



# shellout

BY ANNA HARTLEY

About a half an hour drive north of Broome, along red pindan roads of various stages of corrugation, the Willie Creek Pearl Farm is truly a jewel in Broome's crown.

Perched on the edge of the bright blue waters of the Willie Creek estuary from which it takes its name, red torii gates welcome visitors to the most remote jewellery showroom in the world, where strands of luminous local six-figure pearls sit beside handcrafted mother-of-pearl jewellery and decorations.



Contact Willie Creek Tours  
on 08 9241 6555 or visit  
[www.williecreekpearls.com.au](http://www.williecreekpearls.com.au)

Shopping for pearls in Broome is nothing new, with the industry stretching way back to the 1880's. These days, Broome is a vibrant yet laid-back tropical seaside town, catching everyone from affluent international visitors to bronzed back-packers in its net, and reminders of its multicultural pioneering population abound.

Workers from Japan, China and Malaysia drove the pearling booms from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and the rich history of this once-perilous industry has shaped this town's unique character.

The Australian cultured pearl industry now grosses over \$200 million annually and Broome is home to the coveted South Sea pearls, recognised as the best in the world. Unlike other stores, Willie Creek Pearl Farm offers visitors the chance to go beyond the glass display cases, and have a behind-the-scenes look, learning about the process of pearl culturing and jewellery care.

Getting out to the farm on the bus is an experience in itself. Tour driver Terry keeps up a steady flow of entertaining banter, commenting on everything from historic trees in Broome's main street through to the finer points of animal husbandry, as we observe the startlingly sleek wild brumbies that roam the land around the Willie Creek farm. For those used to the high-life, a helicopter ride back to town can be arranged, taking in some of the sights along the way.

Lisa Vigar from Willie Creek Pearls believes this holistic approach to pearl farming makes Willie Creek such a must-see part of visiting Broome, and farm manager and caretaker Anthony Cavendish agrees.

"Because so many people don't really understand the process of actually creating pearls, when they get here it gives them a better understanding of how they are priced, and why they are priced the way they are."

He manages to cover a lot of ground in his entertaining

presentation on pearl farming, introducing us to the Pinctada maxima, the region's famous gold or silver lip pearl oyster, explaining exactly how it is that pearl farming occurs.

Pearl technicians 'seed' up to 500 oysters per day with a nucleus from the shell of a Mississippi mussel, around which the pearl-creating nacre grows. Careful 'turning' and care of the creatures for over two years goes into the production of one large lustrous South Sea pearl, and the process can be repeated up to three times in an oyster's lifecycle.

While the typical image of a perfectly round, lustrous white pearl is certainly appealing, the organic nature of these jewels makes for fascinating discoveries, as after two years of careful culturing an oyster may reveal an 'imperfect' but gloriously unique pearl.

After passing around handfuls of the orbs, learning to distinguish the five virtues of fine pearls, lustre, size, shape, colour and complexion, visitors get to see how it all actually happens as the flat-bottom boat cruises out to the nearby 'naughty farm'.

The commercial producing farm is further out to sea where the waters are deeper and calmer, but it is here that the oysters which rejected their initial implant, the 'naughty' ones, are sent for the benefit of visitor education. The hardest part of the boat tour is resisting the urge to dive into the brilliant blue waters of the estuary, from which the racks of salty oysters are hauled.

Of course, they say that you don't choose a pearl, it chooses you, and Lisa thinks that people form a special connection with the pearls, which are synonymous with the region.

While the high-end cultured strands can fetch up to \$100,000, there is a fantastic array of beautifully set pearls, strands, earrings and mother-of-pearl products to choose from – so you may find a pearl will choose you after all. ■