

TRAVEL WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Ningaloo's magnetic pull



Whale sharks and a World Heritage setting keep this glamp site top of bucket lists, despite the hefty price tag and long-drop loos, writes **Carolyne Jasinski**.

With his feet in the sand and a glass of wine in hand, New York banker Brian Egnatz proclaims: "This is paradise."

"Then again, paradise is different for everyone," he qualifies. "I might think this is heaven, while others might feel like they're in hell."

I've asked Egnatz what he thinks of Sal Salis – the luxury eco-lodge perched on Western Australia's World Heritage-listed Ningaloo Reef.

It's a \$2290 question – that being the cost of a night for two at Sal Salis. "We live in a big city," Egnatz says. "And we love it. But every now and then I need some grounding. I need to know there is still space to move and to soak up that freedom."

"You don't get much more open than this. It's totally unexpected... in a good way. It's right on the beach."

Indeed, Sal Salis is virtually camouflaged given the operation is tucked into low-lying sand dunes sandwiched between two natural wonders: the ancient Cape Range National Park; and Ningaloo, the world's longest fringing reef at 260 kilometres.

The property began as a few tents in the sand, before morphing into a safari-style camp in 2009 under the Wild Bush Luxury banner. Then in 2015, Perth couple Stewart and Sally Cranswick took sole ownership and joined Sal Salis to the Luxury Lodges of Australia marketing umbrella.

In 2019, it was bought by Journey Beyond, which also operates The Ghan train among numerous tourism assets. Back then and way ahead of the pandemic, Journey Beyond recognised the potential for premium wilderness escapes such as Sal Salis. (Early last year, the US travel and transport group Hornblower also saw the silver lining of Australian regional travel, buying Journey Beyond for \$600 million.)

What's arguably of greatest interest since Journey Beyond took possession of Sal Salis four years ago is how little it has changed. Sure, this season a new chef (Paul Seymour) and camp manager (Leith Graham) have been hired from Seven Spirit Bay at Cobourg Peninsula. But Sal Salis remains, essentially, a row of 16 tents in the sand.

Do people feel they get what they paid for? "We did think it was expensive... until the first morning," Egnatz says. "When you wake up, you realise those things you might have thought were missing actually would be totally out of place here."

The tents have been tweaked and soft finishes refurbished over the years, of course. And they sit on raised platforms connected by boardwalks to help protect the environment. But what is instantly



refreshing is that there's no room hierarchy here – no penthouse or junior suite tents. Although the Honeymoon tent is a little more secluded and has a private beach. All tents face the water with front-row seats – or rather hammocks – from which you can watch glorious golden skies as the sun sets over the Indian Ocean.

Just 50 metres from each tent is the turquoise water; the white sand dotted with shells, pebbles and coral fragments washed in from the living coral gardens.

Some eyebrows are raised on arrival, when confronted with the rustic nature of the tents. There's no air-conditioning, no turn-down service, no daily towel change, no fridge, not even a kettle. Nor is there mobile reception or Wi-Fi.

But rest assured, the tents are cleverly designed with two covers – one shade cloth and one solid canvas, creating a channel for airflow. Windows on each side capture sea breezes, and 12V fans take over in the still of night. It's all run by solar panels, of course.

When it comes to daily ablutions, the reef-friendly sunscreen and toiletries provided mean precious shower water can safely drain straight onto the sand.

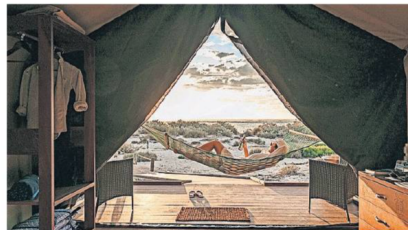
Some guests do initially have concerns about the "open-air" showers, even though they are completely private.

Each tent has its own bathroom, with corrugated iron walls and a zip-up canvas shade that separates it from the bedroom. The toilet is a composting long-drop – which genuinely scares one American guest until she lifts the lid and can smell only sawdust.

All these measures can be looked at as the price you pay for protecting the environment, and there are still plenty of creature comforts.

The missing mini-bar in our safari suite is replaced with a well-stocked "maxi-bar" just metres away in the communal lodge tent. We have 24-hour access to all the wine, beer, spirits, tea and coffee we want.

Would more luxury out here better serve the market? "No way," laughs Egnatz on his



Sal Salis is just 16 tents in the sand (main); glamping guests soon understand why (middle); swimming with whale sharks (above); chef Paul Seymour's seafood options (left).

second night. "The location and style of these tents and the lodge is the biggest drawcard."

