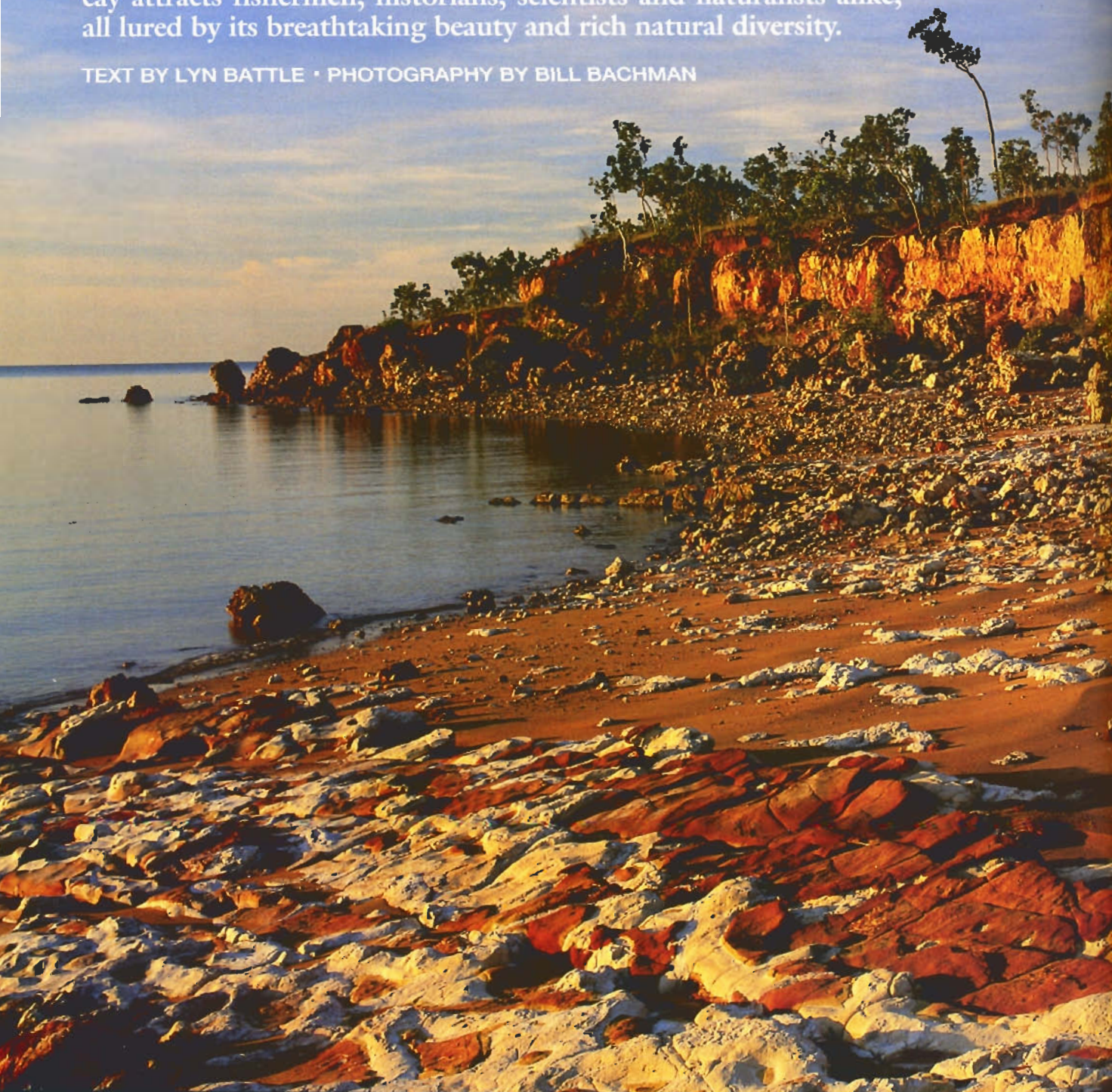


# Rugged Outback isle

A sliver rising from the Gulf of Carpentaria, Sweers Island is the most south-easterly of the Wellesley group. The rugged 8 x 2-kilometre cay attracts fishermen, historians, scientists and naturalists alike, all lured by its breathtaking beauty and rich natural diversity.

