

Australian cultured pearls



The Australian cultured pearl industry took hold in the beef cattle town of Broome, in the Kimberley region of North-West Australia, during the mid-1950s; however, pearl oyster fishing had its origins there over a century earlier.

The industry started as a source of material for the lowly button. Before the large-scale use of metal and plastic buttons, oyster-shell buttons were the main type of buttons in use. With the advent of cheap plastic buttons the town slipped into a decline until the cultured pearl industry began.

Broome, now a small and bustling town, had had the world's most sought after mother-of-pearl oyster shell, valued in the international market for its commercial use in button manufacture. If a pearl was found in the process of cleaning the shells, it was considered a bonus. As pearls became more popular and increased in value, diving for the pearls became more important than simply diving for the shell.

The magic of the pearl tempted men from around the world to risk their lives and try their luck in an insatiable pearl hunt along ocean floors. Wooden luggers and hard-hat divers have come to symbolise those often treacherous hunts for the one perfect pearl that had the power to command a fortune. Broome, although a prosperous beef cattle exporting town, became the hub of a pearling industry.

The Australian pearling industry in Broome continues to produce the world's finest pearls. These are now developed on pearl 'farms'. The industry exports pearls valued

at \$200 million annually and employs approximately 1000 people. Twelve companies operate sixteen licences to fish for wild pearl oyster stocks for their shell supply.

The process of culturing pearls begins at sea. Australian oysters are not yet conceived on farms. Young oysters must be found in the wild and collected by divers on the sea bottom off the north-west coast. The collected wild shells are seeded, which means a small piece of shell is placed inside the oyster. This becomes an irritant to the oyster so it covers the irritant with a secretion. This is the start of the pearl. Seeded oysters are placed in panels and returned to the sea for several months before being taken to pearl farm sites in bays and inlets where the pearls develop in size.

Pearls have been a source of fascination for centuries. They are the only gem created by a living organism. Pearls radiate a certain warmth and glow not found in other gems, due to their unique formation.

Unlike coloured gemstones and some other pearls, the Australian pearl's beauty is there for all to behold the very moment it is delivered from the oyster. These high-grade pearls are of such quality they do not require bleaching, tinting, dyeing or skinning. Australian pearls are harvested by hand, cleansed of sea salt and organic residue and graded for marketing. The beauty of the Australian pearl never fades because the pearls are pure and can be passed down from one generation to the next.

Adapted from:
<http://www.costellos.com.au/pearls/industry.html>

