

### HERITAGE TOURISM ON AUSTRALIA'S ASIAN SHORE: A CASE STUDY OF PEARL LUGGERS, BROOME

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#### Abstract

This paper examines presentations of Australia's non-European history at heritage tourist attractions. It focuses on Pearl Luggers, a tourist attraction which presents the history of pearling (diving for pearls) in Broome, Western Australia. The experiences provided for visitors at Pearl Luggers contrast the dark side of the early history of pearling (high death rates, the forced labour of Aborigines, use of Asian indentured workers for dangerous jobs and racist immigration policies) with the glamour and attractiveness of pearls and Broome as a tropical resort town. This paper uses the example of Pearl Luggers to consider how issues such as the treatment of Aborigines and the restrictions on Asian immigration which comprised the White Australia Policy are treated in interpretation at heritage tourism attractions in Australia. A number of studies have identified a strong tendency for Australian heritage attractions to ignore these issues, instead presenting a Eurocentric view of Australia's history and there are strong fears that growing tourism will whitewash Broome's distinct multicultural heritage. In contrast, there is now a growing trend for some attractions to take a broader perspective of Australia's history and culture.

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## **HERITAGE TOURISM ON AUSTRALIA'S ASIAN SHORE: A CASE STUDY OF PEARL LUGGERS, BROOME**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Broome is a town which has had two boom periods. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Broome was the pearling capital of the world. Hundreds of divers, at first mainly Aboriginal and later primarily Asian indentured labourers, collected wild oysters for the shell (*mother of pearl*), which was popular for buttons and other ornaments. Occasionally they would find pearls, which due to their rarity, were extremely valuable. Due to the value of the industry, Broome's extreme isolation (it is 2,500 kilometres from the state capital of Perth) and the risks of diving, pearling was exempted from the restrictions on Asian immigration contained in the White Australia Policy. After World War One, pearling and Broome declined, primarily due to the development of plastic substitutes for pearlshell.

In the late twentieth century, Broome boomed again, this time as a tourist destination. Its development was due to a combination of local and general factors. Much credit has been given to Alistair McAlpine for his establishment of the Cable Beach Resort and generation of publicity for Broome. More generally the boom in Australian tourism and strong interest in heritage, Aboriginal culture and multiculturalism focussed attention on this old pearling town with a perfect tropical beach at the entrance to the wild Kimberley region (McAlpine, 1997: 136-144; Davidson & Spearritt, 2000: 305-7).

Broome differs from other Australian coastal destinations in the high degree which its culture and heritage contributes to its tourist appeal. In Australian terms, Broome sits on a distant periphery, essentially the most remote destination in the country. However, it is the closest part of Australia to Asia, being only 500 kilometres from Indonesia and East Timor. Broome's culture and physical fabric are strongly influenced by a multicultural history based on its closeness to Asia and isolation from the rest of Australia. At the 2001 Census, 23 per cent of its resident population were indigenous, compared with two per cent for Australia. A further six per cent of Broome's population were of Asian ancestry (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Chinatown is its main tourism and shopping precinct.

Pearls are still a major industry, though now farmed, and provide an iconic symbol of the town. In 2000 Pearl Luggers opened as a tourist attraction focussing on the history of pearling. It is owned and operated by the Arrow Pearling Company, which has pearling interests in Broome and the Kimberley. Its aim was to preserve the last two remaining pearling luggers and allow visitors to understand Broome's rich history and culture.

The purpose of this article is to utilise Pearl Luggers as a case study to examine how Australian heritage attractions deal with Australia's non-European history. This article is divided into four sections. The first considers the current literature on heritage tourism in Australia, particularly as it relates to issues of Eurocentricity. The second describes the main features and characteristics of Pearl Luggers. The third considers how Pearl Luggers interprets the stories of the many different cultures involved in pearling. The fourth examines ownership issues and how they may influence interpretation.

