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OPINION

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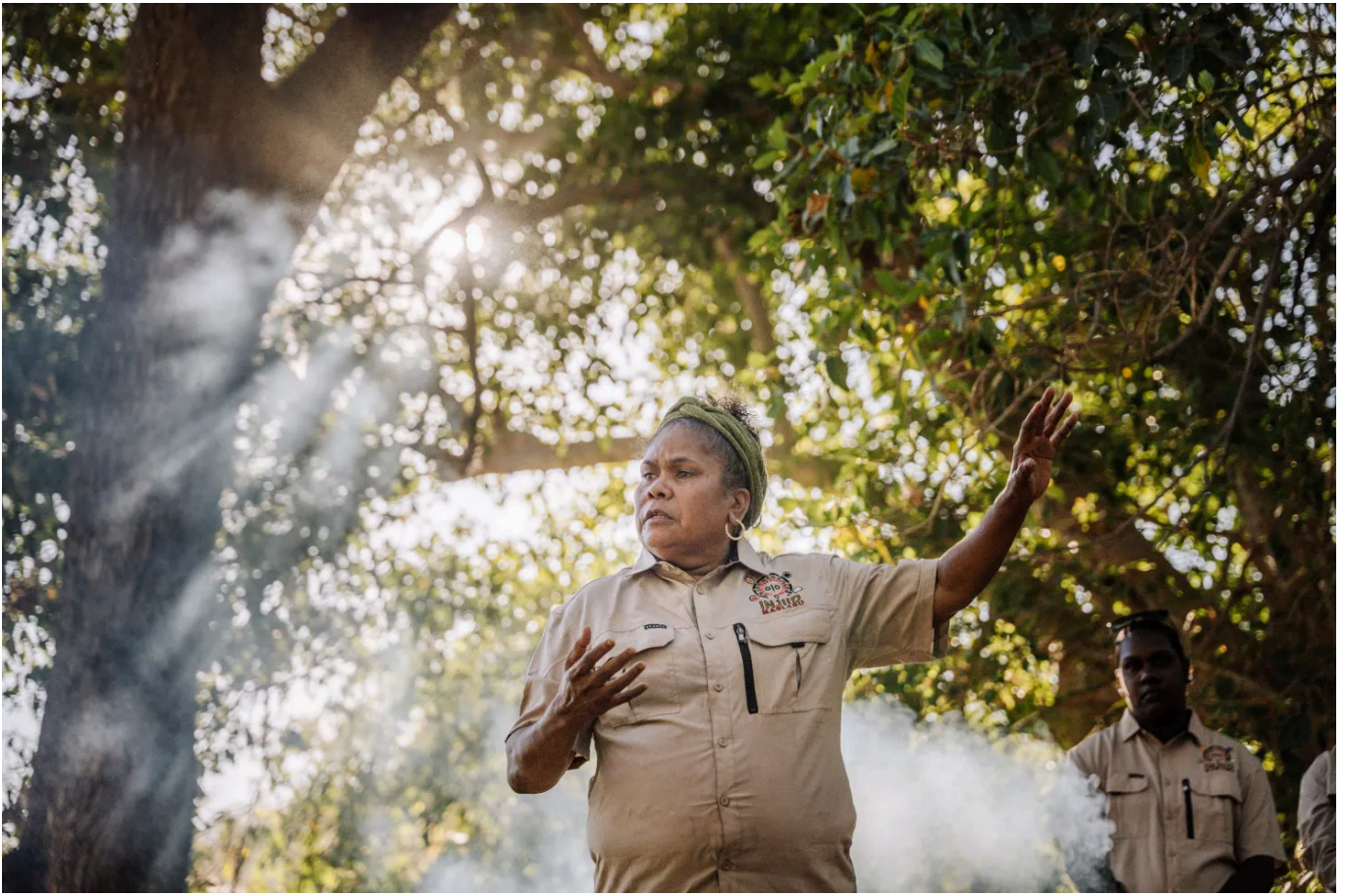
Lee Tulloch

Travel columnist

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It is one of the most emotionally stirring experiences I've had anywhere.

