

A pearl of a town



Broome is as desirable as the pearls it produces. It may be far, far away but there's a polished, sophisticated side to this outback town. **Robin Powell** reports.

Why would anyone pay to be part of a tour to a place you can easily travel on your own? It's not as if Broome is hard to get to. Qantas flies direct from Sydney and Melbourne weekly, there is plenty of accommodation and everyone speaks English (even the backpacking hospitality workers). Our group doesn't traverse great distances; on the contrary, we unpack and stay put in the luxurious rooms of the Pinctada Resort for five nights.

So what's the allure? In a word, indulgence. Take, for instance, the moment when Danni clips the

diamond clasp on a rope of pearls around her mother's neck. Terry's face lights up like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* and she is no less delighted when choosing pearls for her two daughters. We're in the Paspaley showroom and we're trying on everything in the shop because we can borrow whatever we like. For one night only, at our final night degustation dinner, we'll be wearing some of the world's biggest and best cultured pearls. So there's an excited hum in the room as we fondle pearls, drink champagne and take photographs of each other bedecked in jewels. Terry

looks elegant, but when I try a whole strand I feel less Julia Roberts circa *Pretty Woman*, and more Betty Rubble, circa stone-age *Flintstones*.

GIRLS AND PEARLS

Terry is familiar with the protocol. This is her second time on the women-only, five-night Girls and Pearls safari. She was given the trip as a Mother's Day present last year, and loved it so much she's back again, this time footing the bill for both her daughters. There are other mother-daughter pairs in our little company too, which is full of women who say they don't usually do



Ronaldo serves bubbly



Camel train on Cable Beach

tours, but that this one is different. Part of the difference is our host, Maeve O'Meara, whose *Food Safari* programs have aired for years on SBS. Maeve turns out to be as easygoing and good fun in person as she appears on television. She's like some athletic fairy godmother, bestowing on each of us hard-working, self-denying women the indulgence of having everything done for us. She has organised private yoga classes before breakfast, luxurious spa treatments and great food (Pinctada's menu is designed by Melbourne's Greg Malouf). We are treated like minor celebrities: feted at an exclusive dinner at the old pearler's mansion, McAlpine House; whisked to front-row seats at Sun Pictures, the world's longest running outdoor cinema for a screening of the Broome musical *Bran Nue Dae*; helped onto camels for an undulating ride along the beach as the sun paints the sky and the sea-slicked sand in mad pastels.

We pack plenty into our days, and still have time to explore Broome on our own and to laze around the lovely pool and gardens of the resort. As a bonus, Maeve has a journalist's eye for a great story so when opportunities

arise we get unprogrammed exclusives: we meet the highly respected Kimberley artist, Jan Billycan, whose work is held by the National Gallery; and are taken through his line-up of craft-brewed Matso's beers by brewer Martin Peirson-Jones.

Our smiling private butler Ronaldo has poured champagne for us on the beach at cocktail hour and at dinner and we've grown happily accustomed to our temporary celebrity. Even so, it's a huge surprise when on our second last night, just as dark has fallen, we walk onto the lawns of the Moonlight Bay Suites. In front of us a row of chairs on the edge of the grass faces the black expanse of the mudflats and the night sky. The chairs are for us, our front-row seats to one of Broome's most magical natural events, the staircase to the moon. While Ronaldo pours the champagne once more, the moon rises above the red line of the horizon and throws golden light across the shallow trenches of the mudflats. The effect is of steps leading to the moon, or a golden 'red carpet' spread just for us pampered pseudo-celebrities.

We are feeling completely indulged when on our last night we rendezvous in the spa to collect our borrowed pearls. I've ditched the Betty Rubbles for a single pearl and diamond drop necklace. Terry and her daughters sport strands with matching earrings. As we walk down to dinner, gleaming in the moonlight, she confides that she has bought pearls for both her daughters. "And we might have to come back next year," she laughs.

TRAVEL FACTS

Getting there: Qantas flies direct to Broome from Perth, Melbourne and Sydney (dry season only).

Touring: Girls and Pearls is a five-night, women-only tour run by Gourmet Safaris - timed to coincide with Broome's best dry season weather and the staircase to the moon. Dates for 2012 are 5-10 July and 10-17 August. Details at www.gourmetsafaris.com.au

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