

Gantheaume Point

BROOME

with a view

AS A GATEWAY TO THE RUGGED DRAMA OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S KIMBERLEY REGION, BROOME IS FULL OF COLOUR AND CHARM. EVEN WHEN IT'S WET DURING THE DRY.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATE HENNESSY

Places to STAY

AMSARA

An exclusive eco-friendly retreat catering to discerning travellers who appreciate great food. All exceptional meals included in the tariff, two comfortable, modern apartments available and a lagoon-shaped pool to soak in. *W: amsara.com.au*

Eco Beach

What tent camper doesn't crave a shower, a proper bed and a flushing toilet? Eco Tents are the best of both worlds — fun, green accommodation in a pristine, beach environment. Eco Villas also available. *W: www.ecobeach.com.au*

CABLE BEACH CLUB

Prime location on spectacular Cable Beach. Fragrant tree-filled grounds with studios, villas,

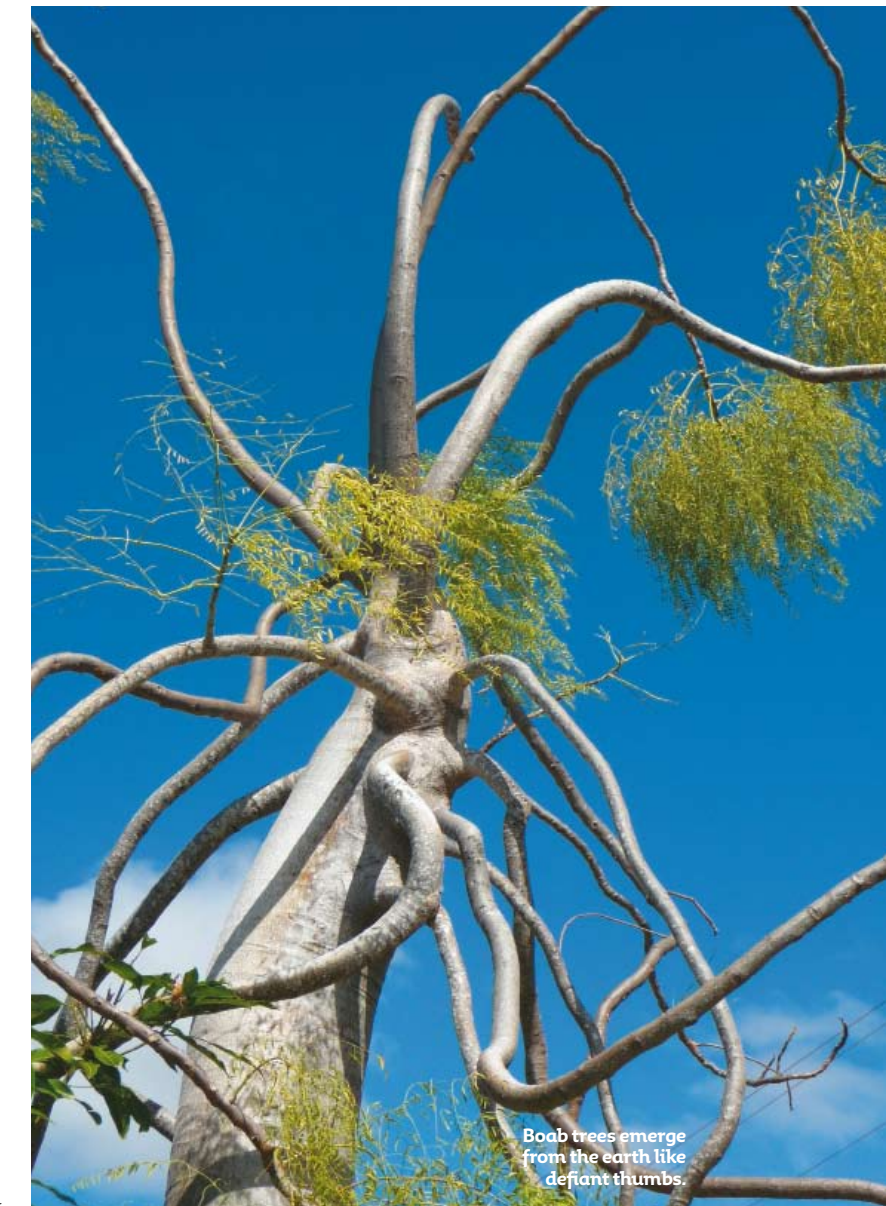
suites and bungalows available. Enjoy the adults-only pool, Buddha sanctuary, tennis and a plush reading room. *W: www.cablebeachclub.com*

KOOLJAMAN (Cape Leveque)

Aboriginal-owned wilderness camp located 220km north of Broome on the Dampier Peninsula. Remote and quiet; you can fish, swim, snorkel or just relax. Safari tents, cabins or simple beach shelters available. Access by air or 4WD. *W: www.kooljaman.com.au*

CAPTAINS BY THE BAY

Two-bedroom, self-contained apartments within walking distance of Broome. Includes free car hire, outdoor barbecue area, pool and wireless. *W: captainsbroome.com.au*



Boab trees emerge from the earth like defiant thumbs.