### **HERITAGE AND TOURISM IN AUSTRALIA**

A common criticism of tourism development is its tendency to be destructive of local heritage, culture and environment (see for examples, Craik, 1991; Wheeller, 1994; Croall, 1995; Mowforth and Munt, 1998). This criticism is often applied to beach resorts, where a universal resort culture based on sun, sand and fun blots out all local cultural features and development may modify the environment (for this tendency in Australia see, Craik, 1991; King, 1997; Mercer, 1999). Broome is no exception to such concerns. As tourism has developed there have been widely held fears that mass beach resort tourism will overwhelm all of Broome's special cultural and heritage attractions. Whilst there has been little academic analysis of Broome, this notion that tourism is overpowering Broome's distinct culture can be seen in general works

such as *Broomtime* (Coombs & Varga, 2001). The importance of preserving its culture and heritage was recognised by Alistair McAlpine, Broome's chief developer:

The snag ... in a small town is that unless great care is taken, the need for constructing accommodation for both new residents and visitors destroys the very reason for tourists coming there in the first place. It is the atmosphere in Broome that is so valuable, an intangible but fragile asset, which could be destroyed by accident or simply by turning the town into just another hell of high-rise hotels and apartments edging the most beautiful beach in the world (McAlpine, 1997: 140).

Heritage tourism in Australia is often seen as Eurocentric. A well-known example of such a focus and the resultant problems, was the 1988 Bicentenary of European Settlement. Its organisers were so concerned that they avoid controversy over the effect of European settlement on the Aborigines, that much of the historical context was removed from their celebrations. Even then the celebration remained highly divisive (Bennett *et al*, 1992; Hall, 1992: 93-4; Lowenthal, 1998: 90; Davison, 2000: 71-2; see also Frost, 2001: 154-6 for similar problems with California's recent Sesquicentenary). Other heritage attractions have been criticised for presenting interpretations of Australian history and culture that are primarily European and conservative, even though there were opportunities for giving more diverse emphases. Examples include the Stockman's Hall of Fame (Trotter, 1992); the Rocks historic port area in Sydney (Waite, 2000) and the Bradman Museum (Hutchins, 2002). Such issues are not confined to just Australia. Worldwide the trend is for dominant cultural and ethnic groups in society to claim, interpret and present heritage in such a way that reinforces their position (Lowenthal, 1998; Richter, 1999).

However, the culture and heritage of smaller or marginal groups are also of interest to tourists. For Australia, tourism and Aboriginal culture have been examined in a large and growing literature (including Altman, 1989; Boyd and Ward, 1996; Griffiths, 1996; Ryle, 1996; Wells, 1996; Mercer, 1998; Hall, 2000; Venbrux, 2000; Staiff *et al*, 2002). Unfortunately, there is a tendency to present Aboriginal heritage as removed from Australian history and mainstream culture. This is manifested through presenting Aboriginal culture as occurring in an ahistorical 'Dreamtime' rather than the modern world (Ryle, 1996) and the common failure to provide 'alternative narratives' by Aborigines which contrast with or even contradict those of European settlers (Staiff *et al*, 2002). Furthermore, despite the growth in this literature, there are still significant gaps. There has been almost no consideration of Aboriginal heritage in an urban context, such as Broome. Nor has there been much analysis of 'cultural displacement', particularly where indigenous people do not benefit from tourism interest in their culture (see Ashworth, 1998, for a case from New Mexico in the USA).

In contrast, there has been very little consideration of Australian tourist attractions featuring the experiences of Asian migrants. One exception is that of Sovereign Hill, an outdoor museum which recreates the Victorian Gold Rushes of the 1850s and has the largest number of visitors of any history based attraction in Australia. A study by Evans (1991) explains how Sovereign Hill's recreation includes a Chinese village and staff acting out the characters of Chinese miners. However, Evans' article is now over a decade old and since it was written Sovereign Hill have developed attractions specifically for Chinese tour groups. While Sovereign Hill is a leader in presenting Chinese heritage, it has been criticised for failing to develop interpretation featuring the experiences of Aborigines in the Gold Rushes (Frost, 2001: 151; Ian Clark of the University of Ballarat is currently engaged in a major study of this issue).

