

# Airborne Aboriginal art tours

**As interest in Aboriginal art continues to sweep the world, a growing number of Australians and international visitors are taking to Territory skies to discover the story behind the paintings.**

It's a festive atmosphere. Inside the ramshackle Warlayirti Art Centre in the desert community of Balgo Hills, two visitors are sitting cross-legged on the floor and two others sit on plastic chairs while art co-ordinator John Oster peels off canvas after canvas from a great pile, holding them up for all to see.

There are exclamations all round as the visitors get the rare opportunity to choose this desert fine art in the very place where it was created. They listen to the tales behind the paintings by the artists whose work is making a continuing international impact on the art world.

These four visitors are a Sydney couple who own an extensive private collection of Aboriginal art and a pair of academics thrilled to see the community where such remarkable work is created. They flew into Balgo, some 800 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs, in a light aircraft piloted by tour organiser and owner of Didgeri Air Art Tours, Helen Read.

As the paintings are shown and John Oster introduces the artist, a second pile of paintings emerges with possible purchases. Helen Read is pleased because her charges obviously like what they see. They collectively spend \$15,000 at Balgo before flying off to view more in Lajamanu.

Helen Read takes great pride in the fact that her tourists have spent a total of over half a million dollars in some 22 communities since she began organising tours in 1989.

Before that she had been an English-trained nursing sister who got her pilot's licence after taking on a nursing stint in Nigeria. From there she came to Australia, where she began work in remote area Aboriginal communities from Kintore to Broome, in the process acquiring an appreciation for indigenous art and the culture of the people.

Helen Read began Didgeri Air Art Tours on a shoestring, careful not to give up her day job. While continuing as a nursing sister, she began attracting wholesale

dealers from Europe, buyers from eastern states galleries, and private collectors mixed with artists and academics.

Last month Tim Klingender, Sotheby's Aboriginal art expert, made a wide-ranging trip with Didgeri, following up his company's record-breaking A\$2.7 million indigenous art sale earlier this year. Ms Read mixes the tours carefully so gallery buyers are not bidding against each other for what they see as the best paintings.

It's a formula that goes down well with the tourists, who often are meeting traditional Aborigines for the first time. They begin to understand the Aborigines' deep connection with their homelands.



Aboriginal artworks, viewed in the communities where they were created.

## Australian Aboriginal Art Tours.

*In co-operation with Aboriginal artists in Arnhem Land, the Tiwi Islands, Kimberley and Western Deserts.*

People interested in meeting Aboriginal artists and cultural custodians form a small group and travel by light aircraft and 4WD across widespread areas of Northwest Australia.

'Didgeri' and the community councils arrange, where possible, the special visiting permits required.

You meet many artists on tour, some of whom have exhibited widely. Paintings may be purchased, if desired, at wholesale prices from the art communities.

### Didgeri Air Art Tours.

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