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LAKE MUNGO NSW

The Walls of China
lunette, Mungo
National Park

Australian history goes back a little further
than you might think. At Lake Mungo,
you can delve 40,000 years into our past.

mungo moon dance

WORDS DAVID LEVELL PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL WEE

The Walls of China
lunette, Mungo
National Park





The Walls of China
(also right);
sand monitor
(below right)



Lake Mungo... the feeling of serenity and sheer space is absolute



EARLYBIRDS CATCH THE best of Mungo National Park, and not just by avoiding the full heat of day. The sun casting first light on the pale ramparts of the Walls of China is nature's theatre at its subtle best. As an impossibly brilliant star field fades, dawn reveals a commanding view of Lake Mungo's dry bed as an immense saltbush carpet. The drone of silence fills the ear and kangaroos, coats harmonising with the landscape's blue-grey palette, potter about in small family groups. The feeling of serenity and sheer space is absolute.

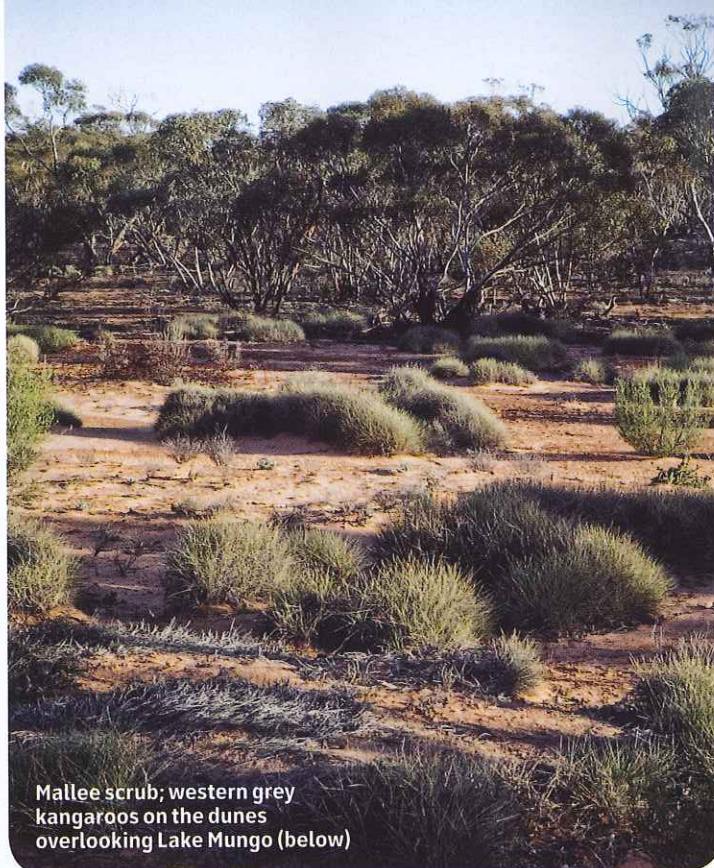
Sunset also has particular charm, lending pink and orange hues to the Walls of China. This otherworldly lunette (crescent of sand dunes) fringing 33km of the ex-lake's eastern rim is Mungo's most striking feature. Some say a visit is like walking on the Moon, which rather ignores those endless lungfuls of fresh outback air – but the towering rock formations do evoke a sort of desolate lunar eeriness. Indeed, today it seems about as wet as the Sea of Tranquillity, and almost as tranquil.

Mungo is one of 17 dry lakes in Willandra Lakes Heritage Area in far-west NSW – so far west that the nearest large town is Mildura, 110km away in Victoria. Despite the aura of time-

less grandeur, Mungo's terrain is a dramatic reminder that our planet is in a constant state of environmental change.

In late Pleistocene times, Mungo was 10m underwater, a 135sq km lake amid a temperate, forested Eden. Herds of zygomaturus (think cow-sized wombats) nibbled lush shoreline reeds and huge flat-faced procoptodon kangaroos thudded about on feet with single hoof-like claws. These 3m giants (twice the bulk of today's largest roos) died out about 40,000 years ago, at the dawn of human presence lakeside.

Australia really was another country back then. Even when Mungo was last full (about 15,000 years ago), Sydney Harbour was a wooded valley 30km inland and Tasmania was at best the Apple Peninsula. Europe was shivering in the Ice Age, Lascaux was the latest contemporary art gallery >



Mallee scrub; western grey kangaroos on the dunes overlooking Lake Mungo (below)



Those seashells so casually scattered about the arid inland are almost uncanny

and people had just started migrating to the Americas. Meanwhile, the long-established Lake Mungo folk were busy cooking Murray cod and golden perch in campfires, traces of which remain as dark smudges in the lunettes.