TEXT BY LYN BATTLE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL BACHMAN











**A**LIGHT BREEZE stirred the mangrove leaves, offering slight relief from the 35°C late-afternoon heat. As the white-hot sun flashed off foil-bright water, I crouched in the shade of the mangroves next to geologist Brett Stubbs while marine biologist Peter Saenger waded among the tangle of stilt-like roots, intent on his leaf collecting. My 10-year-old blue heeler Cara splashed companionably beside him, equally absorbed in her search for mudskippers.

Five hundred metres down the beach I could see a boatload of tourists returning from a day's fishing. At that distance I couldn't hear them, and turning my back imagined my companions and I were the only people on

the island. Doves gurgled in the eucalypt forest behind us, the tranquillity occasionally broken by the sudden pop of a pistol shrimp.

We were at one of the five mangrove colonies on Sweers Island, the most south-easterly of the Wellesley Islands in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Only a handful of the 23 Aboriginal-owned islands are inhabited; a special tourism lease enables my husband Tex and I, and our business partners Ray and Salme Atherinos, to operate a small tourist resort on the south-western flank of the 8 kilometres long by 2 wide Sweers Island, where we cater mainly for recreational fishermen but also receive occasional visits from passing yachts, birdwatchers, amateur historians and scientists.

***Isle of contrasts.** Sweers Island's rugged beauty is manifest in the gilded limestone cliffs on its western coast (previous page) and the sandy eastern shore where a forbidding dawn sky (above) heralds the last of the monsoon rains. Located in the Gulf of Carpentaria, the island – one of 23 in the Wellesley group – has remained relatively unchanged since first visited by Matthew Flinders during his 1801–03 circumnavigation of Australia in HMS INVESTIGATOR. A fishing lodge on Sweers' south-western point provides a base camp for visitors such as Mick Davies (opposite, at left), seen here in a double hook-up with his dad Ray, and friend Russell Thornton.*





"I always enjoy my trips to Sweers," said Peter, emerging from the mangroves and squelching up the beach, Brett and me in tow. "There's lots of small, different ecosystems to study, it's isolated yet accessible and it has a well-documented history that enables us to reconstruct the past from what's here today." A lanky 1.8 metres tall, with thick glasses and a silver moustache, he was all professor for a moment, then his blue eyes twinkled and he said cheekily: "I don't just come here for your Irish coffee, Lyn."

Peter first visited Sweers in 1973 for an environmental study and over the ensuing years has developed a personal interest in the island – its ecology and history. On this, his fourth visit, he was collecting mangrove leaves for DNA testing at the Southern Cross University, in Lismore, northern New South Wales, where he is the director of the Centre for Coastal Management.

"These little fellows will help us unlock some of the worldwide mysteries of mangrove evolution and dis-

tribution," he said, popping one more grey mangrove leaf into his bag while explaining how DNA fingerprinting can determine when this particular mangrove species' genetic material began to diversify from its mainland relatives.

Studies by scientists including geophysicist Kurt Lambeck, from the Australian National University in Canberra, have shown how Sweers became an island about 7000 years ago. Now, as we continued up the beach, I recalled his observations. After melting icecaps flooded the Gulf, temporarily inundating all but the highest landforms, the sea level gradually subsided, creating islands from some of the summit plateaus like Sweers.

Both Kurt and my current companion Brett are interested in how, over many thousands of years, varying sea levels have left their mark on the island whose rocky headlands separate kilometres of pristine golden beaches. The ancient bedrock is topped by a layer of limestone laid down when the Gulf flooded. Today, she-oaks fringe Sweers'

shoreline and thickets of wattle and paperbark grow at its northern and southern ends. The island's central ridge of dunes, harbouring Queensland bluegrass, is bordered by stands of pandanus palms and an unexpected forest of stately ghost gums.

As the beach petered out below pale pink sandstone cliffs, we wandered across the limestone-dotted laterite platform – a weathered palette of terracotta, white and gold-coloured rock containing a low-grade iron ore that, through natural weathering, has given the nearby sand its bold red out-back colour.

