

# The secret life of pearls unveiled

Go behind the scenes and gain insight into Broome's fascinating pearling past and present, says **GEMMA NISBET**

Pearling has played a central part in Broome's history, so much so that it's been said the Kimberley town was founded on buttons — which, alongside items such as jewellery and inlaid furniture, were once made from mother of pearl largely supplied by Broome.

The local pearling industry has changed dramatically since then — for one thing, it's now focussed on cultured pearls, which have been farmed commercially in the area since the 1950s — but it still

continues to occupy an important role in the town.

## WILLIE CREEK PEARLS

To learn about the history of pearling, Willie Creek's Pearl Luggers museum is a good place to begin. Centrally located in Chinatown, it offers guided tours (\$30 for adults) with tales of the early days of pearling in Broome, when pearl divers — mostly young Japanese immigrants — would rise before dawn to get ready to descend to the sea floor.

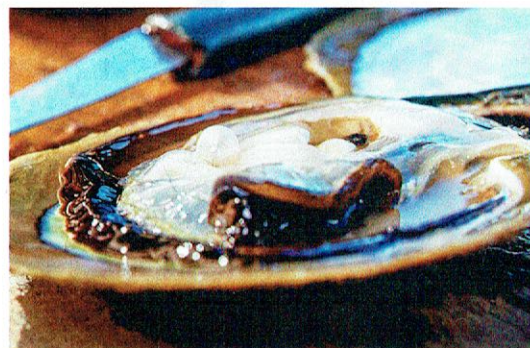
Seeing some of the gear they wore — including lead-soled boots, rubberised canvas suits and heavy helmets — at Pearl Luggers vividly illustrates the dangers of this work.

Meanwhile, Willie Creek Pearl Farm — about an hour north of Broome — provides insight into the modern pearling industry, "from shell to showroom". Its tours include a cruise on Willie Creek plus information on seeding, harvesting and valuing the pearls. They cost from \$75, and both the pearl farm tours and visits to Pearl Luggers can be bundled up with a tour of Broome, a scenic helicopter flight and transport out to Willie Creek.

The company also offers live pearl harvests and pearling masterclasses at its Perth showroom at Elizabeth Quay. ■ [williecreekpearls.com.au](http://williecreekpearls.com.au) or 9192 0000.

## PASPALLEY PEARL FARM

Cruise aboard the 22m catamaran Karma IV with a complimentary "pearlini" champagne cocktail, enjoy a special Pearl Luggers lunch and see pearl farmers at work as part of the new VIP Paspaley Pearl Farm Tour, which is operating for a limited time. The tour visits Paspaley's pearl farm in Roebuck Bay,



Pearl shells at Cygnet Bay. Picture: Tourism WA



Fine dining at Cygnet Bay Pearl Farm. Picture: Tourism WA

3km from the Town Beach foreshore, and includes the chance to harvest your own pearl, which you can then buy once it's been graded. It costs \$289 per adult.

The tour includes the chance to try pearl meat — the adductor muscle of the Pinctada maxima pearl oyster. Or if you're keen to have a go at cooking with it, Paspaley sells frozen pearl meat via its website, available for delivery in Broome.