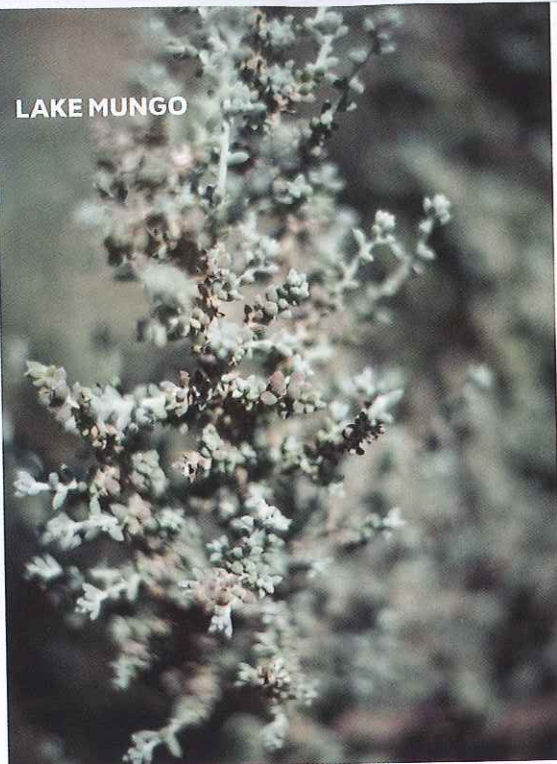
They weren't living on bare dunes, of course. Although building up over millennia, the Walls of China attained their current look in relatively recent years. Those jutting obelisk formations are the remnants of accelerated erosion caused by sheep farming – a species not even domesticated in Europe when lakeside living was in full swing down-under. The other by-product of this recent weathering is the exposure of the fossil-rich sediment that has made Mungo world-famous as a palaeoanthropological site of prime importance.

The discovery of "Mungo Lady" in July 1968 showed people were living in Australia more than 40,000 years ago, about four times longer than previously thought. Her remains are still the world's oldest known ritual cremation. February 1974 brought another surprise only a few hundred metres away – "Mungo Man", from the same time period. The ceremonial nature of his burial – sprinkled with red ochre unavailable within 100km of the site – offers some of the earliest evidence of both goods trading and belief in an afterlife.

Archaeologists have since identified more than 150 prehistoric people nearby, many of whom remain *in situ*, locations undisclosed out of respect to their descendants, the indigenous tribes who co-manage Mungo with NSW National Parks and Wildlife. However, lunette visitors are sure to see ancient campsites and bones of long-gone fauna. Those seashells so casually scattered about the arid inland are almost uncanny; it's like stumbling into a vast surrealist art installation. ➤



LAKE MUNGO



The wind constantly exposes and reburies bones and artefacts

You don't need a science degree to pick out the lunette's three layers of sediment, named after former local sheep stations. The red Gol Gol layer is the oldest; it lacks fossils and artefacts. Atop it is the grey-brown Mungo layer (25 to 45,000 years ago), formed when the lake was at its peak. Zanci, the uppermost and whitest, includes the spectacular obelisks.

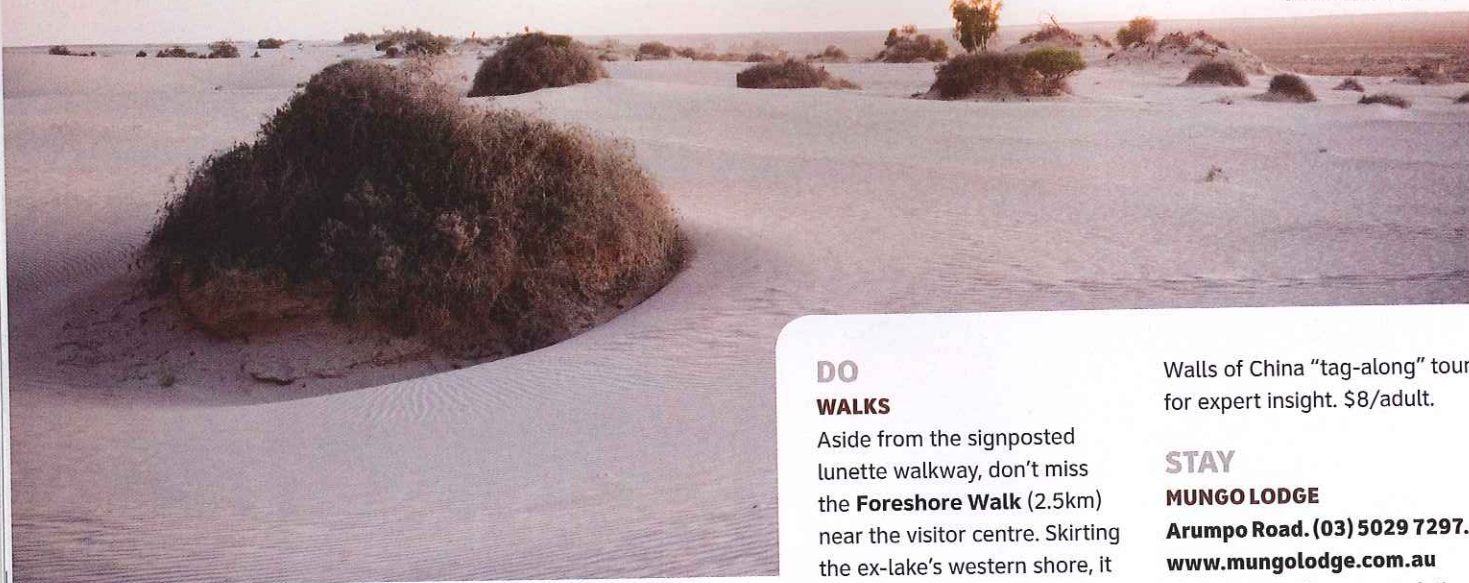
An easy way to get the inside information is Harry Nanya Tours, a one-man show and an award-winning, indigenous-owned business. That man isn't Harry Nanya (a celebrated 19th-century Aboriginal leader), but Graham Clarke of the local Paakantyi people, one of the three Traditional Tribal Groups in charge of the area. Clarke takes a daily minibus-load of tourists across the lake for a guided lunette stroll, where he talks cycles of climate change, human origins and Mungo's natural history.

