

The remote north-west is home to sea-faring Aborigines – and whales. **Claire Scobie** leaves only a footprint

# Tall tales from the Buccaneer Archipelago

The skipper wasn't optimistic about seeing a humpback. We were too late in the season, he reckoned. The mothers and calves would already have started the long journey south to the Antarctic from their breeding grounds off north-western Australia. With the approach of the wet season in the Buccaneer Archipelago, the air was sticky and the water a "cool" 29C – bath temperature.

Then, on the horizon, a faint splutter. With the twin-engine in full throttle, we sped in pursuit. For minutes, nothing. Then a gleaming black-and-white humpback torpedoed out of the water, landing on its back with a loud smack. As the whale breached less than 100ft away, a wave of rank fishy odour engulfed the boat. With each leap the pong grew stronger and the whoops on board louder. There is nothing like a close encounter with a 35-ton whale for an intoxicating high.

Such an intimate encounter with wildlife is what a stay at Kooljaman on Cape Leveque is all about. You can stroke the velvety nape of a turtle's neck or play hide-and-seek with the shy frilly-necked lizard. This eco-wilderness camp located on the tip of the Dampier Peninsula in Australia's far north-west is only

three hours' drive from the pearling town of Broome, but it feels like the final frontier. Nothing can prepare you for the combination of flame-coloured cliffs bleeding into buttermilk sand and the startling blue-green of the Indian Ocean. It is an assault on the senses.

Winner of a clutch of awards in the 2006 Australian Tourism Awards, including one for eco-tourism, the low-impact resort is owned by the local Aboriginal Bardi (saltwater) people and is part of a growing trend in indigenous tourism. The accommodation, all powered by the sun and built to blend in with the surroundings, ranges from palm-fringed shelters to log cabins and luxury safari tents.

I drove there with my partner after a few days in Broome. With its colonial-style architecture, the camel rides at sunset on Cable Beach and a history of pearl luggers, Broome oozes a laidback, tropical charm. While our Nissan X-Trail handled the 150 miles of red-dirt road, a proper four-wheel drive is recommended. Despite signs aplenty around Kooljaman warning of soft sand, we got bogged. With a bigger vehicle we might have saved ourselves an hour toiling in the midday sun, with sand the colour of paprika and just as hot underfoot.

Kooljaman covers a 25-acre site,

with two pristine swimming beaches and reefs for snorkelling and fishing. On arrival visitors are given a detailed map with advice on where not to swim (there are strong tides) and, at Hunters Creek, the odd crocodile. I was assured that no crocs had ever been sighted on the swimming beaches.

Another no-go area for tourists is the cliffs and dunes, where ceremonial sites are located. Traditionally, the Bardi tribe buried their dead by wrapping the corpses in paper bark and, once they were mummified, placing them in caves along the cliff tops. This is what makes Kooljaman special: it's an opportunity to stay on sacred ground.

Our first two nights were in a family-sized cabin, which we shared with a green tree frog and a gecko. Then we moved to a Gidwann safari tent directly below Cape Leveque lighthouse. Built in 1911, the lighthouse was de-manned and automated in 1986, when the land was sold off to the Bardi communities and the resort opened.

All tents are spacious, with a balcony and barbecue, ensuite bathroom and kitchen. With a pool of Bardi guides to draw on, Kooljaman is a place where you can be active every day – mud crabbing, reef walking, taking a boat cruise or

Hail and farewell: humpback whales breed off the Australian coast and then move south to Antarctica; well-equipped safari tent at Kooljaman, right; busy doing nothing on a Cape Leveque beach, opposite

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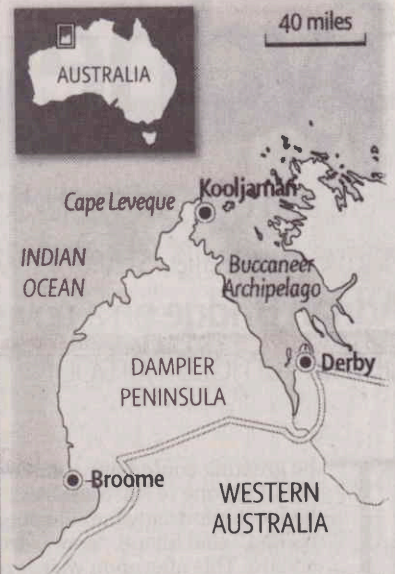
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**Hail and farewell:** humpback whales breed off the Australian coast and then move south to Antarctica; well-equipped safari tent at Kooljaman, right; busy doing nothing on a Cape Leveque beach, opposite

a 4WD Tag Along tour – or simply put your feet up. There are also spectacular charter flights over the archipelago and horizontal waterfalls.

