

Indigenous tour guides are winning the hearts of visitors to the Eco Beach Wilderness Retreat in Western Australia's stunning Kimberley region.

The Larwarrdu Tours, which give visitors a window into the Yawuru people's traditional ways of fishing, hunting and bush tracking are conducted under the leadership of traditional land owner Neil McKenzie.

Neil's son Domanic Matsumoto also hosts tours and daughter Ayesha Cox has a full-time guiding role.

The guides are one of the many experiences on offer at the retreat which was completely rebuilt, and reopened in May, after being wiped out by cyclone Rosita in April 2000.



Press release

Indigenous Guiding is revived at Eco Beach Wilderness Retreat

As a girl as young as nine Ayesha Cox was already on a path that would see her becoming a positive ambassador for her rich cultural heritage.

The second eldest in a brood of children that has grown to 17, Ayesha's father Neil McKenzie took her on frequent trips to hunt for food for his rapidly growing family.

Now 26, Ayesha's ease in spearing a sting ray, throwing a net to catch fish, or ensnaring a goanna, wild duck or turkey, often has her customers, particularly those that hail from the city, in awe.

Ayesha, who is one of 13 daughters and four sons, says her early training in the hunting traditions of her people is partly due to the fact that all the older children in her family are girls.

"I guess you don't see a lot of girls doing what I do," Ayesha says.

"But when Dad first took me on hunting trips he only had six daughters, so he taught me how to help feed the family.

“From the time I was about nine I’d go with Dad to catch fish and turtles.

“On very special occasions he would harpoon a dugong and the meal would be shared among several families.

“Then we’d go bush to find goannas, kangaroos, turkeys and ducks.

“My Dad made me a special hook to catch mud crabs with and showed me how to find the crab burrows.

“I am now teaching my younger brothers and sisters the same things.”

Ayeesha says tour guiding enables her to earn a living doing something she loves while also giving Eco Beach guests a positive insight into one of the world’s most ancient cultures.

Clients-cum-friends are shown how to hook mud crabs and net for fish. .

Visitors also learn which bush plants are edible, which plants can be used for medicinal purposes and how her people follow the tracks of potential food sources such as goanna, kangaroo and turkey, Ayeesha says.

Ayeesha’s pride is echoed by brother Domanic, 17, whose guiding experience stems from accompanying his father on tours as a small child at the old Eco Beach.

Domanic is also a year into completing an apprenticeship in carpentry and joinery with Eco Constructions and has spent a great part of his apprenticeship working on the construction of the retreat.

He is also a talented football player and his sporting prowess earned him a scholarship to Trinity College in Perth.

“It was a great opportunity but I missed my family a lot when I was in Perth,” Domanic says.

“When I finish my apprenticeship I hope to find a place with a WAFL or AFL team. I’ll be older then, so I’ll be able to cope better with being away from home.”

Cultural tours like those provided by Neil, Ayeesha and Domanic provide a memorable travel experience that is uniquely Australian, says Eco Beach owner and managing director Karl Plunkett.

Karl says Australia’s future as a tourist destination partly lies in promoting the distinctive character of its people.

“I’ve been watching Ayeesha develop over the years and like our guests I am over-awed at her fishing and hunting abilities,” Karl says.

‘It’s really quite a spectacle to see how efficiently she can spear a sting ray or throw a net for bait.

“There’s not many people like her.”

Along with expeditions with traditional landowners, the Eco Beach experience can include deep sea fishing adventures, bush walks, horse riding and watching flat back turtles lay eggs in the moonlight.

Designed with the aid of renowned Perth architect Paul Meschiati, the Eco Beach Wilderness Retreat was originally launched in 1998.

With breathtaking views, stunning villas, an infinity pool, fine dining and rejuvenating health facilities, the retreat is a testimony to how luxury and ecologically sustainable tourism can be successfully married.

Karl says rebuilding at Eco Beach, located just over an hour’s journey from Broome by road, fostered an innovative approach to designing sustainable waste management, grey water and solar power options.

The retreat has its own landing strip giving guests the option to transfer from Broome by road, helicopter, boat or plane.

Accommodation at the Eco Beach Wilderness Retreat consists of a combination of 25 cyclone-proof luxurious self sustaining Eco Villas and 30 demountable safari style Eco Tents.

Indigenous guiding is one of several traditions inherited from the original Eco Beach Retreat.

Karl says his staff are resurrecting a tradition of creating memorable experiences for guests attending conferences and weddings or those seeking a unique setting for the perfect proposal or honeymoon event.

In just seven days of being reopened Eco Beach hosted two successful wedding proposals and these couple are now planning their receptions at Eco Beach.

“We’ll do anything to create a memorable and unique experience,” Karl says.

“In the past we’ve had an opera singer on the cliff and lit 3000 candles in the traditional Kimberley black bags to provide lighting and ambience for the event,” Karl says.

“One night our staff transported a four poster bed to a place along the beach, lit a fire and then put some ice on champagne for the honeymooners.

“We then went down to collect the honeymooners and furniture the next morning.”

Originally from the Isle of Man, Mr Plunkett arrived in Broome 22 years ago after spending several years backpacking around the world.

A builder by profession, he fell in love with Broome, opened a backpackers hostel, formed Eco Structures Australia and set about building environmentally friendly accommodation.

Ahead of his time, Mr Plunkett began framing his plans to develop Western Australia’s first eco tourism facilities in the late eighties – a time when global warming and greenhouse gas emissions were rarely mentioned in the media.

For more information about experiencing the Eco Beach Wilderness Retreat visit www.ecobeach.com.au.

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