

# A museum under the wide Outback sky

The Mungo National Park, deep in the south-western Outback of New South Wales, is one of Australia's most extraordinary destinations – an area, writes *Coast & Country* contributor Christopher Whitehead, of great wonderment, like a vast open-air museum.



An eerie landscape in which to contemplate the first civilisation of this country: the mountain-like dunes known as the “Walls of China”, shaped by wind and rain over thousands of years, stretch 33 kilometres through Mungo National Park. As the dunes continue to erode, successive layers are exposed to reveal more evidence of the distant past. Opposite page Strange stone outcrops like this one rise out of the landscape like monuments to the mysterious lost Dreamtime of Aboriginal tradition.

BY CHRISTOPHER WHITEHEAD

**T**HE ROAD TOWARDS the Mungo National Park from Mildura on the Murray River takes you north-east for 120 kilometres and passes through wide-open dry plains. Slowly, a different landscape materialises. Low dunes, known as lunettes, come into view. Here lies the ancient Willandra Lakes system. Huge basins, once fed by water from glaciers flowing westward from the Snowy Mountains when different climatic regimes governed this part of Australia, have been dry for 15,000 years.

The Mungo National Park covers an area of 112,586 hectares. Because of its special archaeological and geomorphologic features it was given world-heritage listing in 1981 and now forms part of the Willandra Lakes region world heritage area.