Legend has it that a couple travelling from Darwin to Perth were once debating where to do their laundry. "Derby or Broome?" they mused. Years after deciding on Broome, the two blow-ins are still there, happily ensnared by the laid-back lifestyle in the stunning Western Australian town.

Perched on the Indian Ocean, Broome is a whopping 2200 kilometres north of Perth. It's known for beach sunsets, pearls, proximity to the Kimberley region and camel rides. What strikes me first is its smell. Perfumed and rich, enough to make you swoon. We've flown in from Sydney to escape a run of spitefully cold July days and I had packed summery gear with cold fingers and trepidation. When we arrive, traipsing across the tarmac of Broome's small-town airport, the temperature is a

lovely 28 degrees and I'm shedding clothes like fruit peel.

The stern faces of the terracotta warriors flanking the entry at Broome's iconic Cable Beach Club contrast with the smiling staff offering champagne at the door. Check-in never felt so recreational! I'm due at Chahoya Spa for a chakra-balancing massage and facial. On the way there, I weave through exotic trees such as Indian oilnut, Malay almond, Madagascan wattle and Fijian fan palm. The ivy grows wild and jungle-like in Broome, carpeting the space between trees and encircling their trunks.

Chahoya Spa is a tranquil, open-sided bungalow that follows the Asian-influenced theme of the resort. Sipping jasmine tea, inhaling the flower and plant essences drifting along the warm breeze, I watch wallabies nibble on the grass. Two hours later, I emerge, face

smooth and body calm. What better way to start the holiday? A cocktail at the resort's Sunset Bar concludes the day as Broome's famous camel train is led up from the beach.

Many visitors from the cooler eastern states make the pilgrimage to tropical Broome during winter. Peak season is during The Dry (May–November) when daytime temperatures hover around 30 degrees. In July particularly, you're guaranteed dry weather. At least that's what incredulous locals tell us when the rain starts the next day.

"I can barely remember a cloud during July," says a stallholder at Broome's market in the courthouse gardens. It's hard to take the rain to heart, especially when there are boab trees to cheer you up, protruding from the earth like defiant big thumbs. At Broome's →



Inset: Silver waves wash up on Eco Beach. Pass by these cliffs during Eco Beach's self-guided walk.

Things to DO

ASTROTOURS

Take advantage of the amazing night skies with Broome's Astronomy Experience. Located at a dark stargazing site 10km from town. Pick-up or self-drive.

W: www.astrotours.net

MALCOLM DOUGLAS CROCODILE PARK

Get close to the fearsome saltie! Visit at feeding time to see tails lash, teeth snap and crocs roll. There are freshies, alligators and other Aussie wildlife, too.

W: www.malcolmdouglas.com.au

HIRE A CAR

Tours aren't for everyone, so hire a car and guide yourself. Petrol in Broome is pricey, so use DriveNow.com.au to select a car with a high eco rating. It also compares best prices available from multiple dealers.

W: www.drivenow.com.au

GANTHEAUME POINT

This incredible rock outcrop is a gorgeous contrast of red and bright, marine blue. A sacred site for the Minyirr Aboriginal people, it boasts fossilised dinosaur footprints at low tide.

HORIZONTAL FALLS ADVENTURE TOURS

Customised scenic flight adventure tours to Horizontal Falls and Cygnet Bay Pearl Farm. Half-day and full-day tours by air, plus three-day cruises with Kimberley Extreme.

W: www.horizontalfalls.com.au

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bigger Saturday market you can buy organic and local produce. The Sunday market is a casual, hippy affair. Dreadlocked vendors gather under trees as drums, didgeridoo and Bob Dylan covers mingle. Soap, arts, tie-dye T-shirts, clay flutes, oils and feathered dream catchers are sold alongside Brazilian, Malaysian and Thai food.

