I n an ancient ceremonial bora ring on Cape York, the dust rises as feet pound the earth in what must be one of Australia’s most colourful festivals.

And the beauty of it, apart from being witness to a vibrant cultural spectacle, is that it remains relatively undiscovered.

I’m one of about five thousand campers spending three days at the biennial Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival, which is held on a traditional site beside the Laura River just outside the tiny remote township of Laura.

Camping is the only option here, but there are plenty of sites for tents, vans and motorhomes. They roll in from Friday, everything imaginable, including a gypsy caravan, and set up for a long weekend of song, dance and storytelling.

There are school groups, grey nomads, hippies, families and backpackers, but the festival retains an intimate feel.

Twenty diverse Indigenous communities from all over Queensland come to Laura every two years to share their song, dance, language and stories. This year there were around 500 performers and it was so clear that what we were witnessing was the passing on of traditions; the youngest performers were about four years old, the oldest may not even know when they were born. But throughout the generations the pride in their culture was evident.

The Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival is now in its twentieth year and is believed to be the longest continually running Aboriginal cultural festival in Australia. Throughout the years the festival has evolved and, under new artistic director Raymond Blanco, this year it moved away from a competition to being a celebration and a platform to share their song, dance, language and stories. It’s an amazing spectacle: the red, ochre, white, yellow and black colours of the earth are painted on bodies young and old. Some are feathered, others wear masks and carry spears or shields. What struck me most was the diversity: it’s so different from anything I’ve seen before at tourist festivals.

Words & images: Lee Mylne

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history of Indigenous rock painting in this area, as well as the Aboriginal and European history of Cape York. You could spend an hour or so here.

The most famous, and accessible, of the rock art sites is Split Rock. Although there are hundreds of painted rock shelters throughout the district, only a few are open to the public, and you must apply for a permit.

Split Rock is known for the tall distinctive figures of the Quinkans or supernatural spirits, both good and bad, that live in the sandstone and rise at night from crevices to stalk the land. It has recently been included on the Australian Heritage Estate and is listed by UNESCO as among the top ten rock art sites in the world.

Split Rock is a self-guided site, twelve kilometres south of Laura, with boardwalks and interpretive signs, but it is also well worthwhile booking a guided tour to Mushroom Rock, the Giant Horse Gallery or the Quikan galleries. The Quikan Country paintings date back around 15,000 to 30,000 years and are highly significant because of the post-contact paintings depicting the first European explorers and settlers that came to the region.

For those wanting to stay on, the weekend after the dance festival is the Laura Races and Rodeo. This is another camping event, usually on the last weekend of June each year.

**FACT FILE**

**Getting there**
The festival site is on the Peninsula Development Road, about 320 km north of Cairns, with a sealed bitumen road all the way over the Great Dividing Range, via Mareeb.

**Camping**
The ticket price includes camping fees. Book online at [www.lauradancefestival.com](http://www.lauradancefestival.com)

Onsite purchases are cash only; limited EFTPOS is available at the Laura General Store or Laura Hotel.

Campers need to be self-sufficient. There are plenty of toilets and hot showers, and bore water taps throughout the camping site. However, you should bring (or buy) bottled water, or boil the water before drinking. There are a limited number of fire-pits throughout the site.

We stayed in an Apollo six-berth Euro Deluxe motorhome. Apollo Motorhome Holidays has branches in Cairns and a range of other capital city and central locations throughout Australia. Campervans, four-wheel-drive campers and motorhomes are available ranging from two to six-berth. Our motorhome had a kitchen with microwave, gas stove and refrigerator, a shower and toilet, and three double beds. The Apollo Euro Deluxe starts at $127 per night based on seven nights’ hire (with seasonal fluctuations).

[www.apollocamper.com/holidays](http://www.apollocamper.com/holidays)

**More information**
The Quikan Cultural Centre is open daily from 9.00 am to 4.00 pm. Entry is free. Tours usually run from late March to early December. [www.quinkancc.com.au](http://www.quinkancc.com.au)

The next Laura Dance Festival will be held in June 2015.
[www.lauradancefestival.com](http://www.lauradancefestival.com)