

SPOTLIGHT ON ROBERT TAYLOR

CEO OF WAITOC, PERTH



A Nanda man of the Yamaji Nation from the mid-west, Rob began as an upholsterer and now sits in the top seat at the Western Australian Indigenous Tourism Operators Council (WAITOC). His journey has lots of twists and turns (chef to hospitality manager) and fascinating side trips (taekwondo instructing) that have given him all the invaluable financial insight, business management experience and leadership skills he now brings to his role advocating for and growing Australian Aboriginal tourism at a local, state, national and international level.

“We’re working to put Aboriginal tourism businesses at the forefront as the face of tourism in WA and establish Perth as the gateway to authentic Aboriginal tourism in Australia.”

Give us your bbq pitch. What do you do?

I oversee WA's Aboriginal tourism advocacy, business development and marketing body that advises both government and industry on the needs of Aboriginal tourism businesses. Over 180 of our 270 member organisations are proudly Aboriginal owned and run tourism businesses that we market at state, national and international conferences and events, from caravan shows to the Australian Tourism Exchange. My main focus is on advocacy and funding for our organisation and members.

Did you always plan to work in this industry?

My father was a wood machinist and furniture maker, so I kind of followed in his footsteps when I left school and started an apprenticeship at TAFE to become an upholsterer. I ran an upholstering business in partnership with a friend for a few years but closed it down when he sadly died of cancer. That was when I decided to change tack and applied for a pre-apprenticeship, qualified with a trade certificate in cookery and entered the hospitality industry. I started as an apprentice at Fremantle's A Shed Café and progressed to head chef just a few years after qualifying.

So, how did you get into tourism?

From the A Shed, I hopped over to the Tradewinds Hotel as a chef de partie (although there wasn't a lot of partying going on – it was hard work). It was there that I met my wife and we decided to start an Aboriginal owned and run hospitality property management business and I took a Diploma in Small Business. Through operating our business, I gained lots of insight and experience in managing diverse teams of people across many locations from Mandurah to Karratha. I'd also become a board member of WAITOC and put my hand up for the role of treasurer. Then I was Chairman for a year and a half, at which point the CEO position was advertised. The Board was keen for me to stand for it, so I applied, and I've been in the role ever since.

How would you describe yourself?

I'm easy-going and not stuck in my ways, so while I consider my strength to be strategic direction, I'm always open to other people's ideas and happy to present anything that's worth putting on the table. Outside of work, I've practiced and instructed taekwondo for many years. That really brought me out of my shell when I was younger and helped me develop good teamwork and leadership

skills too. That doesn't mean I put a strangle-hold on my team and look over their shoulder. I like my team to feel respected and valued in their roles and responsibilities.

What do you love most about the tourism industry?

It's a very supportive industry. There are many stakeholders across many different organisations and memberships who network and work together to make WA's tourism industry successful. If it wasn't for those networks, there wouldn't be the multi-million-dollar funding for major big-picture projects like the development of a new Aboriginal Cultural Centre in Perth.

What's the best part of your job?

What I really enjoy is sharing the knowledge I've gained from establishing and managing my own business to support and mentor Aboriginal people – helping them learn how to get started, run their own businesses and be sustainable in their own right. I love that we're giving people a hand up rather than a handout and encouraging them to make the most of their WAITOC membership and marketing opportunities.

What's your best advice for anyone starting out?

Seek support from WAITOC and Tourism WA's Jina Plan and network with other owners of Aboriginal tourism businesses. There are plenty of good people in our industry who are keen to mentor fellow Aboriginal people in their communities who are just starting out or at any level. And make sure you understand the protocols and obtain the right permissions from your elders if you're intending to share the stories of your people and country.

And what's next for you?

I'm working to diversify WAITOC's income so we can apply for corporate grants and receive philanthropic gifts to grow Aboriginal tourism across WA and Australia too. We're working to put Aboriginal tourism businesses at the forefront as the face of tourism in WA and establish Perth as the gateway to authentic Aboriginal tourism in Australia. And we're helping First Nations' councils in other states to copy our model and come together to establish a national Aboriginal tourism organisation too. It's big, big-picture stuff.

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