Some care must be taken in considering the literature on heritage and cultural tourism in Australia, for there are only a limited number of case studies. Researchers have tended to choose case studies in which attractions focus on a Eurocentric view, but this does not necessarily mean that most attractions present such an interpretation. The clumsy handling of Aboriginal issues during the Bicentenary has rightly attracted a great deal of academic interest (see above). In contrast, the highly successful and sympathetic integration of Aboriginal themes into the Opening Ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics has attracted little academic analysis. Other attractions with strong Asian themes, such as Melbourne's Chinese Museum, the Golden Dragon Museum in the historic gold town of Bendigo, the newly established Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park and the Chinatown precincts in Sydney and Melbourne (and indeed Broome's), have also hardly been considered. Furthermore, it is notable that Australian researchers have not explored heritage

attractions dealing with death and forced labour, which elsewhere in the world have been categorised as *Dark Tourism* or *Thanatourism* (Lennon and Foley, 2000).

In the context of these limitations in the literature, Pearl Luggers provides a valuable case study for two reasons. First, it is located in a rapidly growing coastal resort where there are strong fears that tourism development will diminish a strong and unique local culture and history. Second, it is an excellent example where its location and subject matter has led its operators to consider the interaction of Aboriginals, Asians and Europeans in the history of the pearling industry. As such, it provides an instructive counter to a literature which focuses on case studies where heritage is accused of being sanitised.

## THE LUGGERS AND THE TOUR

Pearl Luggers is located in Chinatown, the busy commercial and tourist centre of Broome. The attraction centres on two old pearl luggers, the *Sam Male* and the *D. McD.*, both named after old pearlers. Luggers were the sailing boats from which the pearlshell divers operated. In the early twentieth century there were hundreds operating out of Broome, but the decline in the industry and World War Two greatly reduced their numbers to only a handful. At Pearl Luggers, these two are permanently fixed on dry land, but only metres from the tidal flats where the lugger fleets used to moor.

One of the luggers is owned by the local council, the other by the Arrow Pearling Company. As part of the arrangement between the council and the Arrow Pearling Company, visitors are welcome to enter the property and inspect the luggers without charge. The luggers are surrounded by a decking allowing viewing at different levels, but due to the fragility of the luggers, visitors are not allowed on them. Initially the Arrow's intention was just to preserve the luggers, but in developing the project it was realised that the best option for providing high quality interpretation and protection of the luggers was through regular guided tours.

Tours are run throughout the day during the tourist season. The charge in 2001 was \$15 per adult. Tours last for about 75 minutes. They are conducted by a number of former pearl divers. The main guide is Richard "Salty Dog" Baillieu, who was a pearl diver throughout the 1980s (Trevor, 2000: 1-11, Blundell, 2002). Presenting an appropriate seafaring character, Baillieu has become the 'public face' of Pearl Luggers, appearing frequently in the media and providing the inspiration for a new BBC-Channel 10 co-produced children's drama set in Broome and called *Ocean Star* (Blundell, 2002). The guides are a popular feature of the attraction and Pearl Luggers provides a good example of where tourists are motivated not so much by, 'the ease and convenience of travelling with a guide, but by the opportunity to learn something' from a knowledgeable source (Weiler and Ham, 2001: 259).

The tour commences in the *tender's store*. Tender is short for *attender*, each diver had an attender who stayed on the surface. This recreated store is a corrugated iron shed or small warehouse, not intended to be exactly authentic, but suggestive of the corrugated iron building style associated with Broome. In its centre are rows of benches for the visitors and around the walls there is an extensive range of historical photos, paintings and artefacts.

