

After Hours

IN the dry season, when the full moon rises over Broome's Roebuck Bay, the exposed mudflats glow like a silvery set of steps. The effect is called 'Staircase to the Moon', and it happens for three nights every month from March to October.

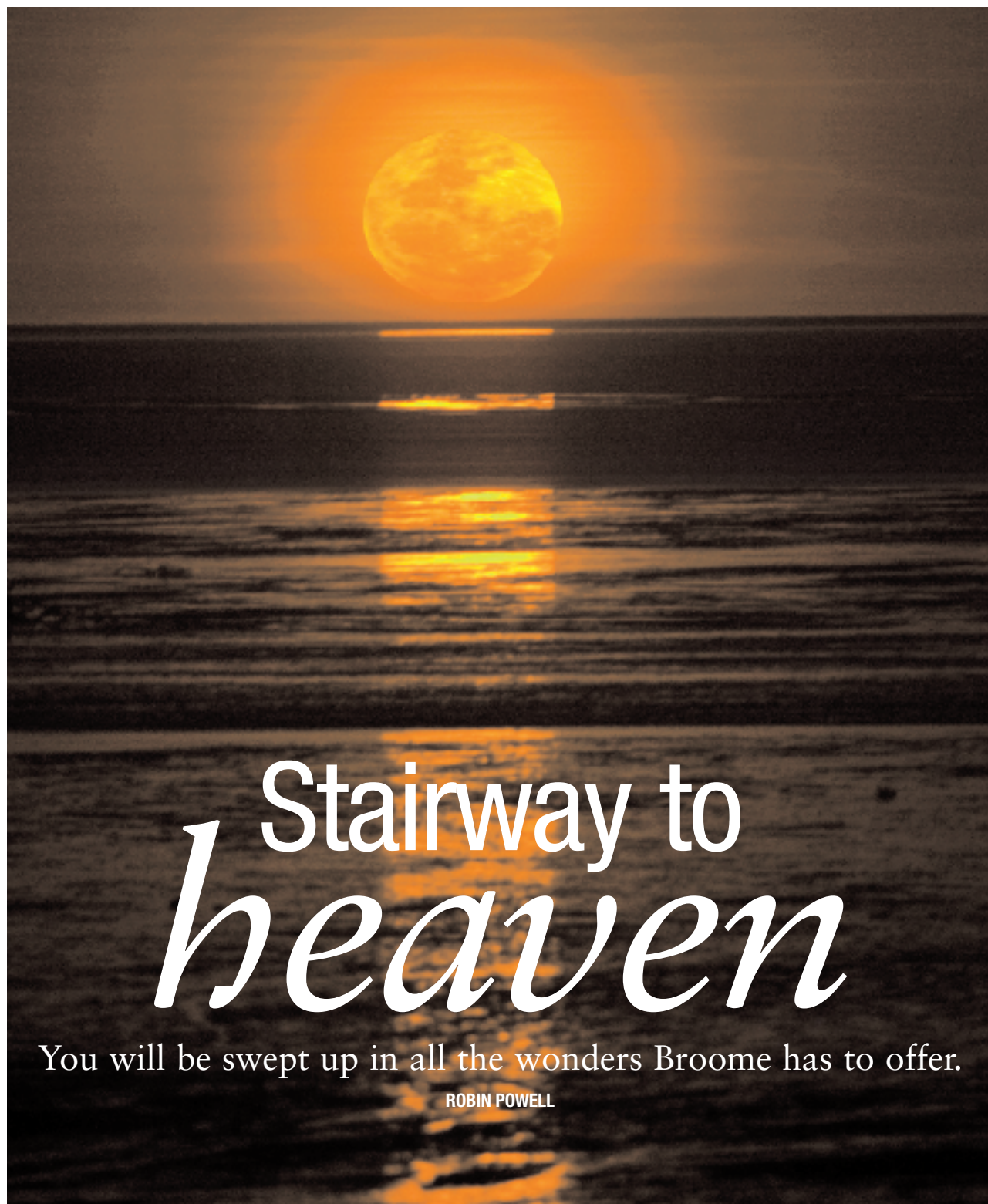
Not even the locals tire of its charms and so, while we fondle pearls in one of the many pearl shops on Dampier Terrace, they ask us, "Did you see the staircase last night? It was a beauty."

