

Western Australia: Barefoot luxury and diving on Ningaloo reef

Nick Redmayne reports from a tented beach resort in Western Australia, a stone's throw from the Ningaloo, country's largest fringing reef.

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Leaving the tarmac of Yardie Creek Road, we followed a short stretch of gravel to South Mandu Beach. "Are you sure this is right?" said my companion.

There was no one to ask. We parked, locked the jeep and set out along the wallaby tracks with just a shoulder bag and a bottle of water. A few minutes later, a solar-powered buggy came into view. "We'll get your bags. Welcome to Sal Salis."

There's no permanent accommodation in Cape Range National Park and stiff competition for the few permitted public camping places leaves the diminutive Exmouth, about an hour's drive away, almost the only alternative base. So the exclusive location of Sal Salis's nine walk-in tents is therefore unrivalled.

Cameron Miller, one of the camp guides, led us to the central dining area, gave us a beer and asked whether we would like a glass – Sal Salis may charge £912 per tent per night, but this is still Australia.

Cameron briefly described the camp, the solar arrays that provide all electricity, the 20 litres of water per tent per day for washing – "Hey, we're in the ocean all the time" – the biodegradable soaps and shampoos, and the odour-free composting lavatories.

He suggested we get kitted out with "rashies" (rash vests), snorkels and flippers then meet on the beach for a quick swim over the reef.

A stone's throw from the deserted white sands of Cape Range lies Ningaloo, 161 miles long, the country's largest fringing reef and the world's only sizeable coral community to abut a continental land mass. Yet it remains unknown to most British visitors to Australia, only 25 per cent of whom make it to Perth, let alone top-end Western Australia. It's not even Unesco designated.

Down on the beach Cameron satisfied himself that on balance we were more likely to swim than sink before we headed up the shore with a view to drifting back down on the current.

"Now mate, once you've got your flippers on it is easier to enter the water walking backwards..." And that was the last verbal communication we had for almost an hour.

Kicking out a little way we were soon at the edge of the coral and immediately invited into the ebb and flow of the reef's multicoloured temperate and tropical drama. Two opposing currents, the Ningaloo and Leeuwin, vortex offshore creating a fecund mix of species beyond the breakers, attracting appearances by A-list stars from the world of filter feeding: whale sharks, humpback whales and manta rays.

Parrot fish returned my stares suspiciously then Cameron pointed out an octopus, perfectly camouflaged in texture and shape – it flashed black annoyance upon discovery.

Elsewhere, among electric blue clouds of reef tiddlers, a hawksbill turtle had wedged its substantial bulk beneath a coral bombe, enjoying a tranquil time out from the constant currents. Clear, dark, unblinking eyes seemed to convey a resigned sadness born of 40 or more years' lonely navigation of the oceans. Then, unexpectedly, a 5ft black-tipped reef shark swam into view, coolly ignoring us.

Back at our tents we showered off the salt, making judicious use of the 20-litre water allowance. I dried off in the breeze while swinging gently in a hammock and then sunset drinks and canapés awaited on the restaurant deck.

There were just two other guests, Rod and Suzanne from Cronulla, New South Wales, perversely celebrating the conclusion of a home renovation with a couple of nights in Sal Salis's tents. Aperitifs were served, my companion and Suzanne choosing a perfectly

chilled glass of Wise sémillon sauvignon blanc, while Rod and I sank another boutique Tasmanian beer.

It was a far cry from my last visit to Cape Range, 14 years ago, when I'd spent 10 days on the beach as a backpacker. I mentioned this comparison to Rod.

"So what happened, did you win the lottery?" Rod was still incredulous at Sal Salis's nightly tariff. "We're just here for two nights. Any longer and we'll need to take out a second mortgage."

Storm lanterns were lit and tables laid. A kitchen team of chef Anthony Higoe and his wife Sally, fresh from an extended tour of duty aboard a multimillionaire's superyacht, cooked and served simple but perfectly seared scallops, followed by fillets of red snapper and an inspired desert of lemon myrtle crème brûlée.

My feet were in sandals, I was wearing shorts, my BlackBerry had no service, there was no moon to outshine the stars and no noise save the chatter of our table, the wind and rushing waves on the beach. I slept well, interrupted only once by the percussive patrolling of wallabies on the boardwalks.

Waking to a deserted camp and walking down to the restaurant area I found enough hot water for coffee.

Soon industrious sounds emanated from the kitchen tent and breakfast was served. Black coffee and fresh croissants taste best al fresco, early in the morning, but they're improved further when accompanied by a procession of humpback whales blowing, diving and spectacularly breaching perhaps a 100 yards or so from the reef and 500 yards from your granola.

I've seen whales before, but this relaxed breakfast time cetacean parade was a decidedly decadent pleasure.

Sal Salis is an experiment in high-cost, low-impact tourism in a sensitive part of the world that has thus far fought off brutal resort developments. The camp's exclusivity can't be measured by five-star service, shiny limousines, icy cold air-con or obscure spa treatments; it's all about location.

Indeed, rather than attempting to insulate guests from the environment, Sal Salis invites them to embrace it, while factoring in excellent food and a comfortable bed.

The cost of staying at Sal Salis is undoubtedly high but preserving the integrity of wilderness is a price worth paying.

WHAT TO AVOID

- Dawn and dusk in Cape Range National Park see roads occupied by local wildlife. Wallaroos (kangaroo subspecies) and emus are liable to leap or stroll in front of vehicles when least expected. Bear in mind that rental car insurance is often invalid between sunset and sunrise outside towns and cities, leaving drivers liable for all costs in the event of an accident.
- Cyclone season in WA runs officially from November to the end of April. Though it's unusual for these storms to reach as far south as Exmouth their power is not to be underestimated.
- During the peak wet season of December to March many tour operators and hotels wind down or even close, though there are always options for hardy travellers.
- The popularity of whale shark and humpback whale encounters has led to instances where animals have become distressed after being harried by pursuing skippers egged on by paying passengers. Australia's Department of Environment and Conservation has drawn up a code of conduct for such encounters to prevent this practice. Avoid operators who do not abide by this code.

Online article can be found at:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/australiaandpacific/australia/8102081/Western-Australia-Barefoot-luxury-and-diving-on-Ningaloo-reef.html>