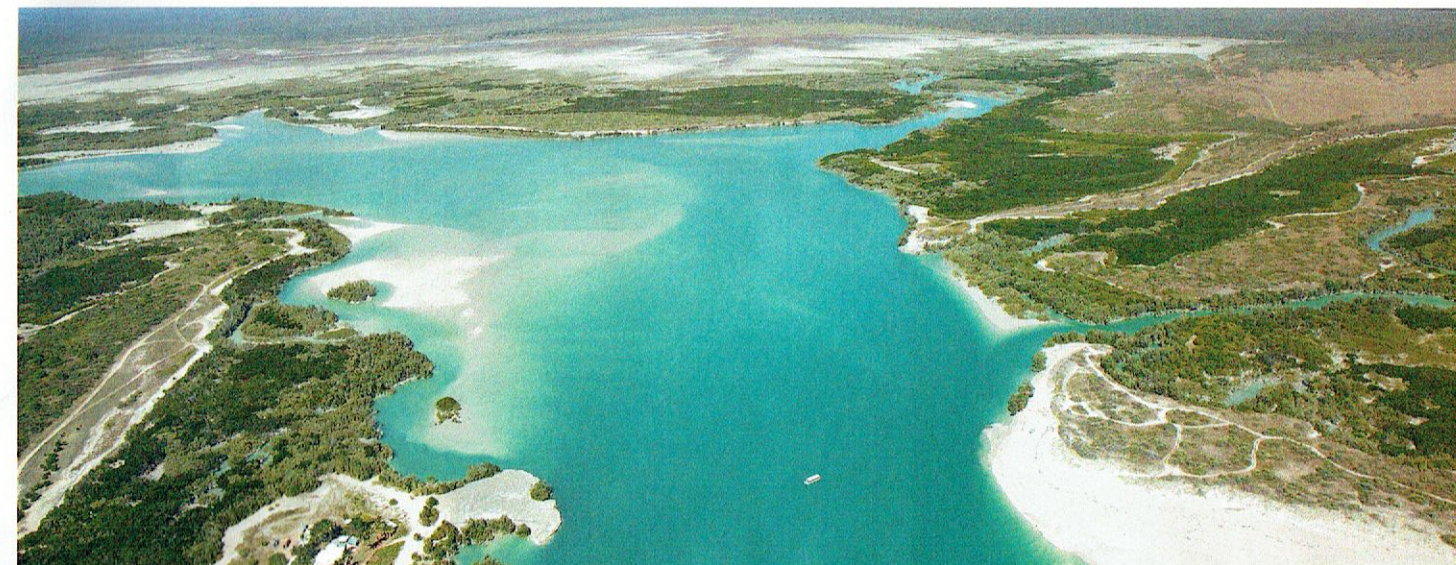
The company also has a VIP Harvest Tour, which goes aboard Paspaley's 51m working pearling vessel and includes everything from pearl harvesting and mother-of-pearl processing to pearl grading and more.

■ [broomepearlfarmtours.com](http://broomepearlfarmtours.com) or 0427 919 191.

## CYGNET BAY PEARL FARM

Three generations of the Brown family have farmed pearls at Cygnet Bay, near the tip of the Dampier Peninsula, about 2 ½ hours from Broome. They now offer pearl farm tours alongside a range of other experiences.

Their one-four Pearl Farm Discovery includes the history of pearling at Cygnet Bay and a look at the fully operational



The magnificent view from a helicopter flight from Willie Creek Pearl Farm. Picture: Stephen Scourfield

pearl farm, and you can add on pearl shell carving and pearl-grading sessions.

Other experiences include sea safaris to see the natural phenomenon of Waterfall Reef, tours focussed on Aboriginal

culture, and more. There's accommodation ranging from camp sites and safari tents to pearlers' shacks and a three-bedroom Master Pearler's Private Retreat, plus a restaurant serving pearl meat

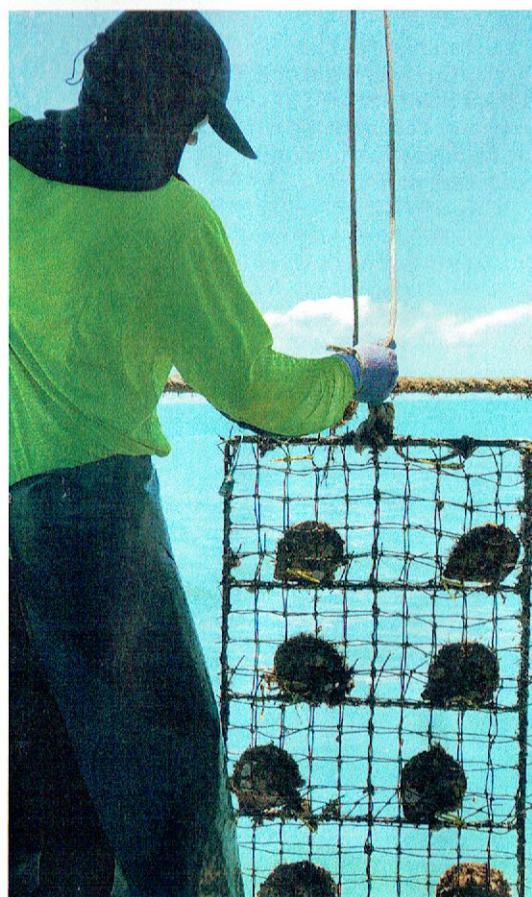
in dishes such as seafood pasta in a rosé sauce.

