

PASPALLEY



New York based jeweller Christopher Walling

has been bitten by the “northern Australia” bug and it looks like he’ll be back as often as possible. Here, he describes his “great good luck” to participate in this year’s pearl harvest, at the invitation of Nick Paspaley and his son, James.

Had I known that I'd have such a good time – that it got me seriously thinking about moving to Australia – I might have thought twice about even going!

Provincially, I was a bit surprised to find that New Zealand is three and a half hours away from the nearest point in Australia; Americans are hopeless about geography!

But I was thrilled finally to be where I'd only been before in books – not just Australia, but also the exotic sounding Timor Sea and the Indian Ocean.

I can more than happily report that the values of openness, enthusiasm and kindness that the rest of the world has pretty much forgotten, are alive and well in Broome, in Darwin – and in the most perfect of cities – Sydney.

I was barely off the plane in Darwin when Nick took me to see

his private collection of pearls; reminding me of some marvellous pirate as he opened chest after chest of rare and beautiful gems just about each and every one of which I coveted (particularly the grey baroque ones the size of a baby's fist!).

With about one and a half seconds to catch my breath, it was off to a real, night-time, north Australian rodeo where the incredible bravado of cowboys, horses – and bulls – alike immediately dispelled the lustre that our own American indoors events previously held for me – not the least because of the friendliness of all those around me, and the attractive way families young and old interacted naturally and lovingly.

I couldn't help but think of the Rothschilds as I became more familiar with the Paspaley operations: but whereas the former started their meteoric rise to success with five brothers I quickly



Opposite Page: The nightly light show over Kuri Bay.

Above: With sharks, sea snakes, deadly jellyfish and saltwater crocs on my mind, I decided to stick close to Nick Paspaley.

met most of the eleven Paspaleys, spanning two generations, who contribute mightily to their emerging family saga.

One of the images I'll never forget is of Nick, on a daily basis, leaving the hurly-burly of wildly fit, scantily clad young men and women working furiously on one of his boats ... to catch a fish or two and bring it back to cook himself, for me and for any other crew member who might be hungry! I'd like to see a captain of industry in any other country do that!

The beauty of the thousands of unspoiled miles which Nick and James flew me over – or we covered by ship – much more than made up for not being able to swim in the waters. Before I arrived, I thought they were pulling my leg with their Texan tall tales of saltwater crocodiles which grow to 30 feet in length, deadly sea snakes, shark and, surprisingly worst of all, tiny, deadly jelly-fish. But I found

that Australians live up to their no BS, "new-Texans" reputation!

I only wish I still were off 80 Mile Beach – testing Paspaley's new flagship Paspaley 4 – or at any one of the extraordinary spots I visited. How to do justice in words to the mirror-still, celadon-coloured bays in which we landed at the Osborne Islands. And especially going from one gleamingly white yacht-like pearler to another ... often by one of several re-conditioned, romantic 1940s flying boats? (And I'd worried I'd never have to chance to see, much less fly in these little cousins of the Clippers that Pan Am flew between Lisbon and New York in an earlier age of commercial aviation!) Had I inexplicably suddenly become Gary Cooper, or Humphrey Bogart? I could almost convince myself I had!

Or the mystery and unique opportunity of going ashore to



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discover caves perhaps no “white” person had seen before, with Aboriginal paintings intact all over the walls.

I’ve been studying pearls for a good forty years – believe it or not, I actually started designing and making jewellery when I was eight – and yet Nick revealed one new aspect after another of their production to me. And I thought I knew it all!

To be totally corny, I have to say that the tenderness and respect with which Nick approaches pearl culture has to be the reason they have rewarded him so. What might have seemed trivial, or have easily been overlooked, turns out to be crucial. As the brilliant architect Mies Van der Rohe famously said, “God is in the details”. There are at least twice as many steps involved as I could have imagined – many of which are part of the secret of Paspaley’s success! The pearlshell is treated virtually with kid gloves ... cosseted beyond belief and I came to understand why Paspaley is able to pull thousands of gem quality pearls out of the water each day of the harvest!

And to understand why it is fun, and truly fulfilling, as well. As for the rough sorting of each of that day’s crop of huge white pearls – those were the very moments which by themselves actually define luxury and magic! And make me ready to say to anyone who might dare to complain about the price of a pearl: “Why, if they were a dozen times more expensive, it still wouldn’t be nearly enough!”

Pearls have long been my favourite gem – flattering the skin of whoever puts them on in a personal and chameleon-like way. And now I feel “complete” ... not only have I done my best to enhance,

if possible, their beauty in my designs but, also, I have paid them the respect they merit: I have researched first hand, every single aspect of their lives and have been fortunate in being able to do so!

What else can I say? A continent with which I was unfamiliar had become a friend, in effect and a business trip which I had in some way resented – such a long set of plane rides away. I’d already travelled enough this year – to India to buy exotic gems, and then to Tahiti, to lecture about – and to buy – black pearls.

In the end, Australia became a pleasure trip – an experience of camaraderie, improving my own craft, excitement, and mystery. And, with luck, one which I hope to repeat often, if not every single year of my life!

And as for my feelings about having been even slightly involved in the production of the crop which will mature in 2003 ... a dream come true. ♪



Inset Opposite: “Regina” earrings. An interchangeable setting of paisley-shaped emerald, sapphire, emerald pavé & sapphire pavé.

Opposite page: “Schwartzberg” earrings feature pavé set diamond “stars” with South Sea pearl centres inlaid with pear-shaped, faceted pink sapphires.

Above: “Melon-carved” fluted emerald bead drop earrings, each suspended from a natural colour Tahitian pearl.