

# NATURAL SELECTION

Equal parts nature and nurture combine to create the perfect five-star camping experience at WA coastal paradise Sal Salis, writes **Sarah Pickette**.



In the afternoon sun, it looks as though a billion dazzling diamonds are studding the water of Western Australia's Ningaloo Reef. A sea breeze challenges the midday heat as I emerge from my car at South Mandu Beach in the Cape Range National Park, about 70 kilometres south of Exmouth. This is the end of the road – literally. From here, it's just a short stroll past drowsy wallaroos to reach Sal Salis Ningaloo Reef, the tented resort touted as Australia's most innovative eco-tourism model.

Sal Salis is currently the only operation of its kind in Australia to be sited in a national park. It delivers a luxury experience without electricity, flushing toilets, television and mobile reception, and despite the fact that everything required by the camp must be carted in on a solar-powered buggy.

There are never more than 10 or so guests at a time at Sal Salis, as the accommodation comprises just five tents. The word 'tent' is somewhat inadequate though. Sure, it's a canvas construction, but inside the generous space, there's a king-size bed with crisp 500-thread-count sheets. As I flop down onto it, I can see the beach, a mere 50 metres away.

Within an hour, I'm in the water with Dani, a companionable guide who is at my service throughout my stay. We drift with the current just metres from the shore, snorkelling above the most spectacular coral gardens I have ever seen. Fish of all colours, sizes and shapes dart in and out of the coral; reef sharks, a shock at first, cruise the surrounds at lightning speed; a harlequin sea snake leaves its wriggle marks in the sand. I am spellbound.

After dark, Dani and I take our torches and walk barefoot along the beach to a spot where, earlier in the week, she'd witnessed a nest of green sea turtles hatch. We're not expecting to see anything when suddenly we notice a stirring in the sand. Attracted by our torchlight, one lone hatchling pops its head up and makes its first shaky moves towards the sea to begin its life aquatic.

The next day, the sea again proves just as strong a lure for me. As I swim and

Photography from Photolibriary. Many thanks to Tourism WA for supporting H&G on our journey: [www.tourism.wa.gov.au](http://www.tourism.wa.gov.au).



**FROM TOP** Sal Salis resort is situated alongside spectacular Ningaloo Reef. The tent accommodation is the height of eco luxury. **OPPOSITE** From snorkelling to swimming with whale sharks and watching turtles nest, wildlife spotting is a year-round highlight for visitors to Sal Salis.

drift, I reflect on the way this place has changed my perception of what a luxury holiday can and should be. I've stuck (just) to the daily personal limit of 20 litres of water, relegated my mobile to the bottom of my suitcase and used a torch to find my tent in the pitch-black night. But within a day, all this becomes normal (as well as a wonderful salve for my eco-conscience). With so few diversions I have been able to read a book on the beach for hours. I've eaten exceptional food prepared by Sal Salis' resident chef and slept in perfect quietness. And, I've been privileged to witness a natural aquarium more beautiful than anything I could have imagined. These are luxuries beyond compare.

## QUICK FACTS

### HOW TO GET THERE

- \* Sal Salis Ningaloo Reef is 1270km north of Perth. You could drive yourself there, but expect to spend at least 13 hours behind the wheel from Perth. Skywest Airlines flies from Perth to Exmouth; fares start at \$222 one way (inclusive of taxes, web-only fare). Call 1300 660 088 or go to [www.skywest.com.au](http://www.skywest.com.au).
- \* Transfers are available to the resort from Exmouth Airport – book when you reserve your accommodation. Call 1300 790 561 or go to [www.salsalis.com.au](http://www.salsalis.com.au).

### WHAT TO EXPECT

- \* Sal Salis boasts five private luxury tents, each with an ensuite bathroom. An adult costs \$685 per person per night twin share until March 31, 2010. Cost includes all meals, some drinks, National Park entry, use of kayaks and snorkelling gear, guided walks and a boat cruise on Yardie Creek. The resort is closed between January 10 and March 15, 2010.

### WHAT TO EXPECT

- \* The most popular time to visit is between April and June, when whale sharks come close to shore. Turtle nesting and hatching is apparent between January and March. Humpback whales and manta rays can be spotted between July and September. Expect 30°C-38°C temperatures between October and March; temperatures rarely drop below 22°C, even in winter months.

