

Seduced by sea and sand



ROOM AT THE INN

Claire Scobie

ON the tip of the Dampier Peninsula in the far northwest, Kooljaman at Cape Leveque is a low-impact eco-wilderness resort. It sits 220km north of Broome but it could be the final frontier. The combination of flame-coloured cliffs bleeding into buttermilk sand and the startling blue-green of the Indian Ocean is breathtaking.

Owned by the local Bardi (saltwater) people, Kooljaman has won eco-tourism accolades and was a finalist in the best indigenous tourism experience in *The Australian's* 2007 Travel & Tourism Awards. Since its inception in 1986, Kooljaman has developed sustainable practices while showcasing traditional Aboriginal culture. The accommodation, all solar-powered and built to blend in with the bush surroundings, ranges from palm-frond beach shelters and mini-safari tents to six rustic log cabins (two ensuite) and 14 luxury safari tents.

We stay first in a family-sized cabin with a pleasant outdoor setting before moving to Gidwann safari tent directly below the 1911-built Cape Leveque lighthouse, which was automated in 1986 when the land was sold to the communities of One Arm Point and Djarindjin.

Our tent sleeps four, with one double and two singles, a balcony and barbecue, ensuite bathroom, kitchen and large fridge. None of the accommodation can be locked: no need out here. Although the tents facing east have the most spectacular view over pristine swimming beaches, they also face directly into the sun. We prefer facing northeast, still looking out across the Buccaneer Archipelago and on to shrubs frequented by a flock of red-backed fairy-wrens.

Kooljaman covers a 10ha site and on arrival a detailed map is given



Top spot: Safari tent at Kooljaman

with advice on where not to swim because of strong tides or, at Hunters Creek, the occasional crocodile. I am assured no crocs have been sighted on the swimming beaches. Nor are tourists allowed to go tramping over the cliffs and dunes where Aboriginal burial sites are located.

With a pool of Bardi guides to draw on, Kooljaman is somewhere guests can be active every day — mud crabbing, fishing or four-wheel-drive tagalong tour — or somewhere to put up your feet. There are also flights over the archipelago and the tidal “horizontal waterfalls”.

The evening ritual begins with a chilled BYO beer on the Western Beach for sunset. As the final rays spread, a deep blush transforms the land to rose-gold. Then it's back to the tent for a barbecue or to Dinka's restaurant, which serves remarkably good dishes: calamari with wasabi mayonnaise, giant steak on potato rosti followed by (somewhat improbably, given the October temperatures are in the mid-30s) bread and butter pudding.

With netting on the sides, sleeping in the tent is as close to the earth as I want to be in this environment, without fear of critters. Drifting off, I'm lulled by a warm wind rustling through the acacias and the swish of the rising spring tide.

The Bardi people have lived for more than 5000 years by these tides, the highest and strongest in the southern hemisphere. I experience their tremendous force on the day-

long Goombading Scenic Boat Tour when, travelling at nine knots, we fail to move as eddies and whirlpools swirl around us.

Following the Moby-Dick theme, a humpback breaches so close that its rank, fishy odour engulfs the boat. As King Sound is a breeding ground for humpbacks, sightings are common. There's nothing like being up close with a 32-tonne whale for an intoxicating high. At Kooljaman be prepared for a true assault on the senses.

Checklist

Kooljaman Cape Leveque, PMB 8, Cape Leveque via Broome, Western Australia 6725. (08) 9192 4970; www.kooljaman.com.au.

Tariff: Safari tents, \$240; cabins, \$140. Minimum two-night stay; open April to October.

Getting there: A three-hour drive from Broome; four-wheel-drive vehicle required. Air transfers available from Broome for \$190 one way (minimum two passengers); www.kingleopardair.com.au.

Checking in: Families and small independent groups; bush-loving couples. About 80 per cent Australian and many returnees.

Bedtime reading: *Dirt Music* by Tim Winton; *Rabbit-Proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington.

Stepping out: Drive north to the hatchery at One Arm Point to stroke a turtle; south for local handicrafts at Lombadina. En route, stop at Beagle Bay to see the 1917 church with its altar crafted from mother-of-pearl shell. Join one of the many tours available, including the Goombading Cultural Scenic Boat Tour to Sunday Island.

Brickbats: Despite Kooljaman's size, some of the safari tents are too close if there's a noisy family nearby; no tin-opener supplied; easy to get bogged in soft sand when driving around the site.

Bouquets: Stunning landscape; a genuine low-carbon footprint; rich experience that makes indigenous culture accessible with the bonus of luxury accommodation.