Clarke shows us how to spot 20,000-year-old campfires, and points out a Tasmanian tiger jawbone partly visible in a sandy hillock. "Mother Nature does all the excavation for us," he says. Archaeological work is completely hands-free, an Aboriginal cultural consideration. The wind constantly exposes and reburies bones and artefacts; investigators simply wait to see what turns up, although careful placement of sticks around an object of interest aids the process by directing rainwater flow and deposits of windblown sand.

Such non-intrusive methodology is in stark contrast to the treatment Mungo copped for much of last century, the most obvious testament to which is historic Mungo Woolshed. Built in 1869 from local cypress pine, it stands by the national park visitor centre on the western "shore". From here the Walls >

Mungo Woolshed;
lakeside flora
(left); the Mallee
Stop (below)





Kangaroos hop in all directions, emus stalk about in small mobs

of China are a vast chalk fence along the horizon, 10km across the lake. One story says the lunette was named for the Chinese workers who built the woolshed for the first European settlement, Gol Gol sheep station. The shears haven't gone click for a long time – steam power arrived in the 1890s and the last bale left the shed in 1978 – but in its heyday, 50,000 sheep a year were denuded here.

In 1922, Gol Gol was subdivided to settle returned WWI soldiers, creating Zanci and Mungo stations. Although sometimes given an Aboriginal derivation (a *mungoe* is a canoe), the name is probably a tribute to the patron saint of Glasgow; the station's first owners had a picture of St Mungo's Cathedral on the homestead wall.

Mungo station became a national park in 1979. All its major sights are now contained in a handy 70km loop drive, starting at the visitor centre. The Walls of China will dominate any itinerary, but other sights to seek out include the ruins of Zanci homestead and Allens Plain on the other side of the lunette, where the terrain changes to mallee scrub, grasslands and woods.

An early-morning drive can have an almost safari feel; Australia's big game is suddenly everywhere. Kangaroos hop in all directions, emus stalk about in small mobs – the more you look, the more you see. And that's the case for many facets of Mungo, a land with a deceptively dynamic present and a future guaranteed by the fascinating window it has opened on our deep past.

DO WALKS

Aside from the signposted lunette walkway, don't miss the **Foreshore Walk** (2.5km) near the visitor centre. Skirting the ex-lake's western shore, it passes through a remnant grove of cypress pine, a good spot to join roos seeking shady respite from midday. Overhead the branches burst with apostle birds, kites and other birdlife. About halfway around the drive tour loop road, the **Mallee Stop** (500m) will show you how to distinguish local bird calls and the three main types of mallee (eucalypts with multiple stems).

HARRY NANYA TOURS (03) 5027 2076.

harrynanyatours.com.au

A guided lunette walk, hearty lakeside lunch and even a few didgeridoo numbers recounting local Aboriginal legend. Day tours April to October; sunset November-March. Pick-ups from Wentworth, Mildura and Mungo Lodge. From \$80/adult.

RANGER DISCOVERY TOURS (03) 5021 8900.

Join Aboriginal park rangers on the Foreshore Walk or on a

Walls of China "tag-along" tour for expert insight. \$8/adult.

STAY MUNGO LODGE

Arumpo Road. (03) 5029 7297.
www.mungolodge.com.au

The only motel accommodation anywhere near the lake, newly relaunched 4.5-star Mungo Lodge is hospitality-plus just outside the park entrance. The cosy restaurant/bar offers a superior changing menu and local (Mildura) beer and wine – and something of a ski lodge ambience with its cross-beam thatched ceiling and large fireplace. There's even a private airstrip. 16 cabins, from \$240.

SHEARERS' QUARTERS

Visitor Centre, Mungo National Park. (03) 5021 8900.

Five rooms; up to 26 people. Communal kitchen and dining room. BYO bedding. \$30/adult (minimum charge \$50).

CAMPGROUNDS (03) 5021 8900.

Main Campground, Arumpo Road (33 sites, near park entrance). Belah Campground (12 sites), over the Walls on the self-drive tour. \$5/adult.