



# Top choice in the Top End

*An art gallery in Katherine in the Northern Territory is offering a fresh take on the Indigenous cultural experience, teaching bush skills to novices*

**BY LAURA WATERS**

**M**anuel Pamkal is not averse to eating a bit of roadkill if it's fresh. Wallaby is his favourite. One of the Indigenous Dalabon people, he was born on the banks of King River in remote Arnhem Land sometime around 1966 – no one knows for sure exactly

when – and wrapped in paperbark, only seeing his first white man at age five. Now, Manuel is teaching me how to throw a spear.

“Rest it on your fingers,” he says as I try to balance the unwieldy projectile on top of my right hand while gripping a woomera for extra thrust. The left hand holds the spear aloft and aimed at a kangaroo-

shaped target 10 metres away. With a grunt, I fling the spear with all my might for it to travel about four metres. Sideways. The “kangaroo” will live to see another day.

It's all part of a two-and-a-half-hour Indigenous cultural experience offered at Top Didj, an art gallery with an unassuming open-air classroom tucked behind it in the

outback town of Katherine, 320 kilometres south-east of Darwin. Spear throwing, lighting fires with sticks and traditional painting is the kind of caper that has the potential to feel a tad cheesy, but this experience is far from it. Manuel shares real life skills from personal experience, making for an enlightening and truly authentic glimpse into Indigenous culture.

“Dad was always telling me to be quiet when we were out in the bush. You can’t catch anything if you make a noise,” he says. A natural storyteller with a beaming smile and eyes that twinkle cheekily beneath a mop of dark hair flecked with grey, he has his audience entranced from the get-go. The morning begins with a powerfully haunting song accompanied by the sharp whack of clap sticks and then a tune on the didgeridoo – not one covered in gaudy painted designs, but carved simply from a woollybutt tree hollowed out by termites.

“Ask me anything you want!” His eager invitation opens the door for a two-way interaction, and we learn about the complexities of skins – “kind of like a surname” – and that the white man’s concept of saving does not exist in the bush, where food must be shared immediately before it spoils. Insights are shared and questions asked, and it’s a rare opportunity for a deeper understanding of culture.

Fire lighting is next. The group takes it in turns to coax a smoulder from the frantic rubbing of two wooden sticks and a few grains of sand for enhanced friction, and cheers erupt when at least one person is successful and the embers are gently fanned into flames.

Alas, at this too I’m a failure, but what I lack in hunting and fire lighting skills I make up for in painting. Rarrk (or crosshatch) is the style of the region, involving a criss-cross of fine lines. I want to copy one of Manuel’s crocodiles, but a fruit bat design looks slightly more straightforward. Step by step,

he leads us through the process with gentle encouragement as we put down layers of white, charcoal and ochre coloured paint. At the outset our task had seemed impossibly beyond us, but I’m thrilled when the image of a fairly respectable bat starts to emerge on the small canvas.

It’s easy to see how Manuel has been awarded a Tourism NT Brolga Award for Outstanding Interpretive Guide. I feel I could spend all day with him – there’s so much more to know – but all too quickly our time is up, and all I have is a small fruit bat to remind me of our glimpse into his world. ●



## THE DETAILS

The Aboriginal Cultural Experience at Top Didj operates twice daily during the dry season (May to October) and costs \$75 per person. [topdidj.com](http://topdidj.com)

Knotts Crossing Resort in Katherine offers a range of accommodation from camping to hotel suites.

[knottscrossing.com.au](http://knottscrossing.com.au)

