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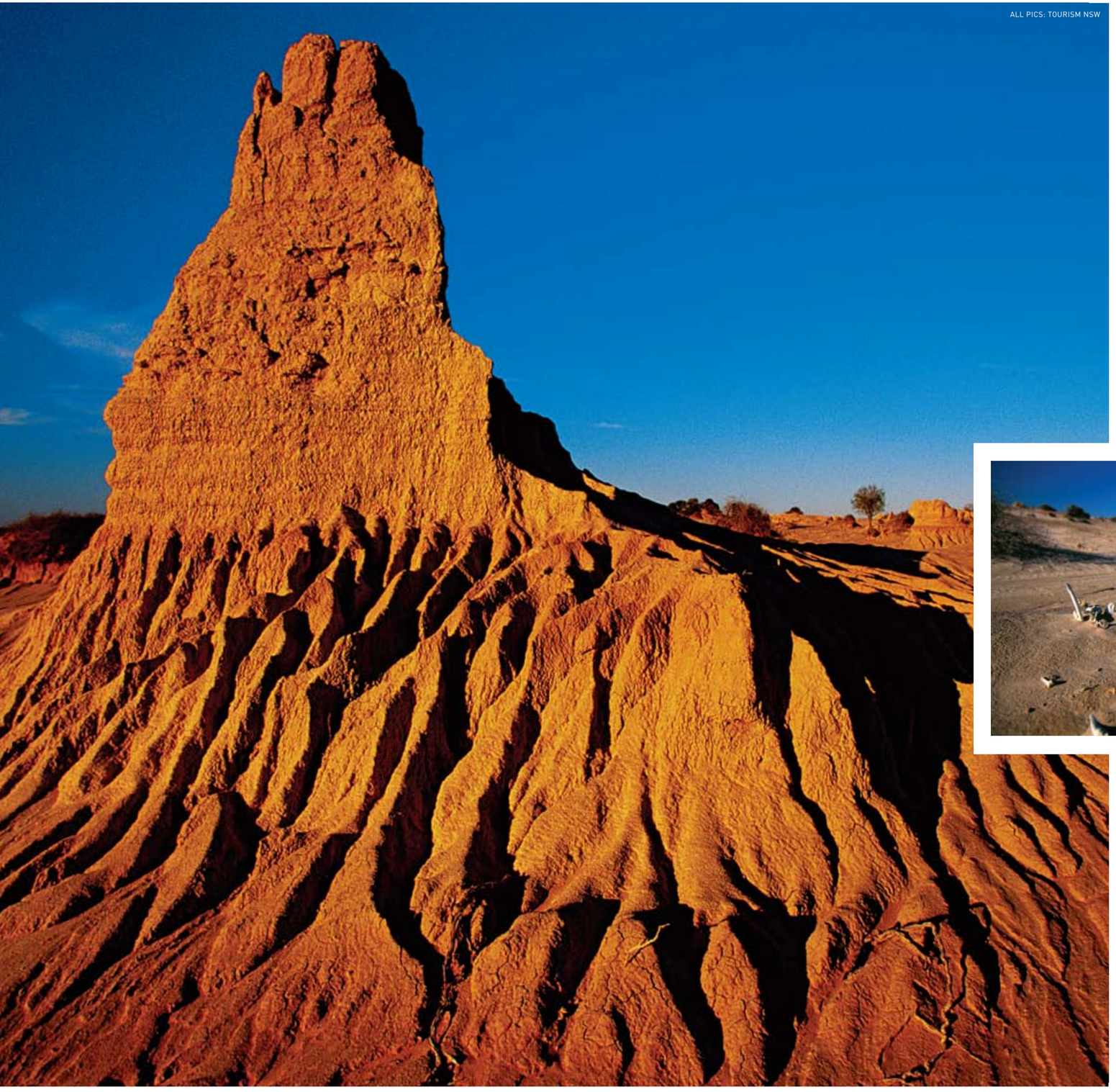

MUNGO NATIONAL PARK

JACKI CASE takes a journey to a land that time forgot

The drive in from the Mungo National Park Visitor Centre is one laced with anticipation. But when expectations are held at such lofty heights, it's usually disappointment that follows.

Wanting to share the cradle of human life in Australia with my dinosaur-crazed kids, I begin by explaining that the crescent-shaped sand-dune formation we're standing upon is technically called a lunette. With the swift wit and innocence that comes from the mouths of babes, my eight-year-old asks if that means we've had our own lunar landing, and for all intents and purposes, it certainly appears that we have.

Rising above the flat plains before us, the Walls of China appear as if transported from another world. Shadows from the clouds race across their sculpted facades, giving the terrain a surreal appeal.

At 33 kilometres in length, they've been formed over more than 100,000 years as the rain has washed the soft sands and mud away. Rilled ridges and residuals remain in their place and these give the unearthly appearance that characterises the Walls of China.

