

Geraldine Reilly,
owner of Moondance
Lodge, Margaret River,
Western Australia



FOOD FOR THE SOUL

Grape rapture might conjure up pictures of a bacchanalian night of drinking. But at Moondance Lodge, it means being massaged with a mix of crushed red grapes, local clay and essential oils, then marinating under a covering of vine leaves and cloth.

"It's part of our grape-healing therapy," says Geraldine Reilly, managing director and owner of Moondance Lodge. "More and more people are travelling around the planet looking for experiences that nourish them at a deeper level. They want beautiful aesthetics, rejuvenating slumber and experiences that connect them to local indigenous wisdom, to the earth, to things that are very natural."

Moondance Lodge made the 2005 Conde Nast Traveller Hot New Hotel list and has won awards such as the 2005 Luxury Travel Award and 2006 Gold Medal for West Australia

Unique Accommodation. Reilly's wellbeing epiphany happened in Asia. During her 13 years in the region, she learned tai chi and reiki and later went to the United States to train in "heart-centred transformation" with a physician. Increasingly immersed in "inner work", Reilly had a dream that she would

'More and more people are yearning for deeper experiences.'

start a healing centre on a forested property somewhere in Australia. After several false leads, she found a 13.5 hectares of natural bushland at Margaret River.

She says the land where the lodge has "strong energy" and that just being there is healing. "Before we started building, I walked

through the property with an Aboriginal elder, who told me stories associated the land and the ancestors and identified the site as largely a centre of women's business."

The lodge offers everything from "corporate nourishment" events – with optional activities including surfing, rock climbing and wine tasting – to women's only "Moondancing the Feminine" retreats. Indigenous experiences include a didgeridoo meditation and medicinal bushwalks.

"The deeper level of interaction isn't everyone's cup of tea. You can come and enjoy things at the surface level and there's no judgement," Reilly says.

"But more and more people are waking up and seeking and yearning for these deeper experiences. Here we offer soulful experiences which nourish the mind and body."

Mick Jerram, director of Gecko Canoeing, Northern Territory.



RIVER DEEP, MOUNTAIN HIGH

As the canoe drifts down the Katherine River, it's the silence that startles, the sight of jabiru storks dancing on sandy beaches and the sudden splash as a kingfisher strikes a gleaming fish. Guiding visitors through this watery wilderness of the outback still delights Mick Jerram and Jenn Child, directors of Gecko Canoeing. Jerram describes the 600-kilometre river system as "just beautiful. I fell in love with it the first time I paddled down it."

Since the couple bought Gecko Canoeing in 2002, the company has won three Brolga Awards for ecotourism excellence.

"Our canoe trips are run only in the dry season and usually start in the Nitmiluk National Park," Jerram says. "The river has really clear water, lots of big sandy beaches and a lot of wildlife. It's a really cool, clean environment and we paddle down the river for three, six or

seven days and often see no one – that's what is really special about it."

"The outback is quite subjective. In the Northern Territory it is the whole arid, desert region with vast tracts of untouched wilderness." For some, the outback is synonymous with walking around the majestic

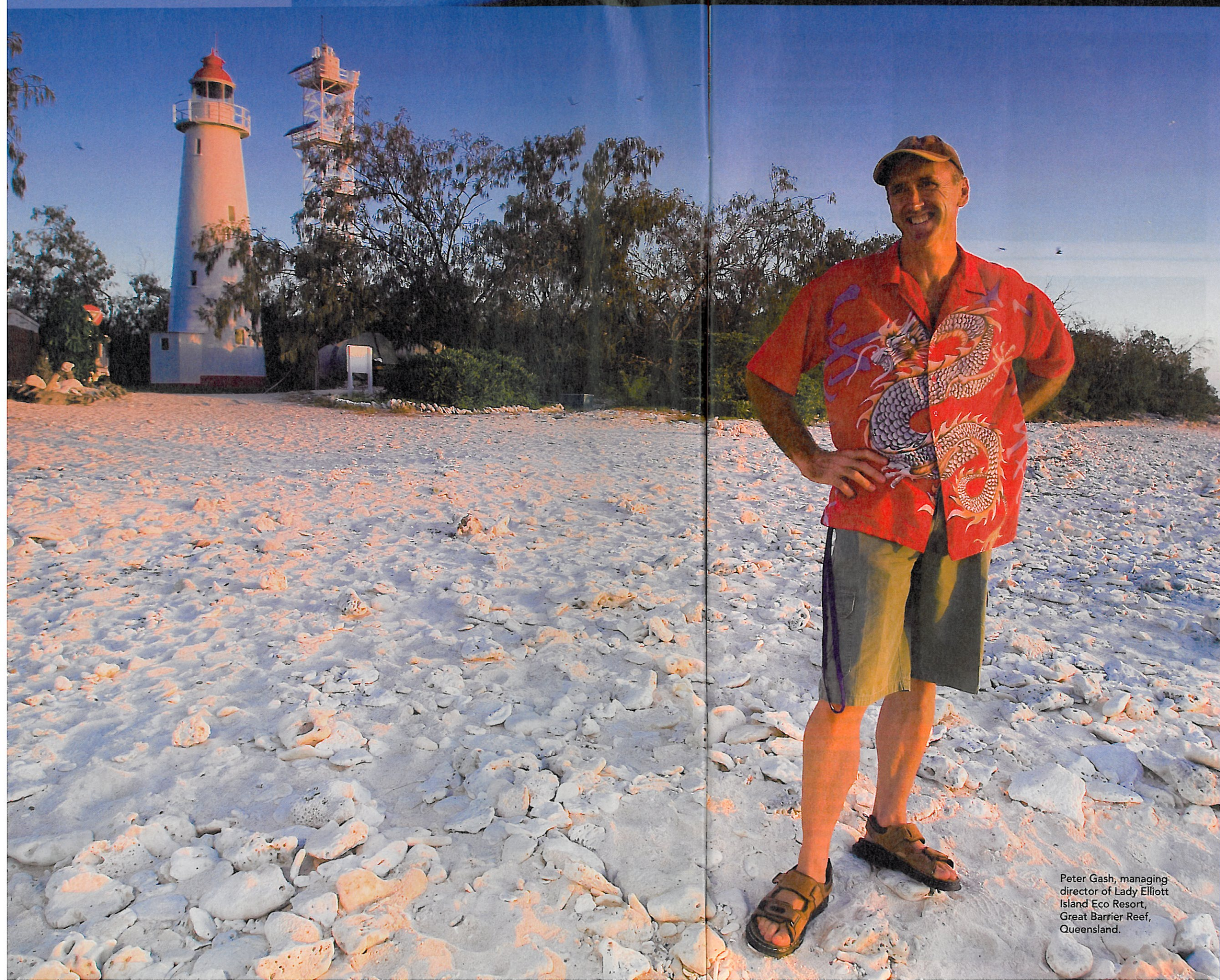
'We paddle down the river for three, six or seven days and often see no one.'

ochre fist of Uluru or watching the desert stars on the Ghan train journey from Adelaide to Darwin. Or it can mean taking a 21-day walking tour with a camel train across the Simpson Desert or gazing into the mysterious egg eyes of Wandjina rock art figures in the Kimberly.

But for many, holidays are about getting away from it all and that is where the wild places like the Katherine Gorge beckon.

"During the paddle down the Katherine, Daly and Flora rivers, guests often see wallabies, freshwater crocodiles, goannas and numerous birds," Jerram says. "I've seen quite highly wound up executives totally unwind and relax in just three days. If they have time to sit down and contemplate and come away with a different mindset, that's fantastic."

"Families experience what a good, old fashioned Australian family camping holiday used to be. They can be by themselves, totally focused, no video games, no computers. Dad will take the kids fishing and mum will just sit there and relax, cooling off her feet in the water, reading a book."



FOR THE LOVE OF A LADY

When Peter Gash first snorkelled off Lady Elliott Island on the Great Barrier Reef, he was "blown away" by the experience. "I fell in love with that whole place. To me there is really no more beautiful place on the reef.

"I just thought: how can I find a way to get other people to experience what I just have? It's a unique place with an amazing ecosystem. It was the smell, the feel, the touch, the unspoilt beauty of the place and its remoteness which stayed with me. Yet at the same time Lady Elliott had an airstrip on it, so it was easily accessible from the city."

On this trip, he met Julie Grey, whom he later married, cementing the place in his heart.

Lady Elliott is one of only four true coral cays where visitors can stay at the Great Barrier Reef. Close to the coastal shelf, it has exquisite corals and a huge variety of fish. Turtles lay their eggs on its beaches and about 100,000 rowdy seabirds nest onshore.

Transformed by his experiences, Gash

'It's the most stunning place to snorkel, see marine life and mega fauna.'

learned to fly so he could ferry people out to the two "Southern Ladies" – Lady Elliott and nearby Lady Musgrave Island. He flew guests to the islands for 20 years, becoming managing director and chief pilot of Seair.

In 2005, Gash, his wife and two partners secured the lease for Lady Elliott Island and its eco resort. He was excited and daunted at the responsibility.

"I want to turn the ecotourism resort into a working model for a self-sustaining, environmentally friendly community," Gash says. "I see it as a vital educational resource – a place where young people can experience reef life at its best and be educated about climate change.

"It's the most stunning place to snorkel, see marine life and mega fauna. In the middle of the year we had an invasion of manta rays. We counted over 125 in a three-week period. It was amazing. We are talking about babies that are only a metre wide up to massive ones with seven-metre wing spans."

Gash takes his job seriously. "I don't see myself as the owner of the island or proprietor. I see myself as a steward. I've been given a task to look after it, so it is preserved for future generations, but preserved in the right way."

Peter Gash, managing director of Lady Elliott Island Eco Resort, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland.