



Walking with the GIANTS

Twenty years after it was built, the Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk in the heart of the Walpole Wilderness continues to delight its visitors with a unique view of the magnificent tingle forest and surrounding area. Lauren Emmerson explores what makes this attraction so special, and why it is more popular than ever.



by Lauren Emmerson



As the walkway of the Tree Top Walk gently sways under my feet, the towering red and yellow tingle trees (*Eucalyptus jacksonii* and *E. guilfoylei*) seem to envelope me reassuringly, despite the fact I'm 40 metres above the forest floor looking at the ground through the mesh steel decking. It's a special moment as the quiet of the tingle forest softens the noise in my busy brain, and the clean, forest air fills my lungs. Let's walk.

The giant tingle trees look like a child's interpretation – with their long, tall trunks and a burst of branches and leaves at the top. The knots on their trunks look like old facial features and one tree – commonly known as 'Grandma Tingle' – has such a distinctive 'face' you'd swear it was straight from the pages of a children's fiction book. There's something undeniably magical about this place and, as one of WA's favourite tourist destinations, I'm not the only one who feels it.

A LOCAL TREASURE

Located in the popular Walpole-Nornalup National Park, the Tree Top Walk was completed in 1996. It was designed to protect the fragile tingle forest while encouraging visitors, including those with mobility aids, to enjoy it. The red



● Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk, Walpole-Nornalup National Park

tingle tree is different to most eucalypts because it has a shallow root system and no tap root, causing the centre of the trunk to dry out over time. Each time a fire passes through the area, the fire burns the centre of the tingle tree but bark continues to grow on the outside of the base, sometimes creating a hollow big enough to walk through. Fungal and insect attacks also contribute to the hollowing of the base. Tingle trees are also sensitive to compaction of soil from people walking or driving around their bases. For many years, people would drive their cars right inside giant tingle trees for a photo opportunity. After 100,000 visitors each year, one particularly giant tree was 'loved to death' and fell down in 1990.

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Main The spectacular Tree Top Walk.

Photo – Marie Lochman

Inset left Picture opportunities of yesteryear.

Inset right Tree Top Walk construction.

Photos – Parks and Wildlife

Above left The Tree Top Walk guides visitors through the canopy of the Valley of the Giants.
Photo – Marie Lochman

Above Winches were used to hoist the spans into place.

Photo – Parks and Wildlife

DESIGNING AN ICON

The Tree Top Walk was designed after an Australia-wide competition. The design was inspired by the understory plants of the tingle forest with spans of the walk long and slightly rounded like the sword grass (*Lepidosperma effusum*). When you look up from the base of one of the pylons to the platform, the structure spikes out like the leaves of the tassel flower (*Leucopogon verticillatus*).

Minimal machinery was used in the construction to avoid compaction of the soil; no helicopters or cranes. Riggers used scaffolding to erect the tall pylons, which were built first. The spans were then built in between pylons at ground level with winches used to hoist the spans into

Something special about the tingle trees

The Tree Top Walk is located in an ancient tingle forest with tingle trees that don't grow anywhere else in the world. The trees grow in the almost untouched 6,000-hectare forest between the Deep and Bow rivers along with some plants that exist nowhere else in the world. Although Australia has experienced significant environmental change over the last few hundred years, much less change has occurred in the south-west of Western Australia.

Many species in the tingle forest have origins that can be traced back 65 million years to the super continent Gondwana when Australia was joined to what are now Africa, India, Antarctica and South America.



Above 'Grandma Tingle.'
Photo – Damon Annison

Above right The Ancient Empire Walk.
Photo – Nic Duncan



Do it yourself

Where is it?: Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk is located in Walpole-Nornalup National Park, 18km drive from Walpole and 52km from Denmark.

What to do: Bushwalking, birdwatching, nature observation, guided tours, holiday programs and picnicking.

Facilities: Walk trails, Discovery Centre – featuring a great range of visitor information and displays, gift shop, bike racks, toilets, free wheelchair and stroller hire, car park.

Opening times: Daily 9am to 5pm (extended hours 26 December to 26 January 8am to 6pm). Closed Christmas day and during hazardous conditions.

Free guided tours: Plan your trip to include a fabulous guided walk of the Ancient Empire. Guided walks are offered daily outside the school holidays. Guided walks are free of charge, but may be subject to weather conditions.

Holiday and school programs: Enrich your experience of the Tree Top Walk by joining in one of the many fun-filled activities held each school holiday period (excluding winter). Nearer to Nature programs can be tailored to suit your school group requirements.

Admission fees apply.

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place. Six lightweight bridge spans, each 60 metres long between seven pylons, made of see-through steel decking create the structure. The spans were specially designed to sway slightly as you walk, in order to enhance the sensation of being in the forest canopy.

The Ancient Empire Walk, which gives visitors a 'ground-up' view of the tingle forest, was built at the same time as the Tree Top Walk. Built to protect the fragile forest floor, the jarrah decking and bitumen paths lead visitors around, and even through, the giant tingle trees. Viewing platforms and seats provide people with the opportunity to rest and observe the forest, and maybe even spot some of the local birdlife. Interpretive signs around the walk tell the story of the tingle forest and its inhabitants.

PART OF THE FAMILY

It's little wonder that since it opened, the Tree Top Walk has attracted more than 3.4 million visitors and it continues to be a big part of the local community. Locals were involved in the construction of the Tree Top Walk, in laying the paths and building the infrastructure of the Ancient Empire Walk. Since then, it is estimated that tourists who come to the area to visit the attraction have invested about

\$50 million into the local community through tourism, hospitality and other services. It also provides job opportunities for those who work at the attraction, as well as those who provide its ongoing maintenance and upgrades. And, for a team of dedicated volunteers, the attraction provides a beautiful setting for their meaningful contribution.

Visitors often leave with a soft spot in their hearts for the place. At different times of the year, you get a markedly different experience – when it's cooler you experience misty moist forest smells, and when it's warmer you get to enjoy the beautiful wildflowers. People keep coming back because there's always something to see.

So, as I reach the end of my walk through the canopy, reinvigorated by spending time in this beautiful place, it strikes me I just immersed myself in the canopy of an ancient forest. Now I'm going to jump back in my car and continue on my way to another amazing park in the area.

Lauren Emmerson is a project officer – editorial. She can be contacted on (08) 9219 9814 or by email (lauren.emmerson@dpaw.wa.gov.au).