Like most guests, I'm here for only a few days and, like most guests, I spend them lazing around, hiking in the national park and snorkelling to spot turtles, manta rays, and cold water coral-loving fish like wrasse, groupers, parrot and damselfish.

There are varied reasons why these guests have chosen Sal Salis – significant birthdays, special wedding anniversaries (aren't they all special?), young couples flexing their "double income, no kids" muscle, time-poor business owners looking for a short break that packs a punch, and those who just want to spoil themselves.

One family of eight is celebrating a 50th wedding anniversary, two 40th birthdays and two job promotions. (Two couples have come all the way from London for this particular glamping party.)

Egnatz and his wife, Ariel, have come to decompress and, of course, to swim with whale sharks. These toothless sharks (the biggest fish in the ocean) are the key drawcard at Ningaloo. No one I meet during my stay can escape their pull.

Dinner times around long shared tables are full of talk about coming face-to-face with the whale sharks' mouths – a metre wide when open.

While Sal Salis is not about silver service, the food is five-star, and that's thanks to new chef Seymour. Suggest that he has a challenge cut out for him to cook to a \$2290/night standard in such a remote location, and he laughs it off.

"Sal Salis is not isolated," he says, despite the fact it's a 10- to 13-hour drive from Perth, from where the kitchen team source all proteins, dry goods, fruit and vegetables. "When I ordered food for Seven Spirit

Bay, it would come by barge. Here we have an abundance of fresh seafood available in Exmouth. I can get as much scampi, shellfish, prawns and snapper as I need – and we're working on buying it straight from the boats, so we get the freshest options, reduce our carbon footprint and help the local economy."

The feasting begins with breakfast choices of avocado on toast, mushrooms and spinach or an acai bowl.

Light lunches include smoked duck salad, or vegetarian options like chilli corn fritters. There's no set menu – it depends on what's in season and available.

From 6pm, sunset canapés and cocktails are served followed by a three-course dinner, often starring fresh seafood. Seared scallops, and sautéed mussels are on the menu during my visit.

"I don't like overcomplicating dishes," Seymour says. "I keep it simple and let the produce speak for itself."

New camp manager Graham acknowledges the X factor of this wilderness escape is mainly down to the landscape: "Outback, ranges and reef... It's hard to beat that combination," he says.

With a history of managing remote lodges across the Top End, Graham was thrilled to take on a property that has natural appeal and is more accessible than he is used to. "We have roads in here, a town and an airstrip about an hour away," he says. "I call that accessible."

His take on the lack of silver service and five-star amenities is that it simply "wouldn't work" out here.

Another part of Sal Salis' appeal is that almost all guided tours are included in the price. "We provide the means to experience the best parts of this region," Graham says.

Guides host two tours daily – snorkelling or hiking – depending on weather and water conditions. "They will take you to their favourite places, whether that's to see turtles or manta rays on the reef or up into the ranges to point out fossilised shells and talk about our First Nations history," he says.

I bond with fellow 50-plus adventurer Kate over one of these tours – a hike to Mandu Mandu Gorge in the neighbouring Cape Range National Park.

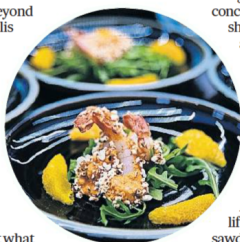
Kate didn't much like the 5.45am start but is glad she made the effort. Glad she was able to walk along a once-raging riverbed that hasn't held water for 35,000 years. Glad for the history lessons, rare black-footed rock wallabies and proof of an ancient seabed now sitting high on a craggy escarpment.

I was glad I had the chance to tackle it – and ecstatic we didn't have to call a rescue helicopter to get me down.

And now, with our weary feet in the sand and a glass of wine in hand, we say cheers to another day in paradise. If this is hell, we're all in. **L&L**

The writer was a guest of Journey Beyond.

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Need to know

Rates From \$2290 for two people a night. Minimum two nights. Includes meals, drinks, guided hiking and snorkelling (whale shark tours are extra). Tel: (08) 9949 1776

Getting there Sal Salis is 70km south of Exmouth in the Cape Range National Park. It's a two-hour flight north from Perth to Learmonth Airport. From Learmonth, you can book a 90-minute transfer to Sal Salis for \$140.

Whale sharks Tours from about mid-March to July.