mussel shells and charcoal remains in layers 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 Tom Robert's Shearing the Rams, painted in 1890, in a shed like this.

The nearby remnants of old tanks, housing, sheds and an underground shelter - for a constant 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 and 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 emus 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 move across the empty basins that once were lakes.

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

Let your own footprints blow with the winds.

FACT FILE

- Go direct to visitmungo.com.au for more information. There are details about Aboriginal discovery tours, commercial tours and self-guided tours.
- Download a guidebook before your visit (visitmungo.com.au/downloads/mungo-v1-0.pdf).
- Mungo National Park can be reached by road from Mildura, Victoria, and Wentworth, Ivanhoe or Balranald, NSW. Allow several hours to arrive and check road conditions before setting out.
- Stay two nights if possible. I stayed at the up-market Mungo Lodge (mungolodge.com.au). Other accommodation options include camping, the former shearer's quarters and a station stay (turleestationstay.com.au).
- See also whc.unesco.org for more on the World Heritage List.



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