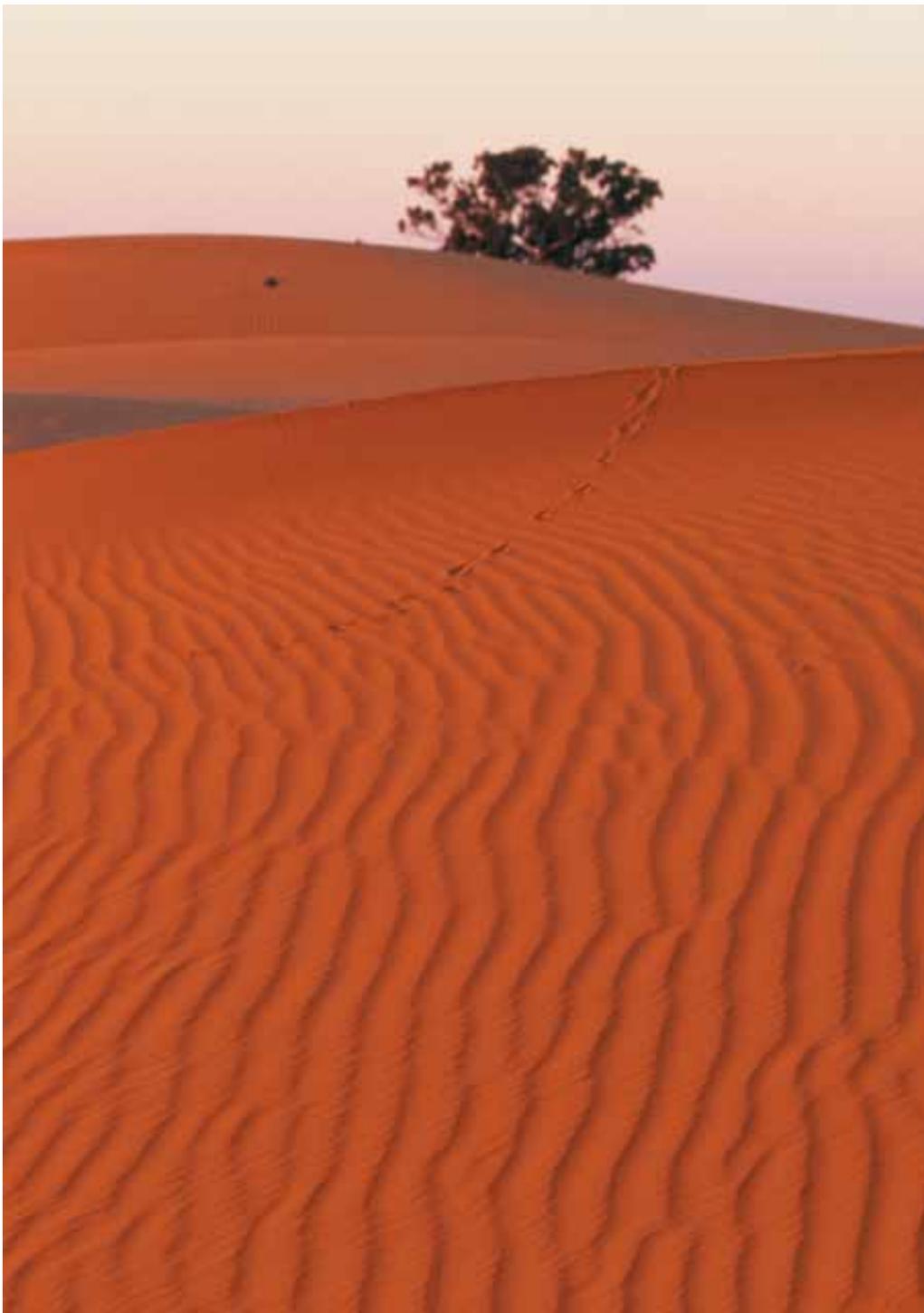
The Willandra Lakes region contains an

extensive archaeological record documenting human occupation of this part of Australia over at least the last 46,000 years. In 1968 at Lake Mungo a geomorphologist, Jim Bowler, discovered a mass of carbonated bone that turned out to be a fragmented human skull. Further excavation revealed that it belonged to a female who had been ritualistically cremated over 40,000 years ago – the oldest demonstrated ritual cremation anywhere in the world. This led to the rewriting of Australian prehistory. The remains of Mungo Woman confirmed human presence and activity in Australia much earlier than had been thought.

The Aboriginal tribes associated with the Willandra Lakes today are the Paakantyi, Mutthi Mutthi and Ngiyampaa people. In a sense such archaeological discoveries put them in closer touch with their past. Many

Australian Aborigines hand down from generation to generation the stories of their origins in an ancestral past known as the Dreamtime. They use song, dance and art to transmit these stories, and it is part of their culture that the stories are linked to features in the landscape. The combination of archaeology and Dreamtime stories can therefore complement each other in preserving Aboriginal cultural tradition.

During the last Ice Age Lake Mungo formed part of a chain of freshwater lakes strung along the Willandra Creek. About 50 million years ago this rocky inland landscape sank, as the Australian eastern highlands rose. Not only was there a lot of tectonic movement at this time, but also a great deal of rain. The Murray, Murrumbidgee and Lachlan rivers all contributed to the transformation of soil and water into the subsiding landscape. Over



Left The colour of burnt orange in the outback sun, these corrugated mounds of earth in the Mungo National Park cover the secrets of an ancient world. From time to time as the dunes shift and re-form they reveal evidence of indigenous campfires, middens and burials dating back nearly 50,000 years. Above The poached egg daisy (*Polycalymma stuartii*) is found throughout the park.

thousands of years dry windy conditions prevailed and the sluggish, meandering Willandra Creek became cut off, forming the Willandra Lakes system. The prevailing westerly winds shaped each lake, and continued to shape and create a lunette as the water receded. The lunette consists of layer upon layer of sand and silt deposited over tens of thousands of years. Wind and water have carved spectacular formations comprised of sand and clay. Three layers of sediment form the lunette, each representing a different period of time and different environmental condition. Each layer tells a story as the continuing action of wind and water reveals

archaeological treasures.