The tour consists of three sections. The first is an explanation of the historical development of pearling and the luggers. Originally pearlshell was found right along the shoreline. For centuries Aboriginals made extensive decorative use of it. In the late nineteenth century Europeans began to collect it. As they quickly stripped the beaches they were forced to go just offshore, using Aboriginals to free dive. As pearlshell became scarce close to shore, extensive beds were discovered in deeper water. Exploiting these required helmeted divers. Japanese, Timorese, Malays and Indonesians were recruited as divers. Diving was highly dangerous, the *bends* were a common complaint and there was an extremely high mortality rate. To illustrate the discomfort of diving, a volunteer from the audience is invited to don a diver's woollen underclothes and then a helmet.

For the second section the tour moves outside to view the luggers. The guide explains the chief features of the boats and also details life on board. With multicultural crews interesting traditions quickly developed, some examples include that bananas were forbidden and that rice had to be served at every meal.

In the final part of the tour, the party returns to the tender's store. The guide relates some of the recent history of the luggers and the stories of some of the main artefacts and pictures in the collection. In the case of Baillieu he tells some stories of his experiences as a diver in the 1980s. A short documentary film from the 1970s is shown. Finally pearls are discussed, which in the old pearl shelling days were really a rare by-product. Today they are grown on pearl farms and an example of a pearl is passed around for tour members to hold and inspect. In addition to the tours, a number of special functions are held, usually at night. These include pearl meat tastings and screenings of old pearling films on the canvas sails of the luggers.

Like many tourist attractions, Pearl Luggers has a number of practical difficulties. Being in the sub-tropics, tourism is confined to the dry season. Its management has found it difficult to develop a name which accurately describes what they offer. They occasionally have visitors arriving expecting they will be on a cruise. Indeed the photo captions in the travel article by Blundell (2002) state that it is a 'floating museum'. Their capacity is limited, each tour has a maximum of 20 people, though Pearl Luggers is considering the logistics of operating two tours at once.

## A MULTICULTURAL STORY

The story of pearling in Broome is a multicultural one. It is also a dark story of forced labour, high mortality rates, lingering illnesses and Australia's infamous White Australia Policy. Such themes are interlaced throughout the interpretation provided at Broome Pearling Luggers. The content includes:

- At first Europeans harvested pearl shell close to shore using local Aborigines as forced labour with a consequent high death rate. Richard Baillieu does not mince words, calling this slavery.
- As pearling moved into deeper water, helmeted divers operating off luggers were used. While the work was lucrative it was highly dangerous. The 'bends' killed and horribly maimed many divers. The mortality rate may have been as high as 50%.
- The high risks and isolation of Broome made it very difficult to recruit Australian divers. Instead they came from Asia, particularly from Japan and Kupang in West Timor, only 500 kilometres north. In addition there was an influx of Chinese traders.
- Broome became an exception to the Asian immigration restrictions of the White Australia Policy. However, while the Asian divers were effectively in command of the pearling luggers, they were required to carry European captains who were nominally in charge.
- In an attempt to reassert the White Australia policy, in 1912 the Australian Government recruited 12 divers from the British Navy ('the white divers of Broome', see Bailey, 2001). However, nearly all of these divers died and the experiment was not repeated.

These racial divisions continued into modern times. Towards the end of the tour Richard Baillieu tells a number of stories *against himself*. Keen to collect as much shell as possible he learnt a number of tricks in order to distract other divers. For example, when diving with a Thursday Islander (from the Torres Strait Islands between Australia and Papua-New Guinea), Baillieu would indicate by gesture that there was a sea snake nearby. As these were taboo to the Thursday Islander he would be frightened away. Now Baillieu regrets such behaviour, but as a young man it just seemed part of the culture.

In its emphasis on death, disease and racial tension, the interpretation at Pearl Luggers may be seen as an example of *Dark Tourism* (Lennon and Foley, 2000). The experience of Pearl Luggers suggests that tourists do not want a sanitised heritage, rather they do value authenticity, even if it is violent and confronting. It also suggests that they will not be satisfied with historical interpretation written purely from the perspective of history's winners (Lowenthal, 1998: 102). That Broome is a coastal resort with a strong emphasis on its beach and tropical climate does not seem to diminish the interest of tourists in these matters. Certainly it is beginning to feature heavily in popular travel writing. In a recent book on Broome and the Kimberley by the well known travel writer Tim Bowden, a great deal of attention is given to massacres, killings and

mistreatment of Aborigines (Bowden, 2001). In an article on Richard Baillieu the emphasis is on tales of death and disaster during diving (Blundell, 2002).

