

Suspended Over Country



The Lapse of Time

at Gutharraguda (SHARK BAY)

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Blue Lagoon

Introduction

Earlier this year I visited Gutharraguda (Shark Bay) for an aerial photography workshop with Australian legends Tony Hewitt and Peter Eastway. They have distinguished themselves both nationally and internationally for their landscape and aerial imagery, winning many accolades in the process, so I was excited to have the privilege of spending time with them. It's been a few months since I returned, so this article is a reflection of my time suspended over Gutharraguda Country and includes some tips about aerial photography.

I arrived at Denham airport a little flustered but excited. My flight out of Sydney had been delayed and I made my connecting flight to Denham with 15 minutes to spare. Both Tony and Peter were waiting to greet me as I disembarked. Everything is quite laid-back in Western Australia and I was already beginning to feel relaxed and glad to be out of wintry Sydney for the week.

Shark Bay is located in the Indian Ocean at the most westerly edge of the Australian continent. It has some exceptional natural features which has earned

it UNESCO World Heritage status. Contributing to this status are some of the world's largest and richest sea-grass beds, an amazing dugong population and colonies of stromatolites, considered to be the oldest forms of life on earth. Five species of endangered mammals call this place home and most people who have visited Monkey Mia would have encountered the loveable Bottlenose dolphins who visit every morning.

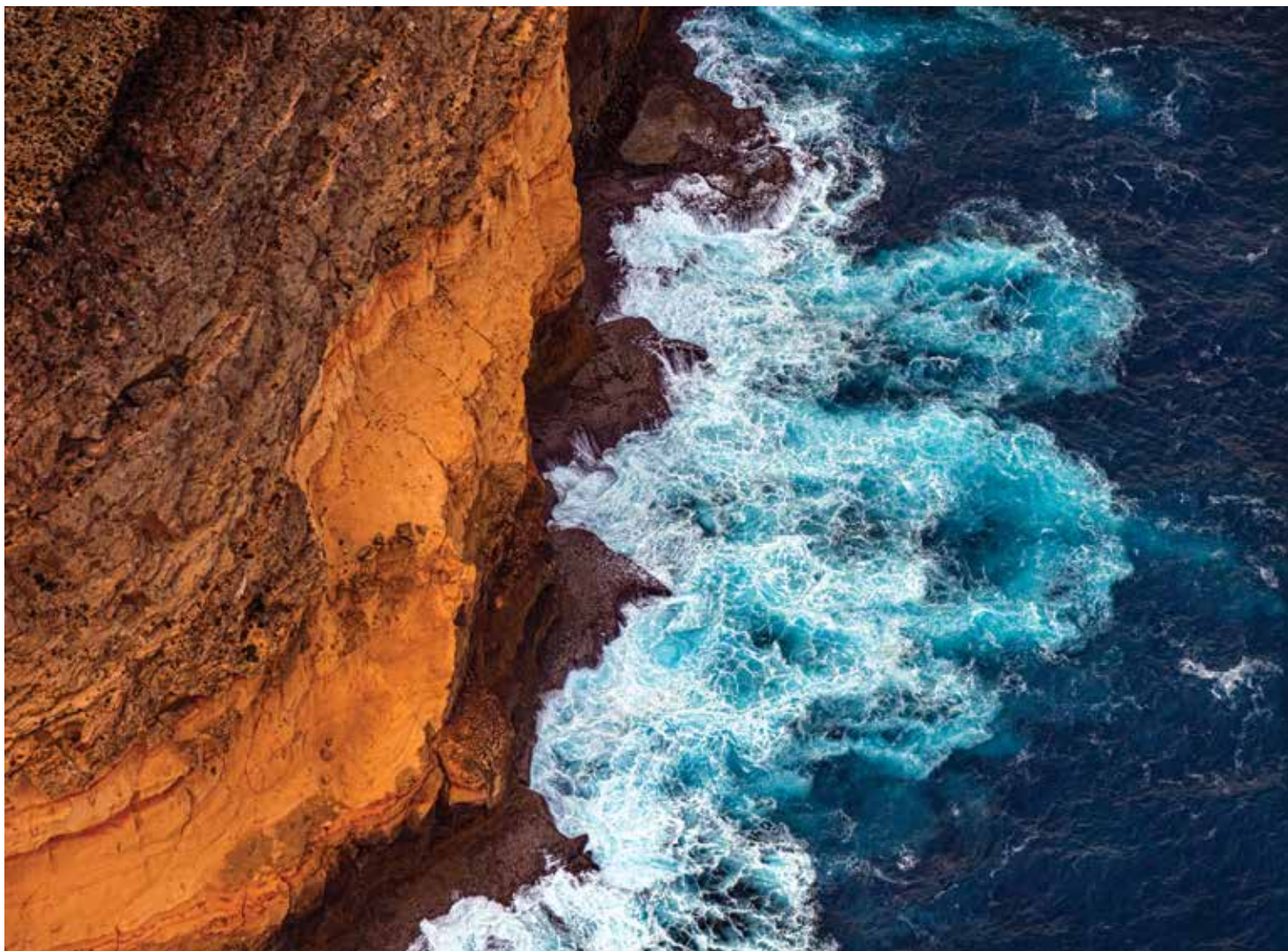
I had visited Shark Bay about 2 decades ago, but this would be my first aerial experience. Words don't do this place justice so I hoped my images might. We would spend the next few days making imagery while suspended over this landscape from a Cessna, with the doors open. I couldn't wait.

