

## BROOME

Words **Sandy Guy** Photography **Robyn Lea**



Above: Broome is home to the treasured South Sea Pearl. Opposite page: the Cable Beach Club Resort is a luxurious base to explore the port and its surrounds.



# a real pearler

ONCE THE PEARLING CAPITAL OF THE WORLD, THE PORT OF BROOME IS TODAY  
A FAVOURITE HOLIDAY DESTINATION THAT REVELS IN SPLENDID ISOLATION.





**W**elcome to Broome, one of the world's most remote towns. With a resident population of almost 14,000, it lies 2230km from Perth in Western Australia's tropical far north, bounded by the Indian Ocean to the west, the Great Sandy and Tanami deserts to the south and east, and the Kimberley wilderness to the north-east. In 1699, the British pirate and explorer William Dampier sailed the HMS Roebuck into what is now known as Roebuck Bay seeking fresh water. Dampier's brief visit was to change this part of the western Australian coastline forever when his journals, describing the rich beds of mother-of-pearl shell to be found in the region, were used by later explorers.

When *Pinctada maxima* – the world's largest pearl oyster shell – was discovered near Broome in 1861, fortune hunters from across the globe flocked to the isolated location in search of the riches that could be made from harvesting the precious shell. Broome was settled in 1883, and by the late 1880s this tropical outpost had become the world's leading supplier of mother-of-pearl.

Driven by the search for shell, the town grew rapidly with a cosmopolitan population that included Japanese, Europeans, Aborigines, Malays, Indonesians and Chinese. Today, Broome's multicultural past is reflected in the faces of its residents, many of whom are descendants of the divers and tenders who risked their lives in the hunt for mother-of-pearl. It can also be seen throughout Broome in its many historic buildings and sites, including the courthouse (circa 1889), a "transportable building" shipped over from England, old master pearl-ers' bungalows, restored Chinatown buildings, and the haunting Japanese cemetery, resting place of more than 900 divers.

The town's history, along with its stunning coastal and desert scenery and warm climate, has helped to create the distinctive character of what has become a favourite holiday destination. Visitors are attracted by Broome's laid-back lifestyle and vast expanses of sapphire-coloured ocean, a startling contrast to the bright red soil and muted greens of the nearby desert.

Cable Beach, a 22km sweep of white sands washed by Broome's huge tides, is renowned as one of the world's top beaches. Here, you can frolic in warm waters or wander for kilometres along the shore. Walk in a southerly direction, as the northern part of the beach is open to cars, which hurtle along its broad shores. A more relaxed way to view the beach is by taking a camel ride, followed by a cocktail at Cable Beach Club Resort (08 9192 0400) – one of the best places in town to view a flaming Broome sunset. One of a range of upmarket holiday retreats, the resort has a unique East-West fusion of architecture that can be seen in many parts of Broome. There are more than 200 rooms including studios, bungalows and villas dotted amid tropical gardens heavy with the scent of frangipani and bright with bougainvillea and poincianas. (The resort will be closed for the duration of February 2004, for renovations.)

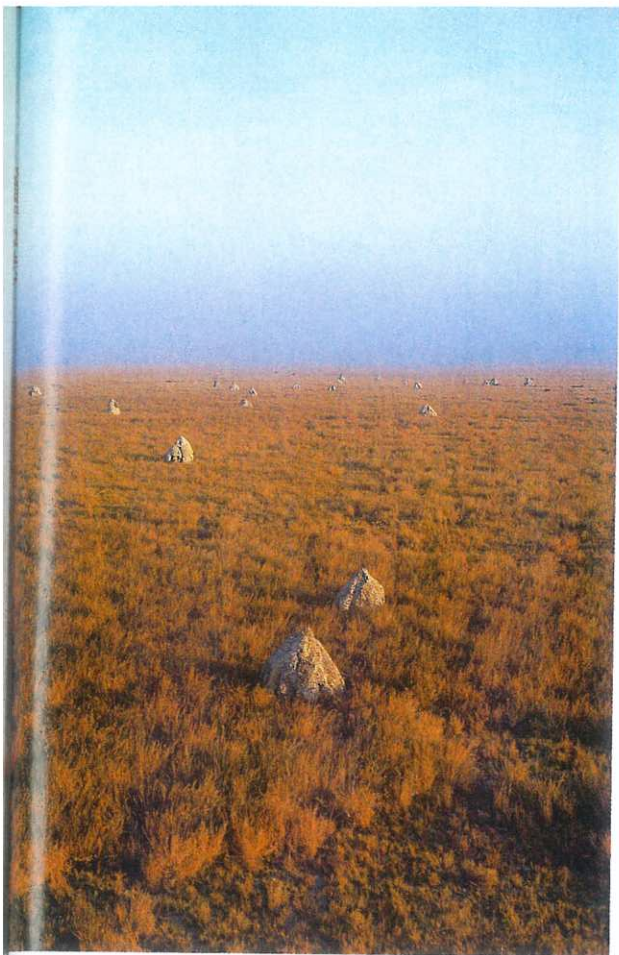
If sun-lovers can drag themselves away from the beach, there are dozens of activities in and around Broome to enjoy. Outback Ballooning (08 8952 8723) takes visitors on dawn flights across endless tundra dotted with huge termite mounds. Floating gently across the sky, you can view a never-to-be-forgotten sunrise before descending to enjoy a gourmet breakfast washed down with champagne.

