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Pearls on the peninsula

Janet Hawley discovers turtle eggs, safari tents and a flourishing indigenous trade on the Kimberley coast.

oma Puertollano, wearing a bright pink singlet, frangipanis in her hair and a beaming smile, stands among giant woks and camp ovens under a sign saying Roma's Chilli Crab Kitchen. Beyond, through the palms, lies a glorious white beach and cerulean sea.

It's not Bali or a Pacific island. This is a new tropical destination to rival them, on the Dampier Peninsula, stretching 200 kilometres north of Broome, the coastal region of the Kimberley in Western Australia's top end. It shares Broome's multicultural history of early explorers, missionaries and pearlers from Japan, Indonesia, China, the Philippines and Malaysia. The result is a wondrous mixed heritage that flavours the lifestyle and attitude of their descendants.

Only 822 people live on the Dampier Peninsula, 84 per cent of whom are indigenous, mostly in small communities or individual homes scattered around the idyllic coastline. About 20 indigenous-run eco-tourism ventures offer a range of spotlessly clean accommodation, from modest shelters and camping sites to upmarket safari tents beside secluded beaches and coves.

Many are run by remarkable characters, like Puertollano at Chile Creek. With her Filipino-Spanish-Aboriginal-English background, she is renowned as a raconteur and cook of spicy Asian recipes. She is also well known for escorting small groups on mud-crabbing tours in the mangrove estuary beside her beach, followed by a cook-up of chilli crab.

If you muck up the tide times for mudcrabbing, as we did, Puertollano keeps other local delicacies on hand for visitors to sample, such as dugong, oysters and turtle eggs. She insists we try turtle eggs she's just collected on the beach and boiled. They're like ping-pong balls made from parchment. "Make a slit in the top and suck them," Puertollano instructs. "The white never sets, no matter how long you cook it. Only the yolk sets." The taste is so rich it feels like you've eaten 10 chook eggs.

We head down to her beach to watch the sun-

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set under a palm-frond pavilion, fitted out with chairs cleverly fashioned from 44-gallon drums and cushions.

Like many places on the Dampier Peninsula, Chile Creek has a variety of accommodation. There are camping sites and bush huts, which share a rustic outdoor kitchen and a cheerful outdoor bathroom, with clam shells for soap holders and shell-framed mirrors. New self-contained safari tents are also available.

We're staying the night at the award-winning Kooljaman at Cape Leveque, on the tip of the Dampier Peninsula. Our guide, Liz Jacks, reckons I should see the best the peninsula has to offer on my first night, then go rustic the following night.

Jacks works for the non-profit Small Business Centre in Broome, helping emerging indigenous entrepreneurs, such as Kath Cox, who is also travelling with us. Kooljaman is jointly owned by the Djarindjin and One Arm Point communities, and it's not hard to see why it has a showcase of awards. Established in the early 1990s and progressively improved, the site is crowned by Cape Leveque lighthouse and red pindan cliffs above white sandy beaches.

Udaipur - Kuchaman - Pushkar - Jaipur - Agra



on timber platforms, with a front veranda to admire the view and a timber kitchen and bathroom at the rear. I'm staying in a zip-up tent with geckos for company but Jacks and Cox are determined to rough it in an open beach hut. Nothing phases Jacks. She was bitten on the ear by a king brown while camping out bush. "My fault," she says. "I was too lazy to put up my mosquito net over my swag that night." Hooray for the Royal Flying Doctor Service, which came to the rescue.

Next morning Jacks and Cox are singing along to the latest Pigram Brothers album as Jacks steers her four-wheel-drive to Lombadina, half an hour away. It's a vibrant community and a sign proudly announces it's a Tidy Towns winner. A resident, Robert Sibosado, greets us. Once a Catholic mission, Lombadina is home to an Aboriginal community of 60 people, who run a number of enterprising businesses, from whale watching and fishing charters to a wood-fired bakery and machinery hire. The old Christ the King Church, evocative of early mission days, is built from local paperbark trees.

brown, "he remarks, "been out hunting for a rat or something to eat last night."

Great. Suppose you have crocodiles here, too? "Nah, only seen one croc all this year but you always keep a lookout," he replies.

We drive a kilometre along the glistening waterfront through deeply rutted sand to see ancient fossilised human footprints. Advertising agencies love this beach for outback fashion shoots and 4WD vehicle commercials. Yet even experienced drivers get bogged here occasionally. "No worries," Sibosado grins. "We charge \$60 to tow you out."

We need fuel, so we drive south to Beagle Bay general store, then weave back north again. First we visit the peninsula's other historic mission church, Sacred Heart. French Trappist monks came to Beagle Bay in 1890 but left and were replaced in 1900 by German Pallottine missionaries, who continued to staff the mission for the next 90 years until it was handed over to the Aboriginal community. When World War I broke out the German monks were placed under house

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