

Mystical Millstream

A Pilbara oasis rekindles fond memories. **Samille Mitchell** reports.



Waterworld: A billabong near the Millstream visitor centre.

As a child I'd always heard tales of Millstream: stories of lily pads and dragonflies, crystal waters, ancient landscapes, mischief and lots of fun. For these were the romantic memories of my mother's early childhood in this northern oasis. In my mind it seemed a mystical place — remote, yet alluring, like a land from a fairytale.

Fast forward through the years and I'd begun to dismiss this image as something from a child's fanciful imagination. That is, until I visited recently. For Millstream Chichester National Park, two hours east of Karratha, really does exude a special form of magic.

The pastoral operations that my grandfather and his parents before him once ran are now long finished but in their place are a national park and visitor centre that lure travellers from afar.

The old homestead is now the visitor centre, home to artefacts and information about the area's rich Aboriginal and pastoral past. It stands not far from a spring-fed pond and babbling streams, home to ferns, palm fronds, rushes and lilies. The waters here are so clear they seem to lure you like an enchanting spell. And while you're not allowed to swim, it is delightful to kick off your shoes and dangle your toes in the water.

You can set out on walks from here, too. If it's not too hot, try the 6.8km Murlunmunyjurna Track which takes about 1½ hours.

A shorter option is the Homestead

Walk which takes you around the homestead and by the ponds and streams of Chinderwarriner, under the shade of date palms.

The walk's signposts are in the words of my grandfather Doug Gordon, drawn from his memories of here as a 12-year-old. He points out where the tennis courts once stood, where the old bathing house was and where they'd swim in the spring-fed pools.

It's an enchanting stroll — pollen dances in the golden sunlight, shifting light pours through the palm fronds and the constant trickle of nearby water soothes the soul.

Perhaps it's because this watery wonderland is tucked amid the harsh, red landscapes of the Pilbara that it is so special. Or maybe it's to do with the region's rich Aboriginal history.

This area has long been home to the Yinjibarndi people. Trainee ranger Ken Sandy is a descendant and relishes the opportunity to live in his homeland.

His mother was born here and he first came to the region as a child with his uncle, who would pass on stories and share the secrets of bush tucker and bush medicine.

Now Mr Sandy passes on some of this information to visitors. He may point out the scar on a snake wood tree from which a boomerang was cut long ago. Or perhaps he'll show you a grinding stone, or a chip of rock which was once used to cut or spear.

Holding the rock in your hand it's

fascinating to imagine it perhaps fixed to a spear, flying through the air and then piercing the heart of an animal to help feed the people who lived here all those years ago.

The country and its stories are the essence of his very soul.

"Once I'm in this area, I'm happy," he says, looking across a rust red landscape cloaked in spinifex. "Once I'm here I know there's nothing to worry about."

Mr Sandy advocates a respect for the country. He tells the story of two boys who failed to give the country the respect it deserved.

"They ate a 28 parrot which is the sacred bird to the serpent," he says. "The snake got them and was happy with that but the old people made a big fuss and wanted to kill the snake. "They speared him in the eye and he got angry and opened the ground and swallowed the lot of them. He's still down there today."

The snake he talks of inhabits the waterholes of the region and must be shown respect. It is a story that spreads all the way to the Deep Reach site on the Fortescue River. No one knows how deep the waters are here and camping is now forbidden out of respect for Aboriginal beliefs.

But you can still visit and enjoy a picnic on the banks of the river, gazing out over the water and listening to the wind whispering through the leaves of towering gums.

Further along the Fortescue River is the Deep Reach lookout. From here you can truly appreciate the immensity of this inland waterway. The white branches of gums stand in stark contrast to the red earth and are beautifully reflected in the water.

The river is particularly scenic at the camp site known as Crossing Pool. Here you can pitch a tent or park a campervan just metres from the water's edge.

There is a new camp site called Miliyana, opposite the Millstream homestead. A new camp kitchen has been built, styled on the homestead's old kitchen. A domed corrugated iron roof shelters the barbecue, table and sink.

There are also plans for safari style eco-tents and compost toilets at this site.

Venturing further afield, be sure

to visit Python Pool. This emerald pool at the beginning of the Chichester Range is embraced by towering red cliff walls.

There is a 16km-round-trip walk to Python which affords great views of the flat-topped hills of the Chichester Range. The hills glow brilliant red in the late afternoon sun while their spinifex cloak transforms into hues of gold.

Mr Sandy's people tell the story of a dingo who travelled from the Burrup Peninsula near Karratha to the Chichester Range, his bounds and his stops creating the hills.

Listening to him talk about his land and his people reminds me of the feeling that swamped me when he showed me my great-grandparents' graves behind the Millstream homestead. I was overcome with feelings of emotion for these people I'd never met.

My links to the area go back just three generations. Imagine the emotion someone like Ken Sandy must feel, knowing that his people have lived here for thousands of years — many lifetimes of hopes, dreams, triumphs and tragedies.

These were the romantic memories of my mother's early childhood in this northern oasis.

PASSING MUSTER

STEPHEN SCOURFIELD

It's going to be a busy week in Kununurra, as the Ord Valley Muster hits its straps.

It began in 2001 as an Outback dinner for local businesses but the Ord Valley Muster has grown into an 18-day festival of more than 50 events, the highlight of which is the award-winning Airthorn Kimberley Moon Experience concert.

This year's is the biggest so far and a tribute to the strong sense of community — and sheer hard work — of people in this corner of the East Kimberley.

The organisers in Kununurra are committed to showcasing the diverse culture, landscape and friendly hospitality that are the landmark of the area.

The muster kicked off with a rodeo last weekend, and continues to June 4, and community events are as much a focus as the June 2 Kimberley Moon Experience, which this year features Marcia Hines and James Blundell, as well as Kimberley musicians and entertainers.

The Ord Valley Muster includes cattle station and diamond mine tours, Aboriginal tours, and a cooking demonstration and masterclass. There is the Turra New Music Windstrokes concert and tonight the Argyle Diamonds Barramundi Concert from 4pm to 8pm at Kununurra town oval. Local performers include Peter Brandy, Mary G, Rodney Rivers and a number of indigenous musicians.

There are a number of new events and this year's Alligator Airways Lake Argyle Swim has attracted 60 daring swimmers from NSW, Victoria, Queensland, WA and the Northern Territory.

A spokesperson for the muster says it kicked off with the street party on Friday night and enjoyed its most successful start.

"Record crowds attended all of the opening weekend activities. More than 2000 people attended the street party on Friday night and over 1000 attended the Station Challenge Rodeo."

Tourism Minister Sheila McHale says the WA Government is supporting regional events. Last year, the Government committed to a three-year \$75,000 funding for the event.

Details: See www.ordvalleymuster.com for the full calendar of events.



Homeland: Trainee ranger Ken Sandy shows where a boomerang was once cut from a tree in Millstream Chichester National Park.

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