Planning and Gear

If I were coming here on my own, I might have been pouring over Google Earth to scout out the locations I wanted to fly over so I could instruct the pilot. However, Tony and Peter have been here many times before so I could relax and let them plot our flight paths. The pilots were also experienced in flying photographers over the area. I had chatted to Tony

All photos

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Cliff Hanger

about what gear to bring before I got here. The 7kg (15.4 lb) limit on carry-on baggage meant that some of my lenses had to be left behind.

Some professional aerial photographers prefer prime lenses but for this shoot I had decided to rely on a mid-range zoom, the Canon RF 24-105mm lens and my Canon R6 body. If I had a 70-200mm lens, I would have brought that along, but it's good to remember that the aircraft can also act as a zoom with a little cooperation from the pilot! I had my Canon 6D as a backup with my 100mm prime lens, but I didn't need it. I chose to leave my filters and polarizers behind to ensure maximum light transmission, but a polarizer would be useful for those oblique shots when shooting a bright sky or to cut down the reflections off a dazzling water surface.

Warm clothing and travel calm pills also came in handy. You will need some backup batteries and memory cards, an external hard drive for storage and a laptop to download and check your images between flights.

I had chosen to not study the many images that had been taken here previously, although if you are on

social media in Australia, you can't really avoid seeing images of Shark Bay. You might find it useful to study the images of this area as part of your planning. One of the highlights of our trip would be visiting the information center in Denham and seeing the gallery of images that the 'Ninety Degrees Five' collective (ND5) shot in this area about 10 years ago. Besides Tony and Peter, the group includes Michael & Christian Fletcher and Les Walkling. This exhibition of aerial photography shows us there are other ways of mapping reality than those that dominate our everyday lives. If you are in the area, make sure to spend some time in this gallery.

Understanding the Challenges and Settings for Your Camera

There was time to freshen up on our first evening before we sat down as a group to chat about settings over a few glasses of wine, crackers and cheese. I set up my camera as we chatted and saved the settings as a custom function (C.Fn) so I could easily recall them when I was up in the air. Movement and weather conditions would be one of the many challenges we



Coloured Salt

would contend with. The wind factor can make your plane ride even bumpier than usual so choosing the right shutter speed is paramount. While you may wish to choose shutter-priority, I decided to shoot on manual and fix my shutter speed at 1/2000 sec. Peter explained that we won't need to worry about depth of field, given how far away we will be. The landscape is also mostly flat. I shot at an aperture of $f/4$ - $f/5.6$ and I rarely had an image that was blurry. I chose an expanded auto focus area given we were in constant movement. I also used my back-button focus to pre-focus each time I took a shot, as I was constantly changing my focal length and composition.

Because I didn't want to introduce too much noise, I set my ISO on Auto, but restricted it to a range between 100 and 3200. We were fortunate that the light was mostly bright while we were shooting. However, if you find your ISO is getting too high and conditions allow, then adjusting your shutter speed might be an option. My metering was set at evaluative so the camera would average exposure for the entire scene. I also turned on the stabilization of my lens. I choose single shot frame advance as there isn't a need to spray and pray in aerial photography!

Up & Away and Shooting

The good thing about aerial photography is that you don't really need to wake up too early, but we postponed breakfast till we had completed our flights. Tony had brought us some ginger chews and I remembered to swallow my travel calm before we left for the airport. I don't really get air sick, and this time was no different. I took a spare battery and memory card and slipped them into my jacket pocket. Shooting with two memory cards is also an option if your camera allows.

Tony was flying with me on our first flight. We were flying with Shark Bay Aviation and our pilot Scott helped me on with my harness. It would be noisy once we were in the plane, but we had a communication system that would allow us to chat. Sometimes simple sign language gestures like a thumbs up can also be useful. Tony reminded me to take some images as we took off and check that they are sharp. I also kept an eye on my histogram. My images were looking good!

