

Brambuk

Brambuk is a living cultural centre named for the Bram Bram brothers who created the features of the Grampian mountain ranges. Known to its traditional owners as the Gariwerds, Brambuk is situated at Halls Gap in the heart of the ranges.

Visiting Brambuk has become inextricably linked in my memory with the Olympic Games. With four children in-tow constant viewing in motel rooms was ensured, subsequently the events are intertwined into a shared recollection.

The Olympic Games but a pleasant fading memory has left images that will live on forever. Everyone who watched will remember the night of the spectacular opening ceremony, where they were and who they were with. The colour, the majesty and our pride in a unique culture and history. The Olympic Flame rising from its watery bed and jubilantly lit by a beaming and nervous Cathy Freeman. Who will forget 'the race' where the hope of a nation was pinned on a slip of a girl who had dreamed of running like the wind.

'Only 400 metres but a huge leap forward for reconciliation', it was reported but this always felt like such a tremendous responsibility for this young aboriginal women from Queensland.

But the overwhelming impression left from the games is a thirst for stories that give voice to the shared heritage of the land. We are ready and we need to listen to the good stories and the bad to share the knowledge of the past and discuss the issues confronting indigenous and non-indigenous people in Australia today.

Brambuk offers all this and more.

We took the longer scenic route to Brambuk heading north to Maryborough and then west to Aarart. To the southwest Mt Buniyoung and Mt Warrenheip look like small round boulders, an indication of the ranges to come. As we head towards the Wimmera it warms up and the paddocks are bright yellow as far as the eye can see. Everyone out of the car for the photo in the fields of Canola, just heads peaking out from amongst the colourful crop.

This was my first visit to the Grampians and they were awesome, they surround you with their imposing grandeur. When Major Thomas Mitchell and a small party arrived towards the end of winter in 1836 they found lush grasslands with abundant water and he named the area south of the Murray 'Australia Felix'. Returning from the coast he climbed Mt Abrupt to look for a way out of the maze of mountains. The rugged mountain ranges reminded him of The Grampians in his native Scotland and they were duly named.

Little did he realise that the Djab wurrung (pronounced Chap wurrung) and Jardwadjali (pronounced Yardwa jarli) people already had 'their own powerfully symbolic names for both peak and range.' Fearful of his coming they had stayed hidden and he only caught glimpses of the indigenous people and so it was duly reported that south of the Murray was excellent, uninhabited farming lands, 'the best' he had seen in Australia.

A clash of cultures was to follow 'European and Aboriginal people were as alien to each other as different species.' Europeans were under the mistaken impression that because aboriginal people didn't cultivate the land they had no need for it and they were dispersed from their homelands. They were dramatically and horrendously decimated and 'of an estimated 28,000

Kooris in this region, approximately 25,000 died during the first twenty years of white settlement.'

Brambuk tells this story and that of the thousands of years of habitation before the white man arrived.

The award winning design of the cultural centre is the first thing that strikes as you drive in but to explain the design we must go back to Brambuk's inception in 1982.

'Five aboriginal communities, (with links to the Gariwerds) came together to share their 'cultural experience' and workshopped with architect Greg Burgess to plan the building. The five circular room components of the centre represent the five communities and the mud brick entrance reminds us of the Ebenezer Mission, central to the lives of the people of the Goolum Goolum cooperative. The exposed tree trunk supports throughout represent the Framlingham forest and the stone walls inside and out refer to the stone huts and stone fish traps of the Kerrup Jamara people at Lake Condah. The Gunditjmara coastal people knew the Gariwerds and they are represented by the backbone of a Southern Right Whale and its rib cage, this is actualised by a curved central beam and rafters that support the roof of the theatre room.

Driving in the 'building is shaped in the form of a cockatoo; at the front, the beak, the back, the tail and the sides, the wing span.' The roof is ochre coloured corrugated tin and the building squats in the landscape like a big round mushroom. The gardens planted around Brambuk have pathways that lead through over 6000 plants that were found in the eco-systems of the five communities. The path leads to the front of the building where the slow rhythmic drone of a didgeridoo welcomes you in.

The four-in-tow raced along these paths until they came to the front of the building where they started to emu and kangaroo dance in the large ceremonial grounds. This is the place where displays of Koori music, dancing and cooking take place and my mob instinctively knew what the area was for.

Once inside I lost sight of them as they took off up the ramp towards the Bush Tucker café, at the top of the three levels of the building. The ramp represents the Aboriginal Elders Cooperative of the Lake Condah region as it reminds us of the eel, 'still a favourite food resource for all of Gariwerd's Koori Communities.'

Like a flock of screeching cockatoos they descended on the arts and craft shop looking for their financial advisor, they needed more food. In the meantime I had purchased several short histories of the Gariwerds and Brambuk and wanted to set up an interview and tour of the centre the following day.

'Sit and be quiet for five minutes' They were directed to sit on a wooden seat made of saplings and various timbers, it was Bunjil's seat, 'his arms out caring for you, as you sit looking into the fire.' I wish those arms would grab the gang of four and hold them still for just five minutes.

The following day Ray Marks was our guide and after fielding dozens of questions about the centre and 'did he know the story of the Southern Cross?' we were shown into the Gariwerd

Dreaming Theatre where an 'exciting multimedia experience tells the Gariwerd creation story.'

Lights were dimmed and the story unfolded.

I had read the story in anthropologist Aldo Massola's book Bunjils Cave and a transcript of the film and presentation but for the first time the story came alive. Briefly,

'In the time of the Dreaming, Tchingal the emu split the Gariwerd ranges with a ferocious kick, creating Victoria Gap.' A tired Tchingal decided to rest at the foot of the ranges and wait for Bunya a cowardly hunter hiding up a tree. The Bram Bram brothers crept up and threw their spears killing the great bird, Bunya was turned into a possum as punishment for his cowardice.

'Now if you look at the Southern Cross, you can see the story told in the stars. At the head of the cross is Bunya, the timid possum. Three of the stars are the spears hurled by the Bram-bram-bult. The large western star is the spear that stuck Tchingal in the chest, the smaller star next to it is the spear that passed through his neck, and the star at the bottom of the cross is the spear that struck him in the rump.

Tchingal himself is the dark shape that lies next to the Southern Cross...and the two brothers are the Pointers of the Southern Cross.'

The four-in-tow were impressed, there wasn't a peep for the whole presentation except for the oohs and aahs as lightning struck and a huge model Tchingal glared fiery red eyes at them.

Back up the ramp where they were invited to decorate their own boomerang. They were given a sheet with simple diagrams representing different aspects of the landscape and its wildlife. "Tell a story on your boomerang." And they did, later I heard recounts of their different stories.

Young Sandy, an aboriginal lad from Horsham demonstrated aspects of life before the white fella in the theatre room. Eel traps, boomerang, clubs and spears. Decorated possum skins, the new Melbourne Museum has one of only five left, were important clothing items to keep people warm as they camped in the nooks and crannies of the Gariwerds.

Where Massolo wrote of Bunjil's Cave it is more accurately described as Bunjil's Shelter and it 'is the only known art site in Victoria containing a representation of someone whose identity is known.'

'Bunjil, the ancestral hero who is credited with creating the very first people.'

Brambuk is a living cultural centre, 'where a new mood and sense of purpose' inform the Koori Community. There is a great pride and respect for traditional culture and a slow flame has been rekindled to nurture age old wisdom. Like the flame that burnt so brightly at the Olympics I salute Brambuk and hope it shines and illuminates us all for a long time to come.