



restaurant; and a games room that doubles as a bar on Saturday nights.

The 34 motel-style rooms here are cheap, starting at \$110 per night, but your best bet is to book one of the 13 cabins, where you'll get sea views and a bit of space. Though simple, they're equipped with all the important things (a Nespresso machine and aircon) and sleep up to 10. They're a favourite with fishing parties that come here in search of marlin, sailfish and giant trevally.

For beachcombers, there are rich pickings in the north, where seashells the size of shoeboxes scatter the shoreline, along with rubbery eggshells left behind by the thousands of turtles that hatch on Thev every summer. The pace of the place changes in November

and December, when researchers and volunteers arrive to study the hundreds of flatback, hawksbill, loggerhead and green turtles that lay their eggs here in the dark of night.

There's good snorkelling – and crays to be caught – at the beach in front of the cabins. But to take advantage of the vast reef beyond, hire a small Plaka boat and make a day of it. Some say the corals don't compare to the technicolours of Coral Bay in the south – but when it comes to marine life, the Mackerel Islands are where it's at.

Plunging into the cool depths, I'm shocked at the sheer scale and neon colours below me – it's like an underwater mirror reflecting the vast red Pilbara. The fish are as curious about me as I am about them (even the haughty parrot fish stop chewing on coral long enough to check me out). That's the way of this sleepy island haven – you come to escape life and end up coming face to face with it. **—Emma Mulholland**

BEST FOR NATURE THEVENARD ISLAND, WA

A ta-ta lizard basks in the sun on my deck, centimetres from my feet, as I feast on just-caught Spanish mackerel and watch the Indian Ocean roll onto the shore. With so few distractions, the natural world becomes the *whole* world – that's the beauty of Thevenard Island (mackerelislands.com.au), a 45-minute boat trip from Onslow in WA's remote Pilbara.

Like the ta-ta, I'm in no rush to move. In fact, I might just spend the afternoon in the hammock, counting quails and watching for whales as they journey north to calving grounds in the Kimberley. At night, you can hear them, their tales slapping the surface of the sea.

Thev, as it's known, is one of 10 isles in the Mackerel Island group north of Ningaloo Reef. Often compared to Rottnest off the coast of Perth, there's not much in the way of human debris on the 550-hectare nature reserve, save for an old decommissioned oil and gas project that pocks its eastern tip. Other than that, there's little more than a store with booze, bait and gear hire; a pool and rarely used gym; a laid-back



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