The first colonists in this area arrived in the late 1860s. They were the pastoralists who established a 203,000-hectare property known as Gol Gol station where they ran sheep in increasingly huge numbers. This form of land use had what we now know to have been a destabilising effect on the soil. In the year 1884-85 pastoralists kept between sixteen and twenty workers constantly cutting scrub to feed the greatly overstocked sheep population. Thousands of native white cypress pines were felled to build fences and farm buildings such as the Mungo Woolshed. The pine woodlands on the western lake's rim were denuded. The

combined effect of sheep, rabbits and feral goats seriously reduced the carrying capacity of the land. A series of droughts, culminating with the catastrophic drought of 1898-1900, caused massive storms to sweep the area and sand swallowed fences, sheds and tanks. In 1922, the division of Gol Gol station into a number of smaller blocks for the settlement of soldiers returning from the First World War further changed the character of the area.

The lease of Gol Gol station was eventually acquired by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales and in 1979 the Mungo National Park was formally established. Since then, the impact of grazing animals has declined and the soil has had a chance to re-stabilise itself. Native vegetation has regenerated and is growing more widely.

Today, the park is a vast and fascinating place to explore. One of the many outstanding features is the lunette known as the "Walls of China". This formation, shaped by wind and rain over thousands of years, contains spectacular rilled ridges and huge shifting dunes of dislodged sand. This shifting erosion has uncovered – and continues to uncover –

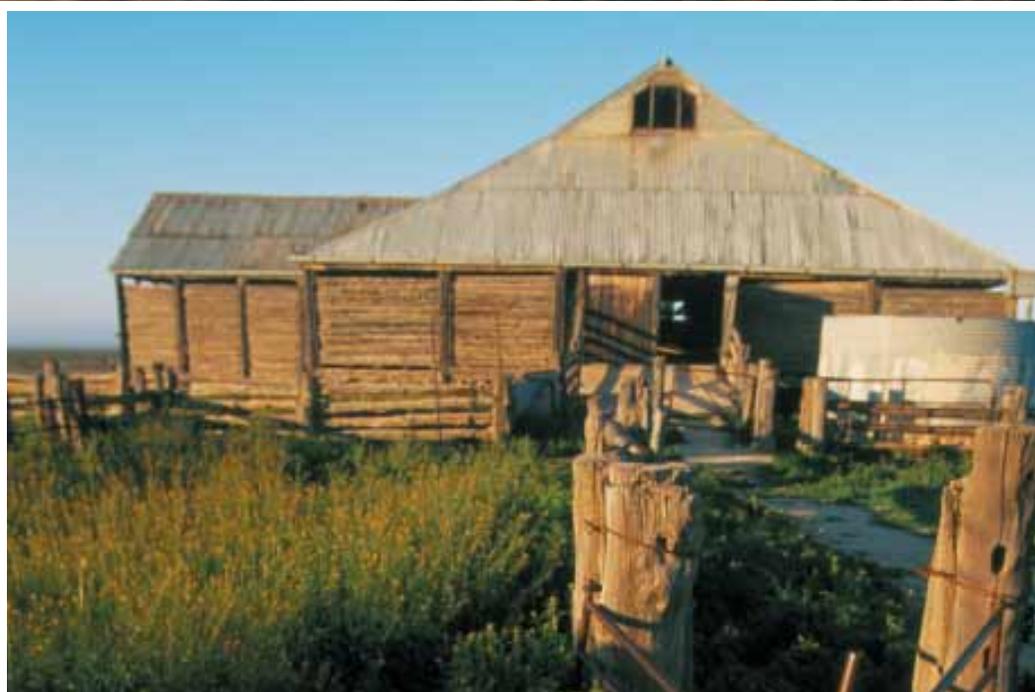


Above Red kangaroos in the Mungo National Park. The park's red sandy country is home to a diverse array of animals, birds and plant life. Right Mungo Woolshed, built in 1869 of local cypress pine, is part of the region's rich pastoral heritage. The shed has been kept in remarkable condition.

extensive signs of Aboriginal habitation. The objects that have come to light include fireplaces and cooking hearths containing the remains of shells and the bones of animals now known to have been extinct for centuries. Among them, bones have been identified from the procoptodon (the giant kangaroo *Stherurus*) and a large wombat-like creature called the zygomaturus, of which a full-size model can be seen in the Visitors' Centre. Such bones provide an excellent record not only of the animals that lived in the area, but of which animals the people preferred to eat.

