

Dancing with the stars

Every two years, mobs of Indigenous dancers gather in Queensland Quinkan country to sing, dance and celebrate culture, writes **Cathy Finch**.



Photography by Cathy Finch and NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory (NASA-JPL).



There is growing electricity on the sidelines, the sort of static caused by an audience watching the final episode of *Dancing with the Stars*. But there is no race for ratings here, and no need for a fancy stage. This dancing ground is much more than that – a patch of grass and dust tucked beneath the shady gum trees on the outskirts of town that has been danced upon by generations of Indigenous dancers and is well known as an ancient *bora* (dance) ground. Here, all tribes gather as one.

I have driven 330 kilometres north from Cairns to the tiny Cape York township of Laura to experience the biennial Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival, a rhythmic celebration of over 20 different communities from the Cape York Peninsula and beyond, showcasing their culture through dance and song.

If you are expecting an arty cultural event with box seats, champagne to sip and gala dinners, well, don't bother. But if you seek a grassroots connection with the land and its traditional owners, this authentic festival won't disappoint.

On the grass, in the heat, and sometimes covered in dust, a crowd of thousands gathers to be welcomed by each traditional dance group from communities such as Aurukun, Bamaga, Coen, Injinoo, Lockhart River, Yalanji and Yarrabah, to name just a few. Spectators make themselves comfy on picnic rugs on the ground, vying for the best viewing angles, while I try to line myself up for some clear shots of the action, a feat that involves taking up residence amid dirt and straw under a wooden stage.

Above me, traditional owner and elder Tommy George of the Kuku Thaypan people welcomes everyone to their land and then one of Australia's largest Indigenous dance festivals takes off with gusto. Drums beat, paired with the sound of clapping sticks, as the *bora* circle explodes ●

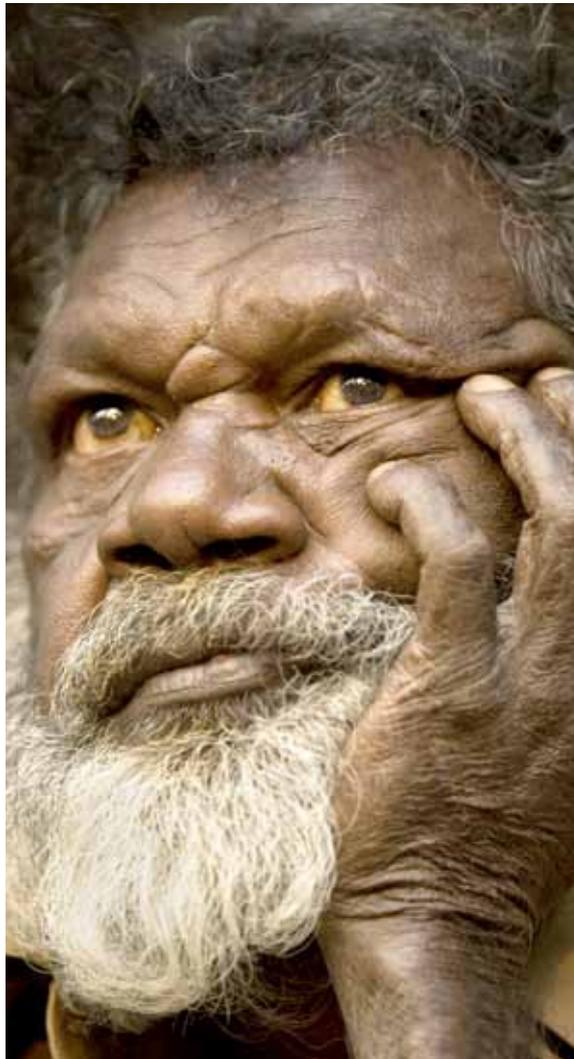
● Destination



with elaborately painted bodies and the mobs start dancing up a storm. This is only a taste of what's to come tomorrow when the real contest begins.

While this entire weekend is vitally important for the trading of stories and cultural interactions, there is also a great honour at stake. The Laura Dance Shield is hotly contested by all the bodies shaking and shimmering under these gum trees, and each visiting mob puts on a feverish display that reaches its crescendo on the Saturday evening.

Shafts of light beam down through the trees illuminating the thigh-slapping, ground-stomping performances of the dancers, eerily projected in the glowing, swirling dust. The earth shakes and vibrates ☞



Clockwise from above: The rock art galleries surrounding Laura are rich reminders of the area's history; traditional owner and local elder Tommy George Junior; a painting of a Quinkan.

DID YOU KNOW?

Quinkan is the Aboriginal name for the supernatural spirits that live in sandstone crevices in north Queensland, the evil ones of which emerge at night to stalk the land just outside of the firelight to grab the unwary. Many are painted in the caves around Laura. Quinkan rock art galleries have been identified as being at least 15,000 years old and are listed by UNESCO as one of the top 10 rock art sites in the world.

● Destination



beneath me as the sound of thumping feet swells and climaxes and pride and passion can be seen in the eyes staring out from stark white ochre. This year, crowd favourites Lockhart River walk away with the shield, but it'll be game on again at the next festival in 2013.

As well as singing and dancing, Aboriginal rock art is also highly significant in sharing stories and culture. Some sites provide occupational evidence of some 15,000 years and are considered some of the most spectacular and beautiful in the world.

While in the Laura area, I take a stimulating helicopter flight into the Giant Horse Gallery, a site where a six-metre-long and three-metre-high horse dominates amid many other images depicting stories and records from the ancestors of this region. It's thought that the horse depicted is the result of European explorer William Hand coming through the area in the 1870s. Many of the shelters depict the ancestral spirits of the Quinkans after whom the region is named. These spirit figures lived in the rocks, and some were evil; others merely playful. They were the boogie men of the Laura area. The long-limbed thin bodies are *timaras*, or tall spirits, and are the good guys, while the *imjims*, or bad spirits, have a distinctive bulbous appendage so they can bounce like kangaroos.

There are many other Aboriginal rock art sites in the area such as the Quinkan Galleries, Split Rock, Gugu Yulanji Galleries and Mushroom Rock Gallery, tucked within the surrounding plateaus. They are as intrinsic to the passing down of ancestral stories and culture as the dance and 'shake-a-leg' spirit I've had the privilege of enjoying at the Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival. ●

Above: Dancers ready themselves on the traditional *bora*, or dancing ground, at Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival.

Fact File

GETTING THERE

Laura Dance Festival is held biennially 15 kilometres out of Laura township, which is 330 kilometres north of Cairns. 2013 dates will be announced closer to the time. Tickets are \$85 inclusive of a full weekend of dancing, music, film screenings, activities and camping. Food stalls are dotted around the grounds.

WHERE TO STAY

The Quinkan Hotel has two rooms and there is a campground at the rear of the hotel.
07 4060 3393

Laura Caravan Park & Camping can be booked through the Quinkan & Regional Cultural Centre. The Centre is also a great place to learn about the area.
07 4060 3457 www.quinkancc.com.au

Apollo Motorhomes Australia rents campervans.
1800 777 779, www.apollocamper.com

WHAT TO DO

Helicopter safaris are available to many Quinkan Rock Art sites in the Laura area. www.skysafari.com.au

MORE INFORMATION

www.lauradancefestival.com
www.queenslandholidays.com.au



JEREMY GEIA, FESTIVAL ORGANISER

"The Laura Festival is a powerhouse – indeed, culture is our version of renewable energy that creates a powerful chain reaction as it crosses that intergenerational threshold – fuelling new leaders to believe in reaching the unachievable and giving older ones the satisfaction that their job as cultural conduits are well and truly making an impact."