Multiculturalism goes a long way back in Broome, although not always as harmoniously. When commercial pearling began in the 1880s, men from Indonesia, Southeast Asia, the Philippines, China and Japan flocked here to dive for pearls and pearl shell. Back then they donned a treacherous suit that looked more suited to a stroll on the moon. In early days, Aboriginal men were forced to dive against their will and later the government tried to eliminate Asian labour as part of the White Australia policy. Fortunately, times have changed but pearls still mean big business in Broome. Oodles of retailers in town sell an excellent variety of styles and settings.

Broome is billed as the gateway to the Kimberley region and tour operators sell trips via bus, plane, boat and 4WD. Most destinations are a solid drive from Broome, such as Cape Leveque (three hours) or the Windjana Gorge and Tunnel Creek national parks (around four hours), so overnight or multiple-day tours are good options. If time is limited, travel by air is tempting, too.

Thus, at 6am the next day, I'm strapped into a 14-seat seaplane spearing through the milky-hued dawn towards Horizontal Falls. Covering 400,000 square kilometres, tidal rivers have carved the Kimberley's ancient plateau into a wonderland of ranges, gorges, mesas and floodplains. In front of me, the pilot reaches for his sunglasses and, right on cue, deep yellow light spills over his face, warm as liquid butter. The sun is up! Below us the land takes on definition as it breaks into an immense inlet called King Sound. It's breathtaking.

The seaplane makes a smooth landing on the azure waters of Talbot Bay. We visit the upper bay where a saltwater crocodile lurks, visible only by its serrated spine and snout poking up from the water. I ask if many have fallen prey to "salties" in the area.

"Been taken, you mean?" clarifies the guide.

"Yes," I gulp. "Taken."

A few days later, I reflect on my alarm. It doesn't take long to realise crocs are part of life up here, not a novelty item for tourists, especially during The Wet, when bodies of water expand, bringing the predators with them.

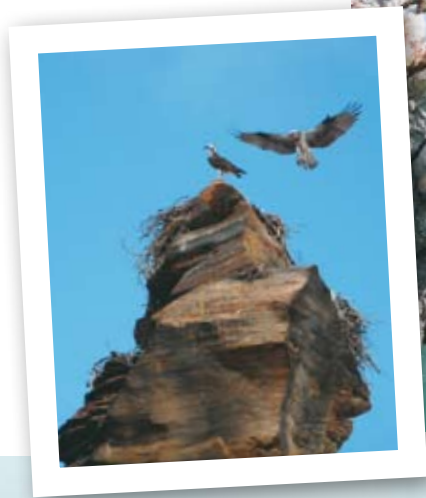
A serene cruise up Cyclone Creek follows. With sheer cliffs rising on either side, it's a safe waterway for vessels to shelter when cyclones swirl in. Ospreys, bramany kites and sea eagles circle above, hoping to pluck a rare rock wallaby, lizard or olive python from the cliff.

The rocky terrain here has its full complement of native marsupials because feral animals such as pigs, cats, camels, foxes and →



The red dirt of the bush runway.

Clockwise from right: Cyclone Creek; the walkway to Gantheume Point; ochre pools formed by the rain; an osprey nest spotted during the self-guided walk.



We visit the upper bay where a saltwater crocodile lurks, visible only by its serrated spine and snout poking up from the water.



donkeys are blocked by the rugged quartzite and sandstone hills. In other parts of The Kimberley, feral cats are a big problem. It's sobering to learn that 20 million feral cats prowl our Australian bush and devour up to four small birds or marsupials each day. Our guide points out a gubinge tree, which bears a fruit loaded with 50 times more vitamin C than an orange. NASA is looking at growing them for its astronauts, he reports proudly.

Our flight returns over the untouched "thousand island" Buccaneer Archipelago then takes the coastal route back to Broome. We see turtles, sharks and dugongs on the way. It's humpback whale season here in July, though none is seen today. It doesn't matter. My visual senses are utterly drenched from gazing down onto the turquoise, greens, whites and blues of the incredible archipelago.

The next day we drive 127km southwest to Eco Beach. The previous resort here was swept away by Cyclone Rosita in 2000. Relunched 10 years later, Eco Beach is now a mellow, solar-powered wilderness retreat nestled on the beach at Cape Villaret. The Yawuru people are the traditional custodians of the land and work hand-in-hand with Eco Beach to show tourists significant sites.

It's a bumpy red dirt road in. Rainbow lorikeets and finches flicker through the spinifex. We leave the car behind and summon Eco Beach staff using a CB radio. They ferry us over the sandy crests towards the sea — and reception — in a buggy. Organic vegetable patches are sprinkled among the scrub and dunes, as are sand-coloured tents and villas. "It looks like a *Star Wars* rebel base!" my husband points out gleefully. Tonight, sunset is spent with the

sand slipping between our toes on a beachside couch.