Willandra is a sensitive and ancient landscape. But it is also an evolving landscape, and the same erosion that uncovers evidence of the past also threatens formations such as the giant lunettes.

Mungo National Park's present custodians have decided that tourism is an excellent way of familiarising people with the story of the Willandra. Tourism also offers the local Aborigines the opportunity to be involved, and representatives of the Paakantyi, Mutthi Mutthi and Ngiyampaa are currently working in the management of this world-heritage



area. They have formed a body called the Three Traditional Tribal Groups Elders Council, which has devised a concept of "shared heritage". This means in effect that the world-heritage area is jointly managed by the council and the New South Wales parks and wildlife service.

The three tribal groups plan to build a "keeping place" at Joulni at the southern end of Lake Mungo lunette to house the Mungo

Museum and an education and research centre operated by the Elders Council. The first stage will be a subterranean structure that operates as an archive, meeting place, collection facility and laboratory space. It will be the first point of call for visitors to the Willandra, introducing them to the significance of the area and emphasising the need to respect the fragile landscape.

The best time to visit Mungo National

Park is during the cooler months of the year, generally between March and October. But keep in mind that at any time of the year this is an area of extreme temperatures. The summer months regularly peak well above 40°C (particularly in January and February) and nights in winter can drop below zero. It is also dry. With an average of no more than four days of rain per month there is no identifiable wet season.

Mungo National Park is truly one of the world's great open-air museums. By the very nature of its structure, it constantly reveals its past. It is an extremely fragile and sensitive landscape, yet its potential for visitors is enormous. And its importance in human and cultural terms in the story of Aboriginal Australia cannot be overestimated. ■



Christopher Whitehead visited Mungo National Park as a guest of Tourism New South Wales.

For more information about visiting the Mungo National Park and Willandra Lakes please ring the park office on 03 5021 8900 or consult the National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales website at [ww2.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au](http://ww2.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au) or the [www.visitnsw.com/Mungo\\_National\\_Park](http://www.visitnsw.com/Mungo_National_Park). Visitors can explore the area independently by following a self-guided 70-kilometre driving tour that covers much of the park, or they can join an organised tour. For an introduction to the park's indigenous heritage, Harry Nanya Tours offers accredited Aboriginal guides who will accompany visitors to a number of sites around Lake Victoria and the dry salt lakes of Mungo National Park. There is also a discovery programme held during school holidays and other peak periods during which rangers from the three tribal groups conduct guided tours and other activities in the park.

There are two camping sites within the park, but neither is powered. All roads are unpaved but generally suitable for standard cars, though roads may become impassable during wet weather. A



**A boardwalk has been built for visitors to the Mungo National Park to protect the fragile landscape from thousands of pairs of feet. Tours include a two-kilometre walk and the explanation of archaeological findings. Visitors are told about the evolution of the ancient Willandra Lakes and the story of the people who lived in the region.**

Visitors' Centre near the entrance to the park provides information on Willandra's cultural and natural heritage. Adjacent to the centre is the former shearers' quarters where bunk accommodation is available. The privately owned

Mungo Lodge has recently been renovated and upgraded and can be contacted on 03 5029 7297. A neighbouring property, Turke Station, provides accommodation on a working farm and can be contacted on 03 5029 7208.



Located at the entrance to Mungo National Park, Mungo Lodge is a sophisticated outback property with a commitment to eco sensitive management.

\* Packages starting from \$150.00 per person (based on twin share) conditions apply and are subject to availability.

[www.mungolodge.com.au](http://www.mungolodge.com.au)

03 5029 7297