

Camp Chivaree

By Sue Farley

Chivaree, the Seagull Man, was a warrior and a bit of a bad boy. He lived in the Dreamtime, that unbelievably early period of Australian Aboriginal creation history when myths and reality were blurred into one inseparable mystical bundle. Known also as the Food God, Chivaree wandered the ancient beaches of western Cape York in the far northern tropics of eastern Australia searching unceasingly for a wife.

Even today these beaches are wild and open, largely unspoiled by human intervention and as harsh an environment as any inland desert or frozen alpine tussock land. There Chivaree wandered, his notorious reputation preceding him as he travelled. Unlike that other creation story where God virtually handed Eve to Adam like a spare-rib on a plate, Chivaree had to slog for weeks along crocodile and shark-infested beaches, pushing through hostile coastal swamps and being slowly desiccated by searing sun and hot tropical winds.

In the Wet Season he dripped with sweat, itching and sore, battered by storms and torrential rain, and driven almost troppo by the sultry heat. Elders of the local settlements would hide their wives and daughters when they heard he was nearby. He was not high on the list as a preferred new son-in-law.

But despite all this hardship Chivaree struck it lucky. On Flinders Beach, a remote 24 kilometre stretch of wide sand backed by low dunes and coastal scrub, and breeding ground to several species of endangered marine turtle, he chanced upon two women. Not known for his functional relationships he quickly abandoned one of his new-found friends, heading north with the other in tow to the islands of the Torres Strait, separating Australia from Papua New Guinea. They were never heard of again.

Uncountable years later Chivaree is now the name given to the Cape York Turtle Rescue camp at Janie Creek, on the northern end of the same Flinders Beach near Mapoon. The camp is owned and run by the traditional Aboriginal owners of the area, overseen by the local indigenous council. It also serves as an indigenous work program, providing seasonal employment for locals, and is the site of a world-class turtle protection program set up to improve the plight of endangered marine turtles.

We travelled there in early summer, the final group to go in before the camp shut for the Wet season. Our days and nights were filled with turtles – from big mamas laying their eggs under a full tropical moon, to tiny little babies making a do-or-die sprint to the sea from their hatchling nest up in the dunes.

These Hawksbill, Olive Ridley and Flatback turtles must endure many hardships to return and nest on the beach where they were born, up to 50 years earlier. Feral pigs and dingoes dig up the nests, eating the eggs or newly hatched young. Sharks and crocodiles patrol the surf line, making landing and leaving a risky exercise for the female and an even more dangerous journey for the hatchlings, driven purely by instinct to reach the sea. Abandoned fishing nets are also a real hazard, mortally trapping the adults as they placidly swim the intensely blue waters of the Arafura Sea and Gulf of Carpentaria.

Chivaree Camp was one of the earlier players in the current trend of volunteer tourism, and visitors are hands-on from day one, helping the rangers to minimise these risks to the turtle population. Twice a day specially-g geared soft-top LandRovers groan down the shifting sands of Flinders Beach to the Pennefather River and back, checking for hatchlings by day and nesting females in the evening. Nests and eggs are counted, pest excluders laid to foil predators and washed-up nets are gathered.

To lie low on the warm sand in the dark of night was an absolute highlight, watching as a female turtle scraped laboriously, digging a nest deep enough to protect her eggs. Keeping behind their line of sight we were able to share these special moments, watching the glistening white eggs drop one by one into the damp sand of the nesting chamber just a metre away. Unable to hear the higher frequency sound of our hushed voices the turtles drop into a maternal trance spending up to 30 minutes fussing around the nest, unbothered by our presence. When the job is done they turn for the sea and doggedly lurch their way back to the water. That is all they will ever see of their babies.

Between beach runs we enjoyed the life about camp. The rangers were always keen to share their stories and research findings. Safely housed behind a strong crocodile fence, we were camping deep in the heart of northern Cape York's saltwater country, where local Aboriginal and Torres Strait island people have lived for generations. These people look on the sea as their life – the fish, the turtles and dugong have always been traditional food sources – and they identify strongly with the Arafura Sea to their west. Their lives are tied inextricably to the sea in other ways as well – culturally, spiritually, economically – as they draw their living, create their art and base their stories on their amphibious lifestyle. The old people, in particular, have a much-valued knowledge of the customary uses of the sea, a knowledge which is carefully guarded from outsiders.

But the locals came to share their time and stories at the camp, and we slept after lunch beneath the swishing casuarina trees, their needle-laden branches moving as lightly as soft saris drying in the breeze. With backing from international groups like the World Wildlife Fund and Comalco, who mine the nearby Weipa area for bauxite, the Chivaree Camp provides all the basics, despite its isolation.

It was at night though, that the area really came to life. After a late evening Land-Rover lurch along the beach to check for laying females we would turn in, exhausted from a full day. All through the night a raucous acapella of birds and sea creatures clicked, snapped and rattled in the trees and along the creek. Through the mesh windows of the tent the moon rose dreamily above the trees, tracking across the cloudless tropical sky before dunking down into the bush behind us.

As morning approached big fish would start jumping in Janie Creek, just outside the fence. They may have been barramundi or grouper, or maybe a swordshark or two – it was too dark to tell. A little further out we could hear the snapping of crocodile jaws as they warmed up for breakfast; birds changed up a gear from their night time chirrups to full-blooded whistlings and squawkings. Small rat-like marsupials called quolls would fight noisily on the sand, while dingoes and wild dogs barked in the distance. There were crocodiles which also barked, in a fashion, and birds that imitated the crocodiles barking. It was all go at sunrise.

As the morning warmed and the breeze freshened, turning the glassy blue water to a choppy sea we donned our repellents, moisturisers and sunscreens and filled up on liquid for the long hot day ahead. Unlike the ancient Chivaree, who had no respite from the harsh elements, we knew it would be just a matter of hours out on the job before we returned to camp for a cool shower, a good lunch and a hot cup of coffee.

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