Peter and I watched in fascination as the normally soft-spoken Brett excitedly pointed out shells and corals visible in the limestone, which was deposited when sea levels were higher than today's.

I was developing a new respect for these rocks – the bones of the island – that as much as the plant and animal life, have their own chapter to contribute to the story of Sweers.







**Food for thought.** Marine biologist Peter Saenger (left) gathers mangrove leaves for DNA testing at the Southern Cross University, in Lismore, northern NSW. The island's five mangrove colonies are dotted around its shoreline and include the six species: red (below), black, club, blind-your-eye, river and grey mangroves, the latter a source of food for the Kaiadilt Aboriginal people, the island's traditional owners. The grey mangrove's broad-bean-like seeds, known locally as marrinda, are boiled, providing a tasty accompaniment to freshly caught fish or dugong, which although protected, may be hunted by the region's indigenous people. The Wellesley Islands are home to one of Queensland's largest dugong populations and boast one of Australia's major green-turtle rookeries, the extensive seagrass beds providing food for both species. Flatback turtles also nest in the area in significant numbers.







**Geologist and** environmental historian Brett Stubbs (opposite) searches for clues to the island's geological evolution from atop his coral-embedded limestone perch. Sweers became an island about 7000 years ago: after melting icecaps flooded the Gulf, temporarily inundating all but the highest landforms, the sea level gradually subsided, creating islands from some of the summit plateaus. Both Brett and geophysicist Kurt Lambeck, from the Australian National University in Canberra, have been studying how, over many thousands of years, varying sea levels have left their mark on the island. More recent shaping of the landscape can be seen in the weathered foreshore and cyclone-damaged cliffs near the small fishing resort (below), where storm surge has broken away huge blocks of rock.





**MY FINGERS FELT RAW** as I scooped aside the wet sand to expose yet another rusty rivet. Beside me, holidaymaker Bradley Cowan paused in his digging to wipe the sweat from his face. "Come on, you've got a few more kilos to lose yet," teased his cheeky cousin and fellow Victorian Andrew, while sweeping sand from the freshly exposed hull.

We were racing the incoming tide, trying to unearth more of the derelict paddle-steamer *Pioneer* for some photos before the waves covered up our morning's work, once more leaving only the rusting remains of the old vessel's engine block visible above the sand. A group of curious gulls and ruddy turnstones huddled nearby while we ourselves wondered if the effort was worth it.

Wrecked in 1870, some 100 m north of the present-day resort, the 30 m long paddle-steamer is the most visible sign

of the once-thriving township of Carnarvon. Established on Sweers in 1866, Carnarvon temporarily replaced Burketown, 75 km south on Queensland's north coast, which was stricken with "Gulf fever" – believed to be malaria. During the late 1800s it was the administrative centre for the Gulf region, at one time boasting a customs house, bond store, hotel and lockup, but there is little evidence of past habitation. Timber houses have long since been destroyed by termites, and wells filled with sand and overgrown by creepers. Perhaps this is what makes rare finds – a broken bottle, a hand-forged nail – all the more exciting on Sweers. Despite early pioneers' attempts to tame this remote island, it has managed to retain a raw un moulded quality – allowing newcomers to make discoveries of their own.

When I first arrived here from my birthplace, Ireland, in 1987 it all seemed

like an adventure. It still does. And I think it's the same spirit of adventure that lures visitors like Bradley and Andrew to Sweers. Just getting here is an accomplishment. Most people fly in by light aircraft, but during his August 1993 visit, AG Society trustee Peter Pigott arrived by helicopter, and one memorable morning a group of parachutists literally dropped in for lunch. Once here, there's the excitement of a new favourite fishing spot, the discovery of a broken piece of crockery from the old town, or a previously unsuspected bird spotted during a bushwalk.

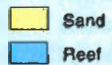
"There's so much history here, yet at a glance you'd never know," amateur historian Glenis Cislowski told me after a day of exploring the island. "When you go walking it's easy to imagine you're the first person to follow that route until you come across a broken bottle or a piece of old iron."





