

CONNECTION TO Country

CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

“It’s not a job, it’s a passion.”

A Taungurung Elder heeds the spiritual call of her ancestral lands and takes up tour guiding to share her story and culture.





“I feel truly honoured to share my culture with visitors,” says Aunty Joanne “Jo” Honeysett as she stands tall on Country, draped in a possum skin cloak she has lovingly stitched by hand.

Kneeling to pat down the pile of gum leaves on the fire pit, she teases out a pure white cloud of smoke that dances with rhythm and purpose. The stage is set to commence a “danderrum” — a traditional welcome smoking ceremony.

One by one, she invites her group members to bathe in the smoke to cleanse their spirit and start their journey of connection to her Country — Taungurung Country.

There’s something special about being on Taungurung Country, whether it’s standing atop The Horn of Mt Buffalo at sunrise, sitting silently by the Goulburn River listening to the birdlife or walking beside an oven mound in Nagambie to respect the wisdom and ingenuity of Taungurung ancestors.

And for Aunty Jo, it also goes deeper. As a proud Taungurung woman and mother to seven older children, she made a life-changing decision five



Left: Aunty Jo performs a traditional dance.

Bottom left: A Taungurung welcome smoking ceremony, known as a “danderrum”.

years ago. She was retired and living in Tyabb (Bunurong Country) but felt something was missing. She packed her backpack, left the house, bought a motorbike and followed her dream to move home to Taungurung Country.

While it was tough at first with nowhere to live, she trusted that her ancestors would look after her.

Sure enough, she got a job with the Taungurung Land and Waters Council in a community role, found a house in Alexandra and everything fell into place. Soon after, all her kids followed.

The move back to Taungurung Country renewed her “fire in the belly” and enabled a better connection to the wider Taungurung community who are reclaiming a shared sense of identity, common purpose and cultural vitality. Never in her wildest dreams did she envisage she’d be knocking back retirement to be a tour guide — but the opportunity to share her story and passion for culture was too exciting to ignore. “It’s not a job, it’s a passion,” she explains.

Aunty Jo is one of five guides who will be leading guests on immersive cultural experiences on Country. Her son Jonah is also taking up the role.

Aunty Jo believes tourism gives Taungurung people a voice. “It’s the opportunity to share our story — a story that no one else has authority to share; to build relationships, educate people and create awareness of Taungurung aspirations. We’ll take an honest and upfront approach to meet visitor expectations but provide excitement and surprises, too.”

Some people might be anxious about joining a cultural tour for fear of saying the wrong thing, but Aunty Jo reassures “there’s no right or wrong questions”.

She explains Taungurung tour guides “believe in professionalism, teamwork and have a willingness to share cultural information in a friendly and welcoming way. Tourism to us means creating a safe space for you to connect with us and our culture, learn and give back to our community and Country. After all, it’s our shared Country and culture that we can all take pride in.”



DISCOVER
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For more details, connect to the Taungurung Land and Waters Council and stay tuned for its tourism experiences launching later this year.

taungurung.com.au