The different-coloured sands and strange contours surrounding us are like something from another planet, or the moon. As the sun sends its pinkey hues across the landscape and the different layers of hardened sand reflect yellows to bright pink, I can understand why an Aboriginal friend once told me the sunsets at Mungo's Walls of China rival those of more well-trodden places such as Uluru.

The dislodged sand has been picked up by the wind and lies heaped into huge mobile dunes along the back of the lunette. This erosion has uncovered an extensive treasure trove of Aboriginal objects that indicate the area once supported a large population.

Mega-fauna bones from animals that lived in the area many thousands of years ago have been revealed over the years. They include examples of a flightless bird with legs as solid as those of a horse (Genyornis newtoni), the towering short-faced kangaroo (Procoptodon goliah), and the buffalo-sized Zygomatrurus trilobus.

The park lies tucked away in the south-western corner of New South Wales, the Victorian town of Mildura being its closest neighbour at 128 kilometres. It is a favourite with geologists and photographers alike and sits at the heart of the Willandra Lakes World Heritage area.

The ochre terrain contains a continuous record of human occupation that stretches back well over 40,000 years. The rain and wind have uncovered ancient fireplaces, artefacts, animal bones and stone tools, once used by people whose voices call out across the sands of time.

There is other evidence too that these plains have had their share of foot traffic; recently discovered ancient footprints that dot the landscape in a secret and protected location. The descendants of these people, the Paakantji, Ngyiampaa and Mutthi Mutthi, continue to walk these lands and they willingly share their country with intrepid travellers such as us.

A Discovery tour led by one of the traditional owners is a chance to learn about the park's natural and human history. My mind tries to process the images presented to us by the Discovery Ranger, that of a massive lake, and the people, animals and plants that it nurtured. Now swallowed up by an expansive desert landscape with a horizon that simply refuses to end, evidence of this once fertile and vibrant world are revealed to us by the experienced eye of our guide.

Our minds are engaged about stories of huge silver perch and Murray cod that once teemed in their thousands and sustained the people that lived, died and were buried within the very dunes that we stand on.

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It is thought that some 400,000 years ago, dry, windy conditions swept the land and the meandering Willandra Creek was cut off, forming Lake Mungo and the Willandra Lake system.

Over time, the prevailing westerly winds shaped the lake and continued to create a lunette as the water receded. Today, layer upon layer of sand and silt tell a story that reaches back in time more than 100,000 years.

We are shown small and intricately shaped stone tools now protruding from the dirt next to one of the many ancient fireplaces. We are told that this is the place where evidence of the oldest human cremation exists, that of a woman who lived 40,000 years ago.

The information confronts us as we start to realise that this landscape was once lush and vibrant. It fell victim to a severe ice age that gripped the planet, drying up all of the lake and all life with it. The large animals and marsupial giants that roamed here all died along with the vegetation and fish, but the Aboriginal people relocated and adapted to the shifting environment, realising that they too were merely a small part of nature.

During a guided walk along what was once the foreshore, we're also reminded of a more recent history. Passing through what was once native pine country, we can see where the thousands of trees once stood. They now form part of the Mungo woolshed, which was crafted by a gang of Chinese miners in 1869 and is part of the area's pastoral heritage.

This theme is explored on the 70-kilometre drive tour that takes in some of the highlights of the park. As my children pretend to see dinosaurs at every turn, it's clear that they too have become enraptured in the history and mystique of the place. But the native animals and birds that now find refuge in this harsh terrain are much smaller in size. Among them are red and western grey kangaroos, echidnas, dunnarts, emus, shingleback lizards, bearded dragons, pink cockatoos and wedge-tailed eagles.

With heads ready to hit our pillows in the well-appointed and newly renovated shearers' quarters accommodation, we process an amazing couple of days with a final walk outside to say goodbye to the spectacular night sky. Before us, the constellations sparkle as they have done since time immemorial and the voices of the first inhabitants of the land can be heard whispering upon the winds.

instant expert

‡ *Like most places in the Outback, Mungo National Park isn't exactly close to anything. Mildura (Vic) is arguably the best regional town to launch yourself from, although it is still 110km away. Mungo can also be reached by road from Broken Hill (316km away), which in turn can be reached by CountryLink rail. Either option can be reached by plane but will require you to have a reliable car and to time your trip with extreme temperatures in mind. The summer months regularly peak well above 40°C (particularly January and February), and nights in winter can drop below 0°C.*

‡ *The best time to visit Mungo National Park is during the cooler months of the year; generally March to October. There is no identifiable wet season, with an average of only four days of rain per month but all roads in the park are likely to close following rain.*

‡ *September to November are the windiest months and on windy days, sandblasting may make walking on the Walls of China unpleasant. To compensate for unpredictable extremes, carry extra drinking water, food, and clothing for all conditions.*

‡ *Accommodation can be found at campsites at the park, the shearer's quarters and at Mungo Lodge; which has a private airstrip for light craft.*

‡ *More information: www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au*