# Sweers Island

Lapped by the tropical waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria, Sweers Island is 35 km off Queensland's north-western coast and the most south-easterly of the Wellesley group. Lashed during the Wet by cyclonic winds and tropical storms, the island responds immediately to the drenching and within days its sun-bleached grasslands are transformed by new growth and a palette of tiny wildflowers.



## THE ENCHANTED FOREST

Unlike much of the island's soil, which is a clay-gravel mix, the loam at this site supports the only substantial stand of eucalypts on the island. The stately ghost gums, some reaching 20 m, are home to a flock of little corellas that nest in their many hollows.

## RED CLIFFS

From the deeply fissured iron ore and ochre wall of Red Cliffs to its Queensland bluegrass-clad central ridge, Sweers is an island of contrasts that enthralms geologists and biologists alike.

## PADDLE-STEAMER PIONEER

All that remains above ground of the paddle-steamer PIONEER, which shipped wool, tallow and hides from the mainland to Sweers, are its rusting boilers. The 30 m vessel was wrecked on the island's south-western tip in 1870 during cyclonic weather.

Paddle-Steamer PIONEER  
Inscription Point

Red Cliffs

The Enchanted Forest

SWEERS ISLAND

## INVESTIGATOR TREE

Matthew Flinders made repairs to his ship HMS INVESTIGATOR on Sweers, carving the vessel's name in a silky celtis trunk on the western shore. The inscribed trunk is now held by the Brisbane Mapping and Survey Museum. In 1988 the same species was planted at the original tree's site as part of a bicentennial project sponsored by the Queensland Surveyors Institute and the State Government.

Investigator Tree

## SWEERS ISLAND RESORT

Established in 1987 by angling aficionados Lyn and Tex Battle and Salmé and Ray Atherinos, the fishing lodge's cosy cabins accommodate about 1000 visitors annually during the March to mid-October season. The preferred mode of transport to the island is light aircraft charter from Burketown, Mount Isa or Karumba.

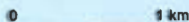
Macdonald Point  
Rock Cod Dreaming

gravel airstrip

Inspection Hill 281

## ROCK COD DREAMING

The traditional owners of Sweers Island, the Kaladit people, attribute the formation of mudstone walls, used as fish traps, to the Dreamtime rock cod Dibirdibi.



AG CARTOGRAPHIC DIVISION GEOGRAPHIC ART: RAY SIM

## Gulf of Carpentaria





**Previous gatefold:** Ablaze with sunset's fiery hues, the craggy western cliffs of Sweers take on a surreal appearance. A vibrant mix of low-grade iron ore and ochre, the deeply fissured wall has been dubbed Red Cliffs by the Kaiadilt who use a by-product of the ancient sediment to colour bags woven from wallaby grass. Atop the cliffs, stunted box trees stand sentinel, rooted in the thin layer of topsoil that also sprouts red and white grevilleas, yellow wattle and insectivorous sundew.

**Enjoying the tranquil water and easy fishing off Sweers' main beach, Maleli Waqa (below) drops a line overboard. Maleli works as a project coordinator on Bentinck Island, 4 km to the west, helping to build houses for the resettlement of the island's Kaiadilt people, who were relocated 70 km north-west to Mornington Island Mission in 1948. To date, Maleli has overseen the construction of five new houses that are home to 25 people.**

This was the second visit for Glenis and her husband. "When Harold heard you needed new floors welded into the boats we jumped at the chance," she said. So they bundled into their four-wheel-drive and travelled nearly 1000 km from their home in Ayr, south-east of Townsville, Queensland.

Why do people keep coming back? "It's just a friendly sort of place," said one guest. "It's relaxing, there's no rules, you just do your own thing," said another. "Getting here's a bit of a challenge," said one southern pilot. "And leaving gets harder all the time."

**ALTHOUGH TEX AND RAY** had been coming to Sweers on fishing trips for many years, it wasn't until 1987 that the four of us decided to stay. On 19 November that year we stood on the beach and watched the 32 m barge *Captain Roberts* head south-east towards its home port of Karumba, in northern Queensland, leaving us behind with 60 tonnes of building materials and a dream of establishing a tourist facility on what was then a deserted island.

Almost 10 years later that dream has come to pass and the *Captain Roberts* still unloads supplies on that same beach every six weeks or so.

"This is definitely one of our favourite stops," said crew member Ian Henderson as he deftly manoeuvred the vessel's forklift around the 9 m wide deck area, loading pallets onto the back of the island's only ute, which Tex then drove off the ramp and up the beach to the nearby storeroom.

"It's hard work, but a good lifestyle," said deckhand Chris Thurkell with a grin, swinging an empty pallet off the returning ute. Tall, blonde and built like Arnold Schwarzenegger, he handled the heavy pallets with understated ease.

Skipper Peter Dorfler – whose previous job had been on a luxury yacht cruising the Pacific Ocean – looked content with his current position as he pumped 4000 litres of diesel from the barge's bulk storage tanks into 200-litre drums for the resort's generators. We use solar power to supply hot water but still rely on a 17-kilowatt generator for most power and refrigeration.







*Half the permanent population of Sweers, Lyn Battle (above, at left) and Salme Atherinos, sit in the resort's treated-pine open-air dining area awaiting an influx of guests. The pair, and their respective husbands Tex and Ray, established the tourist facility in 1987 after years of fishing expeditions to the island. "We wanted to create the sort of place we'd like to visit on holidays," Lyn said. Almost 10 years later that dream has come to pass, the number of return visitors a testament to their success. More than 1000 people visit the resort annually during its March to mid-October season.*



*Essential items such as food and mail are flown in to Sweers each week, but bulkier goods are transported by the 32 m CAPTAIN ROBERTS and delivered every six weeks during the tourist season. The barge runs from the Gulf port of Karumba to Mornington Island. Using the island's only ute (above), Tex and visiting pilot Owen Nelson, in the passenger seat, unload new outboard motors for the resort's dinghies. Later, Owen (left) drives the tractor while holiday makers Harold Cislowksi, riding on the beer-laden pallet, and Joe Hassel take on the task of restocking the bar.*





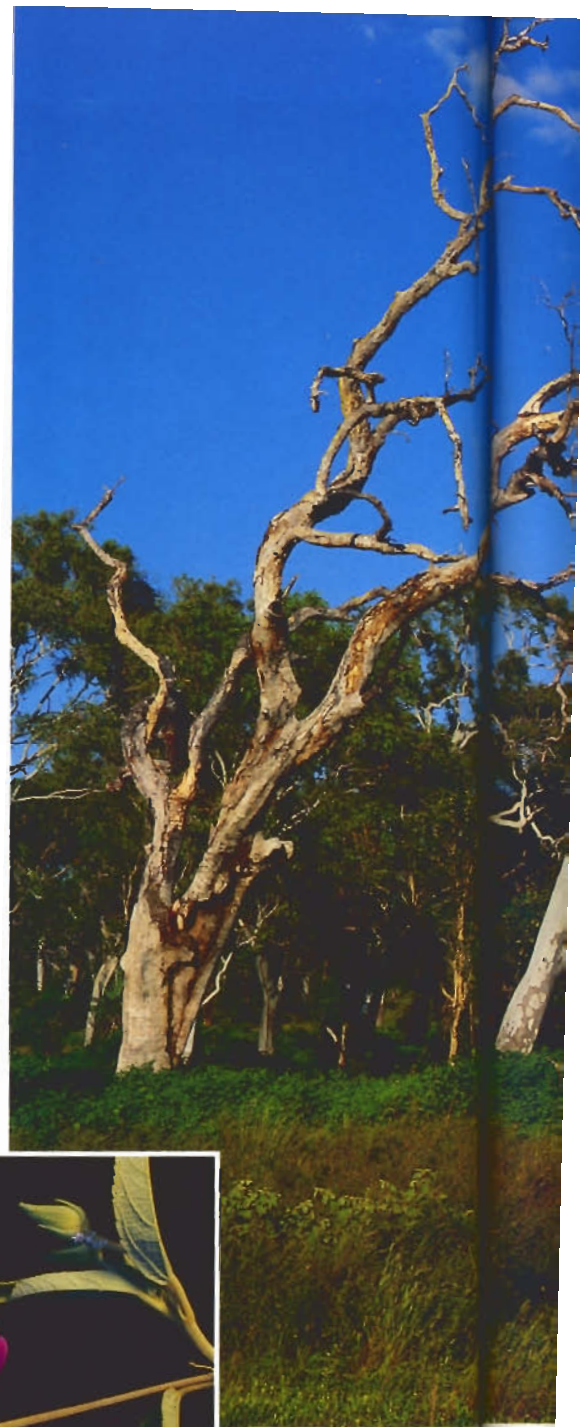
Four tonnes of beer, spirits and soft drinks were stacked nearby, fresh stock for the start of the tourist season, which generally runs from March until mid-October. Food supplies and mail are flown in weekly from Burketown after a 600 km journey by truck from Mount Isa.

Also on the barge was a cement mixer and a tonne of building materials for the new cyclone shelter. Although all buildings on the island are cyclone rated, we've had too many near-misses to take anything for granted. The low-lying islands provide little shelter from cyclonic winds, with Sweers boasting the tallest peak in the form of 28 m Inspection Hill.

Apart from the inevitable cyclone scare, the summer months also bring rain to the Gulf. Storms usually begin building up in mid-October but most of our expected annual average rainfall of 1200 millimetres falls in February. The land responds immediately to this drenching and within days the normally sun-bleached grasses are refreshed with new bright-green growth and tiny wildflowers make their brave annual appearance. Hibiscus, lilies and flowering vines complete the transformation into a tropical



*A riot of colour sweeps across the island landscape during heavy monsoonal rains between November and April. The greening process is swift and wildflowers (below), such as the yellow MELHANIA, spiky pink bachelor button, pink beach bean, violet wandering Jew and dainty white milkweed, are abundant. Many of the island's plants, including the pandanus palm (above), provide bush tucker for the Kaiadilt, who roast the palm's seeds on the campfire.*







*“Magnificent trees for such low-quality soil” is how Peter Saenger (above, at left) described Sweers’ enchanted forest to Brett Stubbs and Lyn Battle during a morning expedition along the island’s western coastline. Unlike much of the island’s soil, which is a clay-gravel mix, the loam at this site supports the only substantial stand of eucalypts on the island. The stately ghost gums, some reaching 20 m, are home to a flock of little corellas that nest in their many hollows. During the Wet, the forest is a popular picnic site for Lyn, Tex, Salme and Ray.*

paradise. And this year, on the northern end of the island, two natural wells linked up to form a lagoon 100 m long.

I love the wet season. In spite of average daily temperatures of more than 30°C and humidity of almost 90 per cent, it’s a fascinating time of year. Visitors are few due to the tropical conditions so we have the island to ourselves for a few months while we carry out routine maintenance and improvements. But we are far from lonely: shy bush curlews wander in and out of our house each evening, kori bustards queue on our veranda for breakfast and the orphaned agile wal-

laby we raised several years ago sometimes hops by to nibble on the lawn. The relaxed pace of the Wet allows more time for exploring the island beyond the tourist-season boundaries of the resort.

LOW MUDSTONE WALLS snake across the rubble-strewn rock platform, curving around aquamarine pools formed by the receding tide. Cara joined the dotterels and sanderlings foraging in their shallow depths while I explored these ancient fish traps, on the southwestern tip of Sweers, with my Aboriginal companions.





*The absence of predators such as dingoes and foxes and the relative lack of human disturbance on Sweers make the island a haven for myriad birdlife, including the shy kori bustard (left) – pictured amid spiky pink bachelor buttons – beach and bush stone-curlews, ospreys, white-bellied sea-eagles and little swifts. The Wellesley Islands accommodate the world's largest documented breeding colony of crested terns – 13,000–15,000 nesting pairs. Endemic to coastal waters, the birds are sometimes spotted on floodplains at Sweers' northern end. Searching for them, however, can be a tiresome task as Brett Stubbs, Lyn Battle and her blue heeler Cara (below), discovered when trudging through knee-deep water and grassland carrying foam floats washed ashore from passing boats.*





*Mudstone-walled rock pools filled and emptied by Gulf tides are a lasting reminder of the Kaiadilt's historic association with Sweers. But even the Kaiadilt can't recall who built the fish traps – described by the Australian Heritage Commission as the best preserved in the Gulf – instead attributing their construction to the rock cod Dibirdibi in the Dreamtime. Peter Loogatha (at right, wearing orange cap), one of the last Kaiadilt born on Bentinck Island, has fond memories of childhood fishing expeditions to Sweers, and is happy to share them with spearmen Rodney Naranatjil, at rear, and Westie Binjari. Preserving the Kaiadilt's culture is of paramount importance to the community, whose members are gradually returning to their homeland, and outsiders such as Melbourne University linguist Nicholas Evans, who has compiled a comprehensive dictionary of the Kaiadilt language.*

The Kaiadilt people of nearby Bentinck Island are the traditional owners of these islands and even they can't recall who built the fish traps – described by the Australian Heritage Commission as the best preserved in the Gulf – instead attributing their construction to the rock cod Dibirdibi in the Dreamtime.

"When the tide goes out, the men come in and spear the big fish, and the women gather the smaller fish," explained Rodney Naranatjil, a tall, muscular young man with initiation scars across his chest. He glanced at his older companion for confirmation – Peter Loogatha was born on Bentinck Island and remembers regular hunting trips across the 4 km channel to Sweers. Both Rodney and the third member of the group, Westie Binjari, share the Dibirdibi totem.

Almost 50 years ago the Kaiadilt, who were still living a traditional lifestyle on Bentinck Island, were relocated to Mornington Island Mission, 70 km north-west, but refused to integrate with other people, clinging fiercely to their identity in the hope that one day they might return to



their homeland. In spite of repeated attempts to do so, the isolation and lack of modern facilities always proved too great, but with the establishment of Sweers in 1988, efforts were renewed. Now, federal government funding and the close proximity of mechanical assistance, basic stores and medical attention have resulted in the most successful attempt to date, with up to 25 people occupying the first five houses of the planned outstation. Peter is one of the last people to have been born on Bentinck and is among those spearheading the move back.

The Kaiadilt chose to make Bentinck a dry community – alcohol is prohibited – where they can reaffirm their traditional lifestyle, albeit with a few modern conveniences: soft drinks and Holbrooks sauce accompany the freshly caught turtle speared these days

from an outboard-powered dinghy rather than the walbu – a traditional raft of lashed mangrove branches.

The fish traps and the Dreamtime story which tells of their construction are of great significance to the Kaiadilt people, who have retained much of their culture. But as Peter's sister Netta often points out, with every passing of a member of the older generation, more of the unwritten history of these islands disappears.

It's fascinating to walk around with the women when they come across to Sweers and point out landmarks, explaining the origins of their traditional placenames and the stories associated with them. The Kaiadilts' determination to preserve their culture and language is clear in their readiness to explore the island with us and share a little of its history.









*Sweers' rugged north-east coastline bears the scars of cyclonic winds that strike during the monsoon season and toss limestone boulders aside to lay bare ancient mudstone formations (opposite). At low tide these wind- and wave-cut platforms reveal succulent oysters, enjoyed by locals. Another attraction is the island's resident groper (above), here being handfed by Tex Battle. Weighing in at around 150 kg and more than 2 m long, he's believed to be at least 60 years old. A hearty feeder, he can consume up to 7 kg of fish at a time. Visible in the background are the remains of the derelict paddle-steamer PIONEER. Built in 1868 for Robert Towns, who operated a warehouse on Sweers, the 30 m vessel plied between the island and the mainland until it was wrecked in a cyclone on the island's south-western shore two years later. All that now remains above ground are the rusting boilers of the 25-horsepower steam engine.*

As the men headed barefoot across the oyster-encrusted rocks to the aluminium dinghy, Peter turned and called "Balmbu kurriju, Lyn" – see you tomorrow. I suddenly felt a surge of pride that he, an elder, would speak Kaiadilt to me. My language lessons had begun light-heartedly during shopping visits by the women, who come across every few days to buy food and soft drinks. Many of the older women speak little or no English and Tex insists that it was easier for them to teach me their language than to try to understand my Irish accent. Nevertheless, they take pride in my progress and it enables us to share a private joke, forging a certain intimacy that crosses the borders of race and culture.