Those in Broome during March and October, when there's a full moon and low tide, should check out the "Staircase to the Moon", a natural >

Clockwise, from bottom left: the main street of Broome has a lot of character and, no doubt, one or two "characters"; the historic Streeters Jetty on Dampier Creek was where pearling luggers would off-load their precious cargo; catch an outdoor movie on a deckchair at the famous Sun Pictures Theatre, which was built in 1916 and is one of the world's oldest garden theatres.

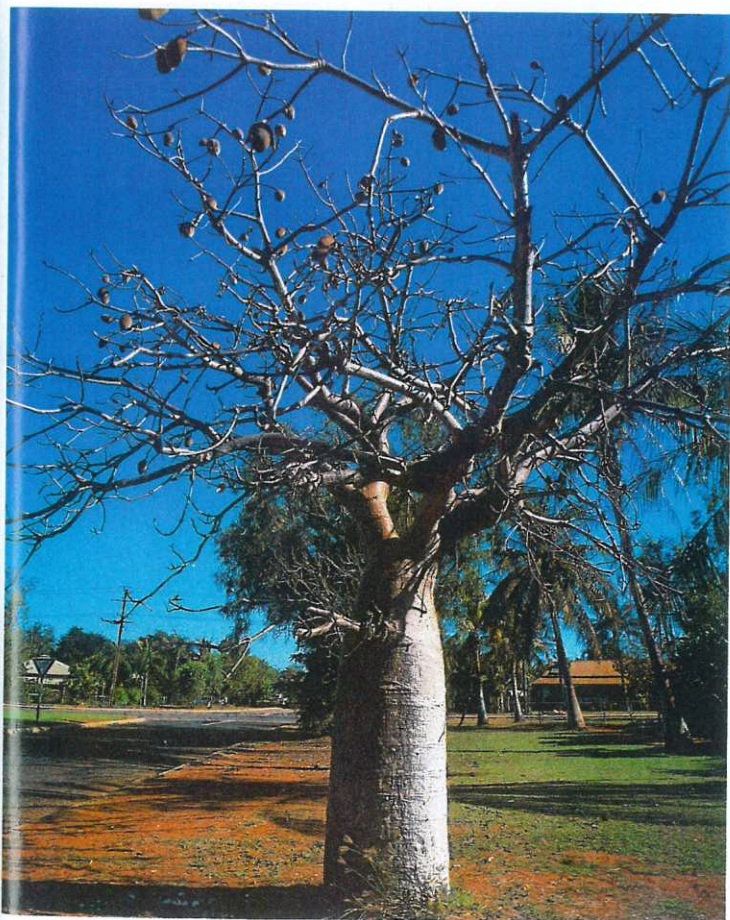
DESCENDANTS OF THE DIVERS WHO RISKED THEIR LIVES FOR MOTHER-OF-PEARL.





Clockwise from top left: an old tin church; a sombre reminder of the town's past, the Japanese Cemetery is the burial ground of more than 900 Japanese pearl-ers; termite mounds dot the vast Tombstone Valley; boob trees are a feature of many of Broome's wide streets; a former pearling lugger is preserved on display at Pearl Luggers in Chinatown; looking across the pristine waters of the Indian Ocean to Cable Beach.

## CHINATOWN'S STRING OF UPMARKET GALLERIES.



phenomenon caused by the moon reflecting off the mudflats of Roebuck Bay. Another low-tide event is at Gantheaume Point, where dinosaur footprints more than 120 million years old can be seen amid the reef. For the less adventurous, a plaster cast of the tracks is embedded at the top of the cliff.

Pearl Luggers in Chinatown (08 9192 2059) is well worth a visit. Here, former diver Richard "Salty Dog" Baillieu recalls the dangerous life of pearl-ers who dealt with cyclones, sharks and the dreaded bends, while visitors view the rubberised suits, lead shoes and heavy copper helmets worn by divers as they descended to depths of up to 30 metres. Visitors can also inspect two real pearl luggers (pearling boats).

Pearling remains among the town's major industries due to the cultured pearl. South Sea Pearls, recognised as among the best in the world, glow lustreously from Chinatown's string of upmarket pearl galleries, including Linneys and Paspaley. Other attractions worth visiting include the Willie Creek Pearl Farm (08 9193 6000) north of town, where *Pinctada maxima* pearls are grown in a pristine tidal estuary; the Malcolm Douglas Crocodile Park (08 9192 1489), which slithers with a variety of reptiles; the Bird Observatory (08 9193 5600), home to an amazing variety of bird life; Saturday's Courthouse markets, a colourful collection of local arts and crafts, and the Sun Pictures Theatre (08 9192 3738), believed to be Australia's oldest outdoor picture garden and a great place to see a movie on balmy evenings.

If that isn't enough, there are also Aboriginal culture tours, bush safaris, fishing charters and cruises through the more than 800 beautiful islands of the Buccaneer Archipelago – named, of course, after William Dampier, who sailed through them more than 300 years ago.

*May to October is the best time to visit Broome. For further information call Kimberley Tourism Association on (08) 9193 6660, or visit [www.kimberleytourism.com](http://www.kimberleytourism.com)*



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