A wonderful yoga class in a room overlooking the beach begins the next day at 6.30am. Behind the instructor, the sky is ice-white and pouring water. Determined to ignore the rain, later we jog the length of the beach towards an outcrop of 150-million-year-old rock called the Mini Bungles. Giant pools of rust-red water are forming in the sand and a spontaneous waterfall of the ochre-stained water tumbles down rocks; as magical and unexpected as Willy Wonka's chocolate river. Where the red water meets the sea it bleeds and blurs into the blue like a wound washed anew.

The following day dawns sunny and we take a self-guided bushwalk along the beach from Cape Villaret. The rock formations have an almost violent beauty and as we approach the sea caves two ospreys shriek and swoop around their nest. Perched on top of a rock jutting out from the sand, their nest is known as "the sentinel". Terns, boobies, frigate birds, curlews, plovers and oyster-catchers are all common here, too.

Come to Eco Beach in October and you'll see turtles shuffling up the beach to lay eggs. Their tiny offspring hatch in December when conservation volunteers arrive to monitor the turtles' activities as part of a scientific monitoring program. Still newly opened, Eco Beach is spreading its wings with new experiences to offer and hopes to begin art therapy classes and marine tours soon.

Twenty minutes north of Broome is our final stop, a secluded luxury retreat called Amsara where hosts Don and Jan welcome a maximum of four guests at a time. Through the swaying leaves of a magnificent hybrid gum tree is a view of Cable Beach. Best of all, however, is Amsara's food (pictured, left).

Imagine the fresh cuisine of your favourite modern Australian

restaurant, then imagine the chef cooking exclusively for you.

The care Jan invests in her guests' ample menu results in an unforgettable dining experience — three a day, in fact! It's difficult to pinpoint her specialty because each time a dish arrives you promptly change your mind. From Persian love cake to Tasmanian salmon with miso butter, to caramelised onion, olive, goat's curd and anchovy tart — all are spectacular. Even better, most of the greens served are from Amsara's garden or pilfered from a friendly neighbour. The bad weather has made procuring the right seafood a devilish art of pulling strings and calling fisher-folk early in the morning. But the method works because that night we feasted on a local fish called threadfish.

Staying at Amsara is like letting a heavy weight slide off your shoulders. There when you need them, gone when you don't, Don and Jan are the perfect hosts. Like many in town, they are from elsewhere. In semi-retirement now, they are very much enjoying succumbing to the anti-pressure of "Broome time", the phrase that describes locals' slower pace.

At dusk on our last evening, we're escorted to the northern tip of Cable Beach. We pull up stumps by some driftwood and enjoy a selection of homemade hors d'oeuvres. "It's listed as one of the top five beaches in the world every year and just look! Deserted!" says Don, clearly still incredulous himself.

Our hosts wave to their friend, Charles, ferrying a tourist overhead in his glider. Again, we're denied a golden sunset due to clouds but the hooded, pastel version is immeasurably beautiful, anyway. As silver-plated waves slide in and out we reflect on the couple that came to Broome for the day and stayed. Here and now it seems like the easiest decision in the world. ☺

Where to EAT

MATSO'S BREWERY

Offers nine distinct beers, including mango, pale ale, porter and blond. The Bishop Smokey Ale and the Ginger Beer are highlights. The chilli beer torches the palate, so save it for last! Go on Sunday to catch live music.

W: www.matsos.com.au

THAI TEA HOUSE

Find it 20km up the Broome Highway on a mango farm. Enjoy authentic Thai dishes in an open-air rotunda. Specialty is eggplant cooked with three types of Thai eggplant grown on the property.

T: 08 9193 736

AZUKI

Fresh and authentic Japanese-influenced fare including sashimi, bento boxes, curry and sushi. Dine al fresco or at a six-metre jarrah table inside. BYO.

T: 08 9193 7211

RA RA'S CAFE

Fresh-baked bread and homemade comfort food. Toasted seedy muesli, gourmet sandwiches, pastries, sweets and salads — all enjoyed in a courtyard-style cafe in Chinatown.

T: 08 9192 1395

12 MILE CAFE

Located on a biodynamic farm 20km from Broome with 100 varieties of herbs, vegies and fruit trees. Serves simple, seasonal, herb-driven dishes.

T: 08 9192 8552



Food image courtesy of Amsara.