

Echoes of the past

■ Mark Beyer

THE term eco-tourism may have become overused in recent years, but one place that truly lives up to the term is Eco Beach Wilderness Resort.

In this case, 'eco' is not simply a trendy tag used for marketing purposes; almost everything about the resort focuses on ecological sustainability.

Located on Roebuck Bay, one hour south of Broome, the resort re-opened early this year, nine years after being destroyed by a cyclone.

Destruction of the original resort enabled managing director and serial Broome entrepreneur, Karl Plunkett, to learn from his earlier experience.

Mr Plunkett, who migrated from the UK 22 years ago, established one of Broome's most successful back-packer hostels and pioneered adventure tourism in the Kimberley.

The original Eco Beach resort started with a handful of A-frame huts for people on organised fishing trips and expanded as the site became more popular.

Only one of the original huts survived Cyclone Rosita and remains as a reminder of what used to be.

The resort now comprises a mix of villas and safari-style eco-tents, developed by another of Mr Plunkett's companies, Eco Constructions.

The term 'tent' does not do justice to these structures; they are really mini villas, with queen beds and ensuites, but with canvas and hessian roofs and walls.

The vegetation and the power supply are also different at the new resort.

The original featured many palm trees, which looked striking but were incongruous with the natural landscape and, more significantly, consumed vast quantities of water.

The current resort has native vegetation, with about 5,000 seedlings planted in recent years. The new vegetation is yet to be fully established after the cyclone left the area barren, but is starting to take hold.

The hybrid power supply is one of the most impressive features of the new resort.

It comprises solar panels on the roofs of 24 of the villas, a bank of



NEW FOR OLD: The 'tents' are more mini-villas featuring queen beds and ensuites. **Photos:** Courtesy Eco Beach Wilderness Retreat

storage batteries and four diesel generators, all linked by a sophisticated computer system that optimises power use.

The system cost \$1.8 million, with about two thirds being spent on the alternative energy components.

It was commercially viable only because of the federal government's renewable remote power generation program, which provided a maximum rebate of \$500,000.

Regen Power chairman Chem Nayar, whose company designed and installed the system, says this was one of the largest grants of its kind to be handed out in WA.

Mr Plunkett is a big fan of the system, which was expensive to establish but has low running costs and supports the resort's ecological sustainability ethos.

"It's fully automated so you can

dial in from anywhere to see what the system is doing," Mr Plunkett said.

"You can find out instantly how much energy you are using in the bar and the main areas of the resort, and how much energy you are producing for the day."

The resort's sustainability focus manifests in many ways, such as the absence of televisions and internet connections in the villas.

Instead, guests are offered a range of nature-based activities, from mud crabbing and fishing to kayaking and bush walking with an indigenous guide.

Another feature of the resort is that most of the villas and eco-tents offer ocean views, which might not seem very special until you get to Broome and discover that ocean views don't necessarily come with the room.