We are gathered on the banks of the Chamberlain River in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia in the garden of El Questro homestead, the famed cattle property that is now one of Australia's most celebrated luxury lodges.



Profound: Mary O'Reeri tells her story.

Over two hours, proud Ngarinyin man Nelson O'Reeri, his wife, Mary and daughter Shonelle captivate us with stories, music, and smoking and cleansing ceremonies significant to the Wandjina people, traditional owners of the land.

I've taken part in a few Indigenous experiences over the years, but this is by far the most profound. The family's storytelling is thrilling, uplifting and wrenching. Injiid Marlabu Calls Us is exclusive to El Questro. It's the story of the O'Reeri family, who lived on this country for thousands of years before the cattle barons came in the late 19th century.

The Injiid Marlabu talk is a tribute to Nelson's grandmother and Shonelle's great grandmother, Injiid, who lived a nomadic life, walking along the river when there were no roads, giving birth on the riverbank, and navigating her journeys by the stars.



Being guided back to our connection to the land can be an overwhelming emotional experience.

Injiid gave birth to 15 children on the land (only her four youngest were born in a hospital). In the early 1900s, she and her sister witnessed the murder of their father by a pastoralist and were taken to Perth to give evidence in his trial.

They were held in a prison tree – the hollowed-out trunk of tree – for many weeks. The pastoralist was acquitted. It's not hard to imagine how frightening this was, as they didn't speak English. She later learned the language from nuns.

When Injiid returned, her first-born child was gone. He had been stolen, taken to a reserve in Wyndham by authorities. It wasn't until 42 years later that they were reunited.

The family weaves life stories from Nelson's grandmother into the yarns, and Mary speaks poetically about dreamtime legends and creation stories, about morality, protocols and Indigenous customs, many of which are challenging for a white person.

Shonelle speaks about the deep connection to country and the way it has supported them for hundreds of generations. "We have our own pharmacy and our own Bunnings," she says.

Mary also talks frankly about the many ways the system fails Aboriginal youth, from the devastating incidences of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, to youth suicide and the disproportionate jailing of young people. Nelson performs a beautiful song he has written after the suicide of a family member.

Often, Indigenous experiences tend to be constructed around bush tucker and Dreamtime legends and don't stray into contemporary issues, but Mary isn't pulling any punches. Intergenerational trauma is real and raw.

Mary says she's hopeful about changes that are happening "behind the scenes".

One of the most significant of these changes was formalised two years ago, involving the country we are standing on.

In 2022, the West Australia government, the Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation and the G'Day Group, operators of El Questro, struck a historic land deal that returned almost half of the 283,000-hectare property to its traditional owners.

The 99-year agreement sees part of the land leased back to El Questro (which includes camping sites as well as the up-market lodge). Any cattle left on pastoral leases will be moved on to allow the land to be rewilded.

The agreement also provides the local Indigenous community's young people with ongoing training and employment as rangers, guides and workers in hospitality.

Indigenous tourism has really taken off in recent years. In 2023-2024 there were three million trips in Australia that incorporated a First Nations activity, according to a [report](#) from the Australian Trade and Tourism Commission.

Sixty-three per cent of these trips were by domestic travellers. Visiting an Indigenous site or community was the most popular activity.

I can understand why. There aren't many travel experiences that have such a strong spiritual message.

For the traditional custodians of the land, the connection is to the soil on which we all stand, the wind that blows, the rivers that carry our water – something every human shares.

“The heart is in the country and the country is in the heart,” Mary says simply.

Most Australians recognise that we've sometimes lost that connection, especially in our relationship with nature.

Which is why being guided back to it by the wise and gentle people of the land can be such an overwhelming emotional experience.

The writer was a guest of El Questro and Luxury Lodges of Australia.



Lee Tulloch – Lee is a best-selling novelist, columnist, editor and writer. Her distinguished career stretches back more than three decades, and includes 12 years based between New York and Paris. Lee specialises in sustainable and thoughtful travel. Connect via [Twitter](#).
