



# Travels *with* My Sister

*On a pearl safari in Broome, Robin Powell meets four sets of sisters, strengthening bonds and renewing relationships in one of the most beautiful and remote corners of Australia*

Offering women-only tours is a new idea in the travel industry. This novel approach is a response to a desire by busy women for holidays that demand no effort and promise plenty of treats—breaks that come with an easy sociability and just the right dose of indulgent pampering.

A group of 16 women, most of whom don't know each other, are sitting in the bar of the glamorous new Pinctada Cable Beach Resort and Spa in Broome. In the flattering soft pink light reflecting off the dramatic red walls, everyone looks healthy and relaxed—as if we're already well into holiday mode. But it's only the first night of a week-long, women-only 'Girls and Pearls Safari'. A sure sign of early days: we're wearing name tags, and beneath our rosy glow, there's a frisson of nervous anticipation. How will we all get on? Will there be a know-it-all, a bully, a name-dropper, a whiner? Or will we all become fast friends, bonding over the shared experiences?

It's not until our vivacious host, SBS food presenter and author Maeve O'Meara, asks which of us are sisters that the remarkable difference of this particular group becomes apparent. There are four sets of sisters, easily outnumbering the mother-daughter groups, the friends and the solo travellers.

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## **SECRETS OF THE SISTERHOOD**

A 2010 US study from Brigham Young University reveals a link between having a sister and being mentally healthy. It also shows that having a sister provides protection against loneliness and fear.

If you're lucky enough to have a sister, there was probably a time when she drove you crazy: borrowing clothes without asking, following you around like a puppy dog. Then, somehow, as you get older, the age gap narrows. Suddenly, you realise your sister has become a close friend and confidante—the perfect travelling companion.

Only one pair of sisters on our tour is already familiar with the charms of sibling travel. Raina Taylor, who lives in Melbourne, and her older sister, Paula Matenga, who lives in Auckland, holiday together whenever they can. "It's very easy travelling with your sister," says Raina. "We like similar things, so we know we're both going to enjoy it. Plus," she adds, tilting her head and smiling in Paula's direction, "I just enjoy her company." When Paula turned 50, she decided to celebrate with pearls. *Where better*, thought Raina, *than Broome?*

## **PEARL TALK**

Our first opportunity to check out the pearling industry is at Willie Creek Pearl Farm. We drive there along the silky red-sand track that passes for a highway. The sky is a brilliant blue, and the surprisingly green bush seems to hum in the bright light.

Soon, a marine biologist is explaining the highly technical operation of implanting a seed into the centre of a living oyster to create a cultured pearl. The oyster in question is the *Pinctada maxima*, the biggest pearl machine in the world. To protect itself from the inserted foreign body, the oyster covers it with nacre, a sticky secretion that hardens and, with any luck, eventually grows into a thick, lustrous pearl, as perfect and mysterious as the sisterly bond.

## **GIRL TALK**

US researcher and author Deborah Tannen's recent book, *You Were Always Mom's Favorite! Sisters in Conversation Throughout Their Lives*, is the result of interviews with 100 women about their relationship with their sisters. Tannen was looking to explain the positive impact that having a good relationship with your sister has on your state of mind. She calls it the 'sister effect' and, as a linguistics professor, she hypothesised that it would have something to do

with talking. Although only some of the sisters in Tannen's research dug through their personal problems together, *all* found that talking about anything at all, no matter how mundane, made them feel closer.

Late-night sibling chat—both the profound and the banal kind—was a highlight of the Broome trip for Sarah Salaman and her sister, Jo Hunt. Growing up in Canberra, the two were close, but then Sarah moved to Sydney, and Jo married and had her first baby. “We’ve not holidayed like this for ...” Sarah pauses to add it up, “30 years, at least! Over the past 10 years or so, our relationship faded a bit. We both got caught up in our lives with our husbands and children.

We never fell out, but maybe we became a bit lazy.” Part of the fun of the tour, she says, is being spoiled together. And we’re definitely treated very well: champagne, treatments at the luxurious Pinctada spa, great food, meetings with inspiring local women, private yoga classes every morning. But for the sisters, the time together is the real treat. “We stayed up late chatting in the dark,” says Sarah. “Then I’d wake up in the morning and see her in the bed beside mine, which I just loved. I didn’t have to share her with anyone. It made me feel like a kid again.”

### **SISTERS REUNITED**

When Elly Comino decided to do this trip, she sent a group email to all her friends asking them to join her, but only her older sister, Jose Whitfield, replied. The sisters have lived in separate cities for more than 20 years, so time alone together is a rarity. Two days in, and Elly thinks this trip is the best thing that could have happened. “It’s been a great opportunity



to reconnect,” says Jose. “And being with Elly is so relaxing; I can do what I want.” Her eyes widen, and she quickly qualifies, “It’s not that I don’t do what I want when I holiday with my husband, but he doesn’t like shopping!” The two laugh together, and when they do, the already-striking family resemblance is even stronger.

### **PEARLS OF WISDOM**

There’s an expectant air as we gather in Pinctada’s open lobby and prepare to head to the Paspaley showroom for a pearl-appreciation course. We’re invited to try on anything and choose what we’d like to wear to our final dinner. So while listening to the experts, we drink Moët, snack on

pearl-meat canapés and roll thousands of dollars’ worth of beautiful pearls through our fingers.

Sarah’s sister, Jo, is being fitted with a string of pearls. The night before, both had declared to each other that they weren’t going shopping. The twin resolutions are now crumbling. Later, Sarah says that the holiday has refreshed and deepened her relationship with Jo. “I was kind of amazed that I bought this pearl necklace. I wouldn’t have done it if Jo wasn’t here, but I’m so glad I did. The trip has given us all these new memories, little secrets we share.”

It’s our last night in Broome. Decked out in more than a million dollars in borrowed pearls, we *feel* like a million dollars. Only a week ago, we were 16 women wearing name tags; now we feel like a bunch of old friends. So when Jo suggests that Maeve put together another trip for us, everyone agrees. Raina offers New Zealand as the perfect destination, and we toast a plan for 2013. Next time, I’m bringing my sister. **P**

## **THEY’RE ALL WOMAN**

### **Gorgeous Safaris**

Maeve O’Meara’s Gourmet Safaris runs the Girls and Pearls Safari. It’s timed to coincide with Broome’s amazing ‘staircase to the moon’, a natural phenomenon that occurs for the few nights of the full moon in the dry season (5 to 10 July or 2 to 7 August 2012). Gourmet Safaris

also runs a women-only tour to Vietnam: think great food, shopping and plenty of luxe spa treatments. Go to [gourmetsafaris.com.au](http://gourmetsafaris.com.au).

### **Adventurous Women**

This company offers active holidays for women—from a five-day lesson on becoming a jillaroo to a two-week trip

cycling exhilarating legs of the Tour de France. Visit [adventurouswomen.com.au](http://adventurouswomen.com.au).

### **Travelling Divas**

The Divas offer fully escorted trips to New York, Spain, Italy and Bali. Expect R and R, shopping, great food, fine wine and a few surprises! See [travellingdivas.com.au](http://travellingdivas.com.au).

### **Valentine Travel**

Tour operator Biddy Naylor arranges walking tours in Italy and Slovenia for groups of up to 12 women. In 2012, she’s leading European spring and autumn tours through Tuscany and Lake Como. In September, she’s in Slovenia for walks and a classical-music festival. Head to [valentinetravel.com](http://valentinetravel.com).