Cygnet Bay Pearl Farm also offers various pearling experiences at its showroom in Broome, such as a two-hour Life of Guwan tour with

Yawuru guide Bart Pigram that includes the area's Aboriginal heritage, pearling history, a live pearl harvest and a pearl meat tasting.

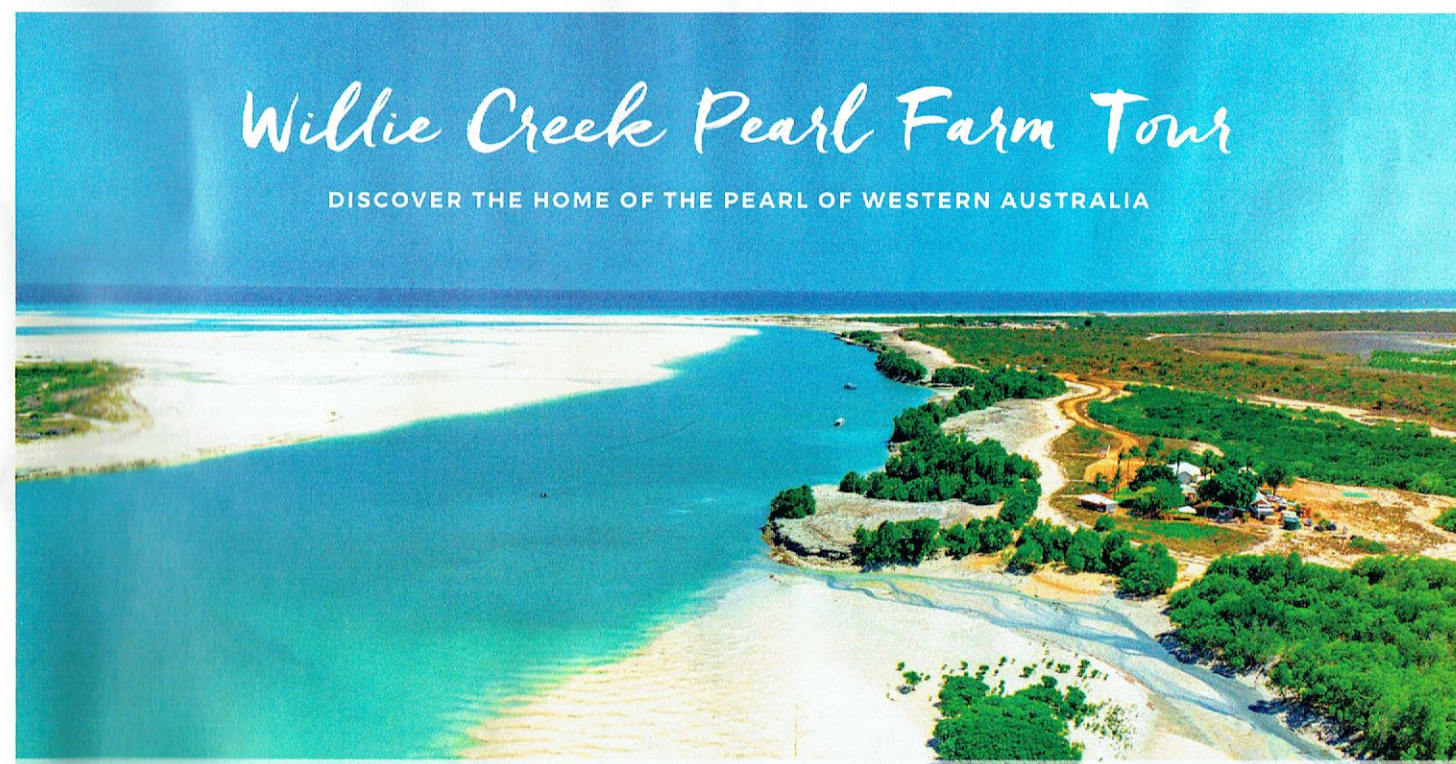
■ [cygnetbaypearlfarm.com.au](http://cygnetbaypearlfarm.com.au) or 9192 4283.

Below: Paspaley Pearl Farm tours.



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