We have come to Broome at this time specifically to see the staircase. TV food presenter, best-selling author and Gourmet Safaris director, Maeve O'Meara, hosts a Girls and Pearls Safari a couple of times in the dry season, timed to catch this natural event.

As it turns out, we didn't see last night's show, but only because we were watching Broome's other natural extravaganza — the sunset. Broome is on a pimple of land surrounded on three sides by water. So before the moon rises over Roebuck Bay, the sun sets on the other side of town, over Cable Beach.

This beach is famously long and famously wide, so even when there are swimmers, sunbathers, walkers and kayakers, it looks mostly empty. Around dusk the population on the beach changes. The lifesavers pack up, the sunbathers reach for something warm and the four-wheel drives start to gather. They point themselves towards the red sand dunes and from their car boots disgorge folding chairs, picnic baskets and bottles of something bubbly.

On the top of the sand dunes, there's an expectant buzz in the outdoor bars. It's as if a sunset were not a daily event, but an occasional festival. Drawn into the magic, we marvel at colours that would look kitsch if they were painted



Stairway to heaven

You will be swept up in all the wonders Broome has to offer.

ROBIN POWELL



Sun Pictures claims to be the longest-running outdoor cinema in the world.

anywhere but on the sky. We haven't had to battle for bar staff attention because our redoubtable butler Ronaldo has provided champagne and canapes on the beach.

Now we are agog, and giggling, atop camels. A camel train silhouetted against the sunset on Cable Beach is Broome's tourism cliché, but that doesn't mean it's not great fun. The undulating sway, "like a slow bellydance" insists Maeve, is strangely relaxing, aided perhaps by Ronaldo's work

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with the champagne a little earlier.

As the camels return and dark settles, we are off to our next destination, Sun Pictures. This outdoor cinema claims to be the world's longest-running. Tonight it's screening *Bran Nue Dae*, the musical set in Broome, and featuring, it seems, half the town.

We grab front-row deckchairs and the last of the cinema's choc tops and settle in to enjoy the surreal experience of watching

unfold a scene that's set precisely where we are seated.

So it's on the month's last night of the staircase that we finally attend the moon show. Most visitors flock to Town Beach, where a market operates on nights of the full moon and there's a party atmosphere.

But as befits the celebrity treatment we're becoming shamelessly accustomed to, we are treated to a private showing, on the lawns of the Moonlight Bay Suites accommodation. We round



FACTFILE

Getting there: Qantas operates flights to Broome from Brisbane, Perth and Melbourne; and from Sydney during the dry season.

Staying there: Pinctada Cable Beach (www.pinctada.cablebeach.com.au) is a luxurious new resort that encapsulates the chic face of Broome. Rooms are spacious, the spa is excellent and renowned Melbourne chef Greg Malouf designs the resort's restaurant menus. Room rates start at \$340.

Touring there: Girls and Pearls is run by Gourmet Safaris. It's a five-night, women-only trip to Broome, with great food, celebrity treatment and an opportunity to borrow whatever takes your fancy at the Paspaley Pearl showroom and wear it out to dinner. Prices are \$3762 per person twin share, with an \$1142 single supplement. Prices include most meals with wine, accommodation, transfers, 90-minute spa treatment and some other activities. More details at www.gourmet-safaris.com.au/page/broome_safari.html

the corner and see a row of chairs set up for us on the edge of the grass, facing the black stretch of the mudflats and the dark, star-spangled sky. Feeling extraordinarily spoilt, we take our seats and drinks as the horizon begins to glow red and a golden moon slips up, casting a path of light towards us.

In an age when almost every image we see is manipulated, we're used to disbelieving what we see. But this is real. Unmediated by an editor, a retoucher, or technology of any kind, we look in wonder and feel connected through history to all those who also looked in wonder and imagined what it would be like to walk a silvery path to the moon. ●

Ms Powell was a guest of Gourmet Safaris.