

Tour

Rubbing shoulders, and sticks, with the aristocracy

Magnetism draws
Louise Goldsbury.

ABORIGINAL botanist Warren Whitfield was attracted to Magnetic Island for its intriguing flora and fauna, left behind after seas flooded the land 10,000 years ago.

The island's 23 beaches are a little lower-tide these days, but the plants and animals are just as odd. Hundreds of rock wallabies spring about the cliffs like bouncing rats, while the lonesome wailing of the curlew bird permeates the night air, as if it knows it's endangered.

Whitfield, a descendant of the first Aboriginal king of Sydney, knows everything about the wildlife on Magnetic Island. He runs Fire Stick Tours, exploring the ancestral home of the Wulgurukaba people, where walking tracks lead to ocean and mountain views, colonies of koalas and historic World War II forts.

Although this is one of those eco tours in a four-wheel-drive, Whitfield's luxury Lexus reaches parts of "Maggie" that the island's ubiquitous Mini Mokes cannot. Interspersed with walking through bushland and across beaches, the half-day expeditions are practical, hands-on and fascinating.

To explain how the Great Dividing



ROCKS OF AGES: Arthur Bay on Magnetic Island, the ancestral home of the Wulgurukaba people; (right) Warren Whitfield.

Main picture: AAP

Range was shaped through tectonic activity, Whitfield draws diagrams in the sand. To see the effectiveness of "bush sandpaper", he rubs a stick completely smooth with a leaf from a native tree. And rather than describe the taste of a green ant, he holds one (live!) for you to take a bite.

Searching out vegetation that has evolved to deal with extreme weather conditions, Whitfield believes that

modern man has not done so well, failing to continue effective practices such as back-burning.

He also shares stories of how the indigenous people interacted with their environment, and finds plants they used for medicine, nutrition, soap and fish poison.

"There was no waste – every plant was used for something," he says.

Discovering Whitfield's own

history is worth the trip in itself. He is a direct descendant of King Bungaree, who was not only King of Sydney, but the first Australian to circumnavigate the country in 1802 with explorer Matthew Flinders.

After studying ethnobotany at university, teaching rangers and writing two books, Whitfield is regarded as one of the top experts in bush foods and medicines.

True to the tour's name, he wraps up with the highlight – using his stick to make fire – and invites everyone to have a go. Luckily the sun is warm enough and we don't need a fire to cook the biscuits we enjoy with cheese as we watch the magical sunset at the deserted West Point.

The writer was a guest of the Great Tropical Drive Project.

> TRIP NOTES

■ A four-hour tour (morning or afternoon) costs \$55 per person, including refreshments.

■ Magnetic Island, part of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage area, is a 25-minute ferry ride from Townsville. Take your car on the ferry or hire a Mini Moke once you're there.

■ Qantas, Jetstar and Virgin Blue have daily flights to Townsville.

■ Fire Stick Tours, phone (07) 4778 5078, see www.firesticktours.com.au.