Songlines

Journalist Gina Baxter learns about songlines and Dreamtime in the Australian outback.

‘We don’t mind using GPS,’ says Baamba, our Aboriginal guide, looking out across the wilderness which belongs to his tribe, the Adnyamathanha people. The red ground ahead is covered with scrub brush and gum trees, all the way to the distant Flinders mountain range, and although it’s early, it’s already thirty degrees in the shade. It’s difficult terrain, but Baamba is a sensible guide: he always carries a satellite phone in his backpack in case of emergencies. His ancestors, however, relied on songs.

The early Australian Aborigines made the land navigable through songs, dance and paintings. The songs described pathways or ‘songlines’, which provided an oral ‘map’ of the land. (1) Generations of Aborigines followed these pathways, leaving legible marks and etchings on rocks and trees to help future travellers. ‘But the songs describe more than a pathway,’ explains Baamba. ‘They also tell stories about the ‘creator beings’ who shaped the earth in Dreamtime.’
According to Aboriginal creation myths, Dreamtime marked the beginning of the world, when giant beings, part human, part animal, came down from the sky, from across the sea and from deep in the earth. These giant beings travelled across the land, making rivers and mountain ranges; then they disappeared back into the landscape, in places which became sacred sites.

(2) ‘The Adnyamathanha people sing songs that tell the story of Akurra, the rainbow serpent,’ continues Baamba. ‘During Dreamtime, he created the Flinders mountain range. We’ll see the cave paintings later at Arkaroo Rock.’

Arkaroo Rock is one of many sacred sites mentioned in the songs and stories about the land. These stories show the considerable attachment the first Australians had to their environment, how they saw themselves as part of nature rather than masters of it, and how their way of life resulted in a profound and valuable knowledge of their land.

(3) It was a way of life that was safe from invasion and influence … until 1788.

When the Europeans arrived in 1788, they had a different attitude to the land. (4) They also believed that if land wasn’t farmed, then it didn’t belong to anyone. At first, Aborigines didn’t understand this attitude, so their first contact was amicable, even friendly. However, conflicts soon arose as new settlers took away the Aboriginal hunting grounds and divided them up into farms and ranches. (5) Some tribes were not allowed to travel from one place to another, while others were relocated into special camps. Sadly, this destroyed their ancient way of life, and many Aboriginal songlines were lost. Today, people like Baamba are trying to restore this heritage and preserve it.
(a) It’s late now and Baamba is waiting outside Arkaroo Rock until we’ve finished exploring. (b) Inside, we’re admiring the beautiful cave paintings, but as soon as we’ve taken some photos, we leave. (c) Dark clouds are visible on the horizon and if we stay any longer, we’ll be caught in a storm. (d) ‘By the time we reach camp, the rain will be here,’ says Baamba. (e) ‘We’ll have problems getting back unless we leave now.’ He’s right, of course – there are already flashes of lightning, and thunder is audible in the distance. As we drive away, the wind whistles through the gum trees, and we can almost hear the voices of those first Australians, singing the songs of their ancestors, and following the songlines.