The evening ritual begins with a chilled beer (bring your own, as the community is dry) down on the Western Beach for sunset. As the final rays spread, a deep blush transforms the land into rose-gold. Then it's back to the tent for a barbie or to the Dinka's restaurant. Run by an affable husband-and-wife team, this serves remarkably good dishes: calamari with wasabi mayonnaise, giant steak on potato rosti followed by – somewhat improbably, given the temperatures in the mid-30s – bread-and-butter pudding.

Sleep did not come fast at first in the tent – not because of any critters, but rather the brilliance of the full moon that rose like a blood orange. By the second night, I had embraced the elements and drifted off to the swish of a rising spring tide. We were there in Lalin – the Bardi word for when the tides change and temperatures rise with the onset of the wet season.

Over more than 5,000 years the Bardi tribe has learnt to master the treacherous currents that shape this rugged coastal region. Traditionally, they would cross between the 500-

odd islands of the archipelago on rafts made of soft cork to hunt turtles, dugong and stingray. "There was no Monday or Tuesday," said Bibido, our Bardi skipper on the boat cruise. "Life was lived by the tides."

After a final goodbye from the humpback whale, with both tailfins outstretched in a wave, our vessel remained stationary as it battled against the strongest tides in the southern hemisphere. As eddies and whirlpools swirled around us, I wondered how William Dampier, the English buccaneer, coped when he sailed here in 1699, giving the peninsula its name.

Cranking up the engine, Bibido and his brother, Unja, turned the boat to Sunday Island. For six years this entertaining duo has run the Goombading scenic boat tours. Unja, rangy and excitable, is a self-described "true blue Aussie", the colour of dark chocolate; Bibido is more calm and considered. Brought up in a lean-to fashioned from palm trees on a nearby beach at One Arm Point, they regard these waters as their backyard and Sunday Island as their "traditional country".

We moored at the rocky island to explore the old Protestant mission, abandoned in 1956. Among the ruins is the rusting shell of an

Austin 7. The missionaries used to make the local Aborigines – including the brothers' grandfather – shift sand from the beach to rebuild the steep road up to the top of the island after each wet season. Since the 1950s, the island has been uninhabited.

From the day's start, Unja made it clear he was determined to catch lunch; he was tired of ham-and-cheese sandwiches. Cutting the engine among the mangroves, both brothers slipped into the water with lethal-looking spear guns as turtles bobbed around the boat. All on board hovered nervously, on the lookout for crocs. "If it's coming downstream it's a log," we were told. "Upstream, yell out."

After what seemed an age, they both returned with four golden-lined spinefoot. We continued, gliding on lucent water into a sheltered cove for lunch. The fish cooked on the coals was served on a platter of leaves, its sweet flesh infused with charcoal. Served inside a buttered bun it was undoubtedly the freshest fish I have ever eaten.

"This is my kitchen," Unja said, with a broad smile, tossing aside the ham and cheese. "Welcome to Bardi country."

As the boat pulled away, I looked back. The only trace we had left was a footprint in the sand.

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Various tours go to Cape Leveque:  
Kimberley Wild ([www.kimberleywild.com.au](http://www.kimberleywild.com.au))  
charges about A\$140 (£60) each way.

**Staying there**

Safari Tents, A\$240 (£103) per night;

cabins, A\$140 (£60) per night; beach  
shelters, A\$60 (£26) per night; all based  
on two sharing; there is a minimum two-  
night stay.

**What to do**

Goombading Cultural Scenic Boat Tour,

A\$200 (£86) per person, can be booked at  
Kooljaman (or call 0061 8 9192 4119/  
email: [admin@goombadingtour.com.au](mailto:admin@goombadingtour.com.au)).

**When to go:** April – October; coolest  
weather: June – August.

**What to take:** plenty of food as there is a

huge fridge ("bush butler" also available  
food delivered, to be cooked on your own  
barbecue); beer/wine; polarised sunglasses.

**Further information**

[www.kooljaman.com.au](http://www.kooljaman.com.au), 0061 8 9192  
4970

