



Watjan Guided Tours

Case Study



Purpose

This case study will provide information on an Aboriginal owned and operated remote tourism business in the Northern Territory. It highlights the importance of selling your idea, knowing the back end of running a business and details how this particular business sought business and other financial support to allow for continuous improvement and planning for future growth.



Description of Watjan Guided Tours

Watjan Guided Tours, established in the Northern Territory in 2008 by Joe (Dingo) Parry and his partner, Lucy Carlungung. It is an authentic off-grid Aboriginal cultural experience. Located on their Traditional Lands west of Daly River community, personalised guided tours for small and large groups.

The core principle behind the tours is in the sharing of culture. Joe says "The main thing is learning from us what we do out here. If you haven't met an Aboriginal person out on Country, it might be a good experience for you."

Activities include tours of the flood plains and its inhabitants; rock art site and fossil tours; beach walks, spear making, looking for bush foods, fishing and hunting; traditional Aboriginal arts and crafts; sunset viewing and yarning together while eating around the camp fire. Self sufficient traveler tag along tours are offered, and visitors are encouraged to bring everything required for a BYO bush trip. In more recent years infrastructure improvements have been made with raised wooden platforms for swags, shower block and self contained composting toilets.

Focusing on the native animals and the "smorgasbord" of native seasonal fruits and vegetables available to the area, the intention behind Watjan Guided Tours is to share their knowledge to people of all backgrounds and ages.

"Kids wanna live out here, there's no shop around the corner for them. There's plenty of tucker to eat if you know the right places to look. They want to come out to learn and experience our culture."

Joe and Lucy operate the tours with the help of family. There are options for culturally appropriate gendered groups with Joe and his male family members running the mens groups; and Lucy and her female family members taking care of the womens groups. The mens groups involve hunting, whereas the women's groups look at gathering bush foods and plants for eating and weaving.

Watjan Tours

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Established relationships with a number of tourism

operators in order to broaden their market

and connect people with their culture in a meaningful and immersive way.

Early Days

Watjan Guided Tours began their tourism journey in 2008 with the dream to share their culture, Country and knowledge with as many people as possible.

Being a side business from Joe and Lucy's daily ongoing employment, the first 10 years were less intensive for the pair as they offered to take a small number of people out on Country each dry season. It was in 2018 when things started to ramp up, and Joe and Lucy turned their focus on creating a business to fully sustain themselves and their family, with the end goal to build up a business that could be passed on to family in the future.

It was through grassroots development; relying upon help from family, friends and those from neighbouring communities and homelands, that saw the current amenities (shower block, self-composting toilets, raised wooden platforms for swags/tents and steel awnings for shade) being installed. Watjan faced many challenges during the early years to secure funding, and it was through their determination and tenacity that they were able to raise enough money to develop the business.



Consolidation of the Business

Joe and Lucy's approach to business relies heavily upon their knowledge of the Marrithiyel land and their commitment to creating a viable tourism operation. "We came up with a plan there and then, no piece of paper or nothing. We're gonna be doing this, so we're going to do this!" Joe says of the family business start up. They proceeded to safely clear land and prepared for the infrastructure whilst searching for administrative and financial support in 2017.

That support came in the form of a "financial fella", who works with the couple to manage their finances and find grant funding opportunities. Joe employs family who know the land to operate the tours with them, sharing knowledge passed down through the generations.

2021 marked a solid year for growth with the largest number of visitors to that point in time for the business. When tour operations grounded to a halt during the pandemic, it was a time for Joe and Lucy to focus on the business and to seek funding to develop more infrastructure improvements in the form of self-composting toilets. Since restrictions have eased the business has recorded record numbers of people each dry season.

Late 2022, Watjan Guided Tours formed a partnership with a tourism operator to bring groups to the region. The partnership has been very successful already with Joe reporting that as early 2023, a large number of bookings have been secured for the upcoming season.



Future Business Development

"I think it's very, very important to have our culture, (and) we gotta understand their (non-indigenous) culture as well - how they work... if you can put them two together, mate, you've got it made for you."

Still in the developmental stages, Watjan Guided Tours currently offers self-sufficient traveler tag along tours. They do offer a shower block and food preparation facilities. Joe and Lucy are working to source funding for site upgrades which include space expansion for eco tents and new dongas and infrastructure amenities such as running water, electricity and flushing toilets.

Watjan Guided Tours also plan to consult with Traditional Owners about the construction of an airstrip. This would improve tourism opportunities around the shifting seasonal calendar with roads being hard and at times impossible to navigate during wetter months of the year.

There is interest in collaborating with other local tourist operators such as Daly River Tourist Park to expand their tourism reach.



Key Learnings

Joe Parry and Lucy Carlungung identified the following key learnings at Watjan Guided Tours for Aboriginal tourism entrepreneurs and operators thinking of starting up a similar business.

- Follow your dream and give it a go.
- Work on marketing your business. If people don't know about you, how can they book to visit?
- Don't be afraid to ask for help from family and friends. Whether it is to help build and maintain infrastructure or help with other facets of the business, business can be hard, so it's okay to ask for help.
- Two way learning and sharing is very important for business. Aboriginal culture is important, but Countrymen need to understand non-Aboriginal cultures as well to learn from each other.
- Work on forming partnerships. Having good relationships with local tourist destinations and other tour operations can help attract more business



Information supplied by Joe Parry, Lucy Carlungung and Michael Hartzsch of Watjan Tours.

The term Indigenous has been quoted in interviews conducted for the case study and used in collective reference when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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