

## A Walk in the Park by Jackie Bird

The freeway was quiet, they said twenty minutes away so I must be nearly there now. It's a beautiful park they told me to take a book to read and sit under the big tree in the women's park but I wanted to walk round first although I probably wouldn't do it all today especially in this heat. The park is larger than America's Central Park by 140 acres and has over 300 specimens of flowers, herbs, bushes and trees, never mind the kangaroos, wallaby's and other wild life. The park is made up of smaller areas hosting children's play grounds, picnic and Barbeques free to use, an outdoor cinema, some cafes and the Federations walkway which includes a tree top Walk although not for me. The walkway is a path that circumnavigates a large area of the park. There is also some wild bush land deliberately left uncultivated for the wildlife. I won't be walking there far too many snakes and spiders for me.

I am meeting the rest of the family and friends later for a picnic but I want to explore on my own for a while and learn about the park and maybe a little about its history.

I arrive and pull into the vast car park, how lovely no charge to park my car. I can see the fountains in the distance and think I will make my way to them to stand in the cool spray of the water later but first to the viewing platform. It surprises me that there are very few people around but as I make my way across the crunchy dry but green buffalo grass I can see the blue river in the distance. The Swan river is a beautiful deep blue famous for and named after its black swans. The outline of Perth city stands proud in the distance and the ferry that takes you from Perth to Fremantle looks like a toy ship on the water.

The plaque tells me that the park was opened in 1895 and called Perth Park but was renamed in 1901 to mark the ascension to the throne of King George VII. There's so much to look at and learn about so despite the many plaques around I decided to join one of the guided tours.

The young guide is a native Australian the indigenous people are known as Aborigines. He tells us that the Park is revered by the Aborigines whose mythical snake Wajyl is said to have entered the ground and emerged at the foot of Mount Eliza on which the park is built and created the beautiful Swan River.

As we walk the guide tells us about the ancient ceremony of the Walkabout. He explains that this is a tradition for young boys usually around 10 to 16 years old. It is passing from childhood to manhood, they live in the wilderness for a period of about 6 months to make the spiritual and traditional transition into adulthood. Although it rarely happens these days its history is fascinating. Boys were taught by the elders to recognise natural food from the bush, where and how to find water and to find their way by singing the songs taught to them by their elders. They could only leave when the elders decided they were ready for the long trek they had no technology to help them and built their shelters and implements from the bush land around them. They could be walking up to a total of 1000 miles. The boys were decorated with traditional paints before they embarked on this marathon journey and they were taught about healing plants so that they could treat their wounds and sore feet.

Sadly the term walkabout is not understood by many and is often used as a derogatory term and seen as a crazy thing to do by those who don't understand its significance. To the Aboriginal people it has important cultural significance. We are proudly told that the Aboriginal people are the oldest settlers in the world. The walkabout is a time for self evaluation and spiritual learning.

We walk on towards the big old Boab prison tree said to be 1500 years old and known as Kunumudj. It has a circumference of 14 meters and has a split down the middle where its spongy insides can be seen. This tree is said to have been used by the Aboriginal people as a sacred place and a resting place. It is known as the prison tree as history reports it to be the place where Aboriginal people were held as prisoners before being transported to the jail in the county of Derby WA by the white settlers.

It's time for me to leave the tour of the park. I thank the guide and tell him I am meeting family for a barbecue he reminds me to watch out for the kangaroos some of which will cheekily steal your food and not to approach them especially those with a joey in their pouch.

A lovely day not yet ended it but it was time to meet up with family and friends to share a picnic and catch up on news especially from those friends not seen since my last trip. So the Fraser walk and memorial park will have to wait for another day. As I walked to our meeting place I reflected on a beautiful informative day that had started out just 'as a walk in the park'.