



INSIDE
ASIA PACIFIC

Time and tides: a ship
waits near Montgomery
Reef and its surrounding
channels and islands

DEEP BLUE SOMETHING

Located between Darwin and Broome in northern Australia, the Kimberley is a place of abundant nature and ancient treasures. Sue White experiences its wonders from the sea

Zipping across a startlingly-blue Timor Sea shortly after sunrise, two thoughts cross my sleep-addled brain. First, Jacques Costeau was definitely onto something when he realised just how ideal the inflatable Zodiacs are for skimming marine surfaces. Second, on the marine surface directly ahead this particular morning, a series of waterfalls appear to be rising from the surface.

The illusion is Montgomery Reef, a 400sq km reef about 200km east of Broome. Hidden under five or six metres of water most of the day, this secluded system is transformed at low tide into a series of oceanic waterfalls, where rushing waters drain into a receding sea faster than you can say 'tidal phenomenon'.

It's a dangerous time for the reef's plentiful marine life: those caught unawares of the fast-dropping tide quickly find them-

selves stranded on the isolated plateau. Escapees take a risk, too: many fall victim to the sea turtles and reef sharks lurking below, hoping for an easy meal to tumble into their mouths.

Given the isolation and inaccessibility of the Kimberley region, there's usually little competition in viewing the spectacle. The 424,000sq km corner of northern Western Australia, stretching virtually from Darwin to Broome, holds myriad rewards for those willing to leave towns, tourists and mobile phone reception behind.

Still, there's a fine line between admiring the beauty of a rugged environment and sweating your way through it.

Enter expedition cruising. If you're willing to put up with a few spears of spinifex poking into your socks it's an ideal way to eliminate the logistics of how to go where roads simply don't.

It's also a niche that my hosts, Orion Expeditions, have down to a fine art: ➤

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‘The Kimberley’s isolated, harsh landscape gets in people’s blood. From the sea you can see the beauty of the place.’

lashings of adventure on land, large doses of luxury at sea.

Having spent large chunks of his adulthood interpreting rock art, running fire management programmes or patrolling national parks, expedition leader Darrin Bennett has had plenty of Kimberley dirt under his nails:

‘It’s still special by land, but in a lot of areas roads are non-existent. Where they do exist they’re full of the worst corrugation you’ve seen in your life. But the Kimberley’s isolated, harsh landscape gets in people’s blood. From the sea you can really see the beauty of the place,’ he says.

My own time at sea is far from passive. Osprey nests are spotted between billion-year old red rocks around the mouth of King George’s River; the origins of the elegant ancient Bradshaw art figures are debated on Jar Island; and migrating humpback whales flap pectoral fins before doing impressive breaching backflips off the ship’s starboard side.

Nonetheless, the Jacuzzi is not forgotten. It’s an idyllic way to experience the Kimberley’s sunsets, with the added

Written in the stones: spectacular rock formations at Talbot Bay (above); ancient art at Bigge Island (below)



advantage of being markedly safer than taking a dip in the ocean, given that thousands of saltwater crocodiles reportedly make their home in these parts.

With Orion’s 76-strong crew catering around the clock to their 100 guests’ every

whim, it’s easy to be fooled into thinking the customer is monarch of the high seas. In reality, it’s the tides that are in charge.

Meals, shore expeditions and activities are all timed around nature’s rhythms, and the optimal Kimberley experience ➤

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often occurs when you rise with the sun.

It's a fact I'm reminded of on yet another early morning jaunt, this time along the Hunter River. Like much of the region, the area boasts red escarpments which tower at heights of up to 200 metres above the shoreline, providing a spectacular backdrop for satisfying wildlife viewing from sea level.

Dolphins flit by as the Zodiac speeds towards exposed mangrove flats; a grey nurse shark struggles in the shallows only metres away; and a dozing crocodile appears unconcerned by six Zodiac passengers watching its every move.

As a white-bellied sea eagle plucks an unlucky fish from the water's edge, it's impossible not to feel in tune with an ecosystem that has evolved beautifully with its ancient surroundings:

"These rocks are at least 1.5 billion years old, but major geological

changes occurred 1,125 million years ago, when the floating Kimberley craton collided with Australia's mainland,' Bennett says.

"The Kimberley went down while the Australian plate went over the top. As a result, the rock has taken on a twisting and folding that is spectacular to observe."

It's not only the landscape that has adapted to the region's shifting sands. Today's Kimberley is home to around 15,000 Aborigines, most of whom live in the region's small towns of Derby, Wyndham and Kununurra. For many visitors, it's artwork that best conveys the indigenous people's long connection to the land.

Wandjina Art features in overhangings along the Kimberley coastline, and some of the best is found at remote Raft Point. It's a steep, half-hour climb to see the ochre works of round-faced figures with piercing eyes, but the glimpse into the >

The big drop: Zodiac passengers gaze in awe at King George Falls

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A grey nurse shark struggles in the shallows only metres away; and a dozing crocodile appears unconcerned by our presence.



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Anybody see any salties? the wide, blue expanse of the Hunter River

past is a highlight for those making the sweaty trek.

'Aboriginal people believe the Wandjinas were the first ones to wander the earth, and that it was their spirits who did these paintings,' says expedition guide Harry Christensen, noting that three clans (the Worora, Ngarinyin and Wunumbul) are connected to the Wandjina art.

It's not all the Wandjina were responsible for, Christensen adds:

'They were also believed to control the Kimberley's weather.'

To date, they're doing a superb job. Temperatures in the dry season (April to October) hover around 30-33°C, making shorebound excursions comfortable in the mornings, although less so if adventures occur in the heat of the day.

The Wandjina may be in charge of weather, but it's Orion's crew who are tasked with executing a series of luxury touches which take the focus off the heat.

Champagne and croissants appear out of nowhere under King George Falls; an ice cream delivery turns up at exactly the right time after a warm morning's birdwatching on the Hunter River; and hot

chocolate spiked with rum appears on a remote sandbar for exhilarated turtle spotters fresh from Montgomery Reef.

Despite all the advantages of sea life, some things are still better experienced via air. In this part of the world, an included flight over the beehive-like formations of the Bungle Bungles is one, while an optional helicopter ride over Mