

Fork in the Road, food travel column
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Poking around for mud crabs in the swamps of Australia

By Laurel Miller

“How do you know there’s no crocs in here?” I asked Vincent, knowing full well that Western Australia’s mangrove swamps are prime crocodile habitat.

“You just get a feeling,” he replied, adjusting his aviator shades and stomping off, barefoot, through the knee-deep, sulphurous, stinking, primordial muck. I had no choice but to trust the fat Aboriginal guy with the CIA-style glasses, so I followed, armed only with a three-foot long metal crabbing stick and a pair of neoprene booties that did little to keep out the smaller denizens of the mud. Minutes later, as we waded across a small inlet, a six-foot reef shark thrashed across our path. I swatted at the pterodactyl-size mosquitoes swarming around my head.

Much is made, ad nauseum, of Australia’s toxic and toothy fauna, but mingling with the wildlife was part of the experience here at Cape Leveque. I was on the remote Dampier Peninsula in northern WA, visiting Kooljaman Wilderness Camp, an aboriginal-owned eco-accommodation overlooking the vivid turquoise waters, isolated white sand beaches, and red pindan rock cliffs of the Indian Ocean.

Kooljaman, which is owned by the Bardi people of the Djarindjin and One Arm Point aboriginal communities, organizes mudcrabbing trips, and I was eager to forage this indigenous staple for myself. Vincent, a member of the Jawi clan, has been leading mudcrabbing tours for visitors to the region for years. It’s an economic enterprise that also helps to raise awareness of Aboriginal culture and preserve the tradition of foraging for “bush tucker,” or indigenous foods, a way of life that is imperiled due to the availability of processed takeaway foods available on aboriginal communities.

The Bardi and Jawi are coastal peoples who still augment their diet with the wild foods of their region: mudcrabs, fish, oysters, dugong, turtle eggs, sting ray, bush potatoes, bush passion fruit, pandanus. While diners in cosmopolitan Sydney or Melbourne might be hard pressed to find dugong, or sea cow, on their plate, mudcrab is considered a delicacy in all demographics because of its exceptionally sweet, tender, clean-tasting meat, which is similar to our local Dungeness crab. And now that I’ve experienced what’s involved in catching mudcrabs, I know exactly why they cost so much. Whenever Vincent would point out a likely crab hole, I’d thrust my stick inside, poking and prodding until I felt the irate creature clamp on, then extricate it from its burrow. Given that mud crabs are the size of large dinner plates, and their heavy claws are capable of removing a finger in one swift pinch, considerable care is required to complete the capture.

Several hours work yielded four plump crabs. That night, Vincent made his famous chili mud crab, sautéing the cracked crustaceans with a prepared Asian sweet chili sauce, loads of garlic, ginger, and fresh red chilies. Sweet, succulent Dungeness crab makes a perfect substitute, and it will be in season through May. Be sure to purchase live crabs, to ensure freshness and the best flavor.

For information on mudcrabbing and accommodations at Kooljaman Wilderness Camp, call 011 08 9192 4970, or go to www.kooljaman.com.au.

Chili Mud Crab

Recipe courtesy of Tourism Northern Territory, Australia. Serves 2

- One 2 ½ lb. live mud crab or Dungeness crabs
- 1/4 cup peanut oil
- 4 cloves garlic
- 1 tablespoon grated ginger
- 1/2 cup tomato sauce
- 1/4 cup sweet chili sauce
- 1/2 cup of white wine
- 1 tablespoon light soy sauce
- 4 fresh red chilies, seeded and thinly sliced
- chopped green onion, for garnish

Place crab belly side up on cutting board and plunge large knife through pointy flap, then remove flap and discard. Pull off claws and reserve, then remove top shell, rinse, and reserve. Remove and discard gut and spongy gills. Cut crab into quarters and set aside.

Heat oil in wok over medium high heat, and fry crab pieces until they change color, which will take several minutes, turning frequently. Remove and set aside. Lower heat and cook garlic, ginger and chilies until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add remaining ingredients and bring to a boil. Return crab to the wok and stir to coat the crab. Reduce heat and allow to simmer for another 3 minutes. Serve with steamed rice.