**TEX WADED INTO** the shallows and slapped the fish carcass against the water. I stood behind him on the beach with our first guests of the season, watching, waiting, cameras at the ready. "Here he comes," said Tex, pointing to a dark shadow. Slowly it moved closer until it assumed the shape of a huge fish.

"Bit like a Murray cod," said one of the Victorian guests, referring to Australia's largest freshwater fish.

"A lot bloody bigger," chimed someone else behind me as the giant groper headed for the carcass in Tex's right hand.

We strained forward to see. In the shallow water his back was exposed; the colour of old moleskins spattered with flecks of brown and black. Then he lunged forward, face clearly visible just below the surface – both eyes staring – opened that cavernous mouth and "whoosh", sucked the carcass right out of Tex's hand. Everyone took an involuntary step backwards, gasping in disbelief.

The groper churned up the sand as he turned, allowing Tex to stroke his back before coming round unhurriedly for another feed. With a reputed life-span of more than 100 years he has all the time in the world.

Over 2 m long and at least 150 kilograms, this fellow could be 60 years old and comes in most days to feed on the fish skeletons left after the day's catch has been filleted. You can see





***Cara the wonderdog** (left) hasn't left Sweers since her arrival as a fresh-faced six-month-old pup in 1987. The talented canine revels in the attention lavished upon her by resort guests, and often pulls out all stops to entertain them. Here she leaps for a garfish, more often used as bait for various reef fishes including rock cod, coral trout, red emperor and sweetlip (below). The extensive reefs surrounding the island and the warm, shallow Gulf waters provide an ideal breeding ground for the permanent reef residents and a winter playground for seasonal fishes such as tuna and Spanish mackerel. With the encouragement of the resort's owners, most visitors to the island become environmentally aware – tagging and releasing their catch or returning undersized fish to the sea – thus ensuring a fishery for the future.*







the fishos' eyes glaze over as they size him up, yet no-one ever harms this gentle giant.

Later that afternoon, we sat in a dinghy off the southern end of the island, hooks baited in the hope of catching a slightly smaller specimen. Nearby in another boat was publican Mick Davies from the Innamincka Hotel, in north-eastern South Australia, with his dad Ray and friend Russell Thornton.

"This is a bit of a change from the desert," Mick yelled to me, with typical outback understatement. His grin was wide beneath the brim of his Bush Tucker Man hat.

Suddenly the boat was a tangle of arms, legs and lines as the three men hooked up at the same time.

"Get the gaff," yelled Russell, a mountain of a man who was having great difficulty bringing in his catch. I hoped it wasn't our groper, but Russell looked content enough as he hauled a 10 kg rock cod aboard. Other common

*Enjoying the last vestiges of another picture-perfect day, fishermen toss handlines into the water of Investigator Road, a 4 km wide channel between Sweers and Bentinck. In spite of early European settlers' predictions that Sweers would "ere long rival Singapore", little has changed since its discovery and the view today is probably much the same as that which greeted Matthew Flinders 196 years ago.*

reef fish include sweetlip, parrotfish, and stripey and red emperors, while the pelagics such as mackerel and tuna are much sought after during winter.

Beside me, Joe Hassel from Rochester in Victoria was quietly unhooking his own catch – a beautiful little coral

trout. "A bit small," he said with a shy smile, getting a quick photo before releasing the fish. Most guests, with our encouragement, are conservationists and realise that small fish released this year ensure a fishery in the future.

Watching the happy faces of Mick and his mates, who like the Cowans, and Brett and Peter, would be leaving in a few days to travel the long distance home, I realised how lucky I was to be the one left behind. To be able to revisit the fish traps and the mangrove colonies tomorrow, and the day after that if I chose.

As the sun set in a blaze of golden glory, I started the outboard and headed home, determined not to waste a moment of my time here on our rugged outback island.



AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC and Lyn Battle thank Micromist Aviation and pilot Owen Nelson; John Clarkson, Queensland Department of Primary Industries; Col Limpus and Jeff Miller, Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage; and Zoë Garbutt and Delva Smith, Australian National University.