In its discussion of European treatment of Aborigines, Pearl Luggers contrasts starkly with Sovereign Hill. Recreating the Gold Rushes between 1851 and 1861, its management has given a great deal of emphasis to authentic recreation and this is its major selling point (Moscardo and Pearce, 1986; Evans, 1991; Davison, 2000: 168-176; Frost, 2003B). However, its great dilemma is in how to depict Aborigines. Under extreme pressure from European settlement, traditional Aboriginal society had collapsed just prior to the Gold Rushes, with consequent increases in disease, drunkenness and mortality. Afraid of upsetting visitors with such issues, Sovereign Hill has chosen not to depict Aborigines at all, though it does emphasise death and disease amongst European miners.

I discussed the Sovereign Hill case with Stephen Arrow, the manager of the Arrow Pearling Company. He was surprised with their decision. He felt that the pain and suffering of the various non-European groups were integral to the story of pearling and the pearl luggers and indeed of Broome. In developing the attraction it had not occurred to him to leave any parts out because it might upset their visitors.

In 2001 the historian David Goodman, a noted critic of historic attractions such as Sovereign Hill, took the opportunity of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Australian Gold Rushes to call for changes in which these episodes in Australian history were viewed. Complaining of the tendency to see the Gold Rushes as a comfortable and prosperous period of European settlement and expansion, Goodman argued for an 'edgier' approach focussing on uncertainty and those groups, such as Aborigines and Chinese, who had tended to be consigned to the periphery (Goodman, 2001). Goodman's comments echo a developing trend in Australian historiography. Recent research is changing the way that groups such as the Chinese are viewed. Instead of being seen as passive victims of European exploitation, there is an increasing focus on their technical, management and entrepreneurial skills and their ability to adapt to Australian conditions in mining and agriculture (Curthoys, 2001; Frost, 2002). Pearl Luggers demonstrates this trend. Asians and Aborigines are integral to the stories told. Their skills and flexibility are emphasised. The Japanese, in particular, are portrayed as skilled divers who often effectively skippered the luggers and even secretly owned them. These stories are of a type rarely told at heritage attractions in the past. Adapting Goodman's terminology, it can be said that Pearl Luggers presents an 'edgier' history of pearling.

## **OWNERSHIP**

Pearl Luggers is a privately-owned tourist attraction. In Australia, historic tourism attractions are generally publicly-owned, either by community groups or government agencies. For example, Sovereign Hill is owned and operated by a community association, Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement and the Historic Port of Echuca by local councils. Unfortunately, the fairly sparse literature on the business of heritage tourist attractions has little consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of public or private ownership, or how ownership may affect interpretation (Frost, 2003A). An interesting exception is a case study of privately-owned Old Sydney Town, a historic recreation of the convict era. Despite never being likely to return a profit Old Sydney Town kept in operation due to the passionate commitment of its owner (Davidson and Spearritt, 2000: 266-7, Old Sydney Town closed in 2003).

Why do private businesses operate historic tourism attractions? Are they intended as profitable enterprises? Or are there other reasons (as at Old Sydney Town) for the establishment of the attraction? It is important to understand what the objectives are, for they should determine how the attraction is run and the interpretation is presented. Furthermore, the objectives set the criteria for success or failure.

Identifying why the Arrow family set up Pearl Luggers and what they were seeking from its operation was a lengthy and complex process. It quickly became apparent that there were a number of different though inter-related factors at work. Different family members gave different opinions and some had different perspectives at different times.