The previous day we had chatted about the types of images we might take. If you want to shoot looking



Last Rays

straight down, then you'll have to instruct the pilot to put the wing down. You can also shoot oblique images that might include the horizon. These are not your typical abstract aerials, but they can be quite unique because of that. We had been instructed to not lean out of the window or door to avoid becoming part of the slip stream. Because we were harnessed, we were definitely very safe!

My zoom lens helped me avoid the struts and wheels of the plane in my composition but that's not always possible. I remembered that I can always clone out unwanted bits, so I didn't let it limit my composition.

Finding Metaphor and Meaning in Composition

I have always been fascinated by the ancient aerial paintings of Aboriginal artists. They imagined themselves hovering over Country as they documented the natural and mystical forms they visualized. Knowing their country intimately was crucial to their survival. Indigenous art was on my mind while I was in suspended in the air.

While colors, textures, form and shapes are central to abstract photography, many photographers are



Deep Dive



Tree Patterns

keen to also find meaning and metaphors in their images. As this was the first time I was seeing this landscape I was hopeful that I could find meaning and metaphor later. I concentrated on looking for patterns. Highlights over water can blow your exposure, so it is always better to underexpose by at least a third of a stop.

The Flights

It's hard to beat the intensity of colors in an Australian Landscape. The red earth, the teal blue ocean, the white sandy beaches, and the variety of greens in both the water and landscape make for a beautiful color palette. Our first flight was over Francois Peron National Park where the outback reds meet the ocean blues. Tony's image of Little Lagoon is well known now, but I was still keen to put my own spin on it. I think that first flight took my breath away. I could not stop smiling when we disembarked. I think it would be fair to say this was one of the most stunning places in the world and seeing it from the air is perhaps the only way to truly appreciate its expanse and beauty.

Our second flight concentrated on the area known as Useless Loop. It's hard to believe but even in this remote part of the world, humans have left their mark. Useless Loop isn't really open to the public although you can get close with a 4-wheel drive vehicle. The best way to see this salt mine that produces the purest salt in the world is from the air. The area was wrongly named by Frenchman Freycinet, when he visited in 1801, because he thought there was a sandbar blocking access. The captivating patchwork of shapes and colors found in the salt ponds provide amazing opportunities for geometric compositions.

Our third flight was during the late afternoon and was mostly over water and sand dunes. As I looked down on our beautiful planet from the safety of a Cessna—albeit with the doors open—I was naturally drawn to the pathways and patterns carved by water systems. I have never seen so many incredible shapes and patterns in the ocean or on a beach and I was mesmerized by them.

As the sun began to set, the beautiful glow of the afternoon sun lit up the landscape. The light highlights the Biridas on the ground which appeared to be an otherworldly landscape. They were landlocked saline lakes between sand dunes when sea levels were much higher than they are today. The drop in sea levels caused the lakes to dry and left these salty hollows that we call Biridas.

As we flew over this landscape for the last time, I reflected that this area was home to the Malgana, Nanda and Yingkarta people. I wonder what life was like for them as I look down on this landscape in awe. We flew over Useless Loop one more time and then discovered some amazing sand dunes and the rugged

Zuytdorp Cliffs. I was excited when I spotted Egg Island— a beautiful island on the East side of Dirk Hartog Island. The island was beautifully captured by Peter Eastway and his image had caught my attention when we viewed the exhibition of the ND5.

Reflection

All too soon it was our last dinner together. We had engaged in some wonderful conversations about art and photography and aerial imagery. We had discussed processing, looked at one of Tony's photography books as well as their print exhibition which had sparked a trend not just in aerial photography but also in bringing photographers to the area.

I will always treasure my memories of this trip with gratitude and remember this week as one that inspired another step in my creative journey.

Nilmini De Silva is a Sri Lankan born

Australian and an international award-winning amateur photographer based in Sydney. She discovered a passion for photography in 2010 when she spent a month volunteering in



South Africa on a Conservation & Photography project during a gap year. Since then, she has launched numerous exhibitions in the Sydney area, published a photo book 'Fate or Destiny: Living Life with Passion,' completed an artist residency, and engaged in photography projects to highlight issues she cares about. She enjoys the exhibitions process and has gained both national (GMAPS) and international honours (SPSA, EPSA and EFIAP). She is also keenly involved with her local camera club where she serves on the committee. She is keen to use her writing and her photography to inspire the transition to a more regenerative and resilient future through the Town Planning consultancy PolisPlan, which she directs with her partner.

You can see more of Nilmini's work and contact her via www.narratives4change.com.au.

You will find her on Instagram at [nilmini_de_silva_photography](https://www.instagram.com/nilmini_de_silva_photography)



Waves in an Ocean



Island in the Clouds