In my early discussions, they consistently emphasised that Pearl Luggers was a business, was run on commercial lines and was intended to eventually make money. Of course such a position is understandable, the Arrow family have a wide range of business interests and would not wish to be associated with a project which lost them money and showed them in a poor light. However, they also emphasised that Pearl Luggers was more than just a purely commercial venture. If they were just interested in another good investment, there were other alternatives. For example, one of their competitors, Kallis Pearls, has recently built a large modern shopping centre in Chinatown. In economic terms the Arrows were aware that the opportunity cost of a heritage attraction were higher than other tourism-related ventures.

Over the course of a number of discussions, members of the Arrow family identified a range of less tangible benefits which they gain from Pearl Luggers. Stephen Arrow is passionately interested in pearling and maritime history in general. The Pearl Luggers allows him to share his interest. He also has a sentimental attachment to one of the luggers which he served on when he first came to Broome. Fleur Arrow (his mother) sees the project as the Arrow family giving something back to Broome and pearling, strengthening their links with the community. Penny Arrow (Stephen's sister) observes that the Arrows collectively have a strong interest in old equipment and artefacts. She also believes that there are benefits to them in working on such an interesting and pleasant project, that involvement in Pearl Luggers breaks up and varies their normal working routine.

Pearl Luggers opens up other commercial possibilities for the Arrows. Their main business is in cultivating pearls, which are sold to wholesalers. They have no retail shop, nor are their pearls identifiable to the final customer. This contrasts to some of their competitors who do engage in retailing, such as Kallis and Paspaley. Pearl Luggers provides an opportunity for promotion of their name and some small scale retailing. At the conclusion of the tour, visitors will often stay behind to ask their guide further questions. Many of these discussions centre on pearls, for in the last part of the tour they have been shown an Arrow pearl and visitors commonly ask can they buy pearls from Pearl Luggers. In such circumstances the guide will bring out some pearls and the visitor may buy them.

Pearl Luggers works in co-operation with other businesses in Broome's tourism industry. A good example of this is their relationship with another pearling attraction, Willies Creek Pearl Farm. Willies Creek is the only pearl farm regularly open for tours. Pearl Luggers directs tourists interested in pearl cultivation on to Willies Creek, in turn Willies Creek directs visitors interested in the history of pearling to the Luggers. Rather than see each other as competing, both operators see the other as complementary. This integration of the Arrows into tourism in Broome opens up possible opportunities for them to engage in other tourism ventures in the future.

## CONCLUSION

The value of considering Pearl Luggers as a case study of heritage tourism is twofold. First, it is an excellent example of an Australian attraction which considers Aboriginal and Asian interactions with Europeans. In providing this 'edgier' perspective, it counters the emphasis in the Australian tourism literature that heritage attractions are preoccupied with providing a conservative Eurocentric view of Australia's history and culture. It demonstrates a trend at Australian attractions to tackle difficult issues of the darker aspects of Australia's history.

Second, it counters the widely held view that tourism is usually destructive of heritage and culture, particularly in coastal resorts. Instead, it demonstrates that tourism may be a highly positive force. Tourists seek the exotic, experiences and places which are different to *their* everyday. Part of that is translated into the quest for beautiful beaches, sunsets and scenery, but part also is searching for different cultures and historical places and most importantly *understanding* those cultures, histories and places. While some have voiced their concern that tourism may destroy Broome's cultural and heritage qualities, they have missed the point that tourism has created a value for those qualities and given impetus for their preservation. Pearl Luggers preserves two historic boats and provides interpretation to visitors because there is sufficient demand from the growing numbers of tourists to Broome. Without those tourists it is unlikely that this project would have been undertaken.

### **A Note on Sources**

Field trips to Broome were conducted in 1997, when Pearl Luggers was still at the conceptual stage and 2001, when it was operating. I am grateful to the Arrow family and their staff for their assistance with this research.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Dr Warwick Frost lectures in tourism at Monash University. His research interests are in regional tourism, heritage, national parks, environmental history and immigration. His book *Travel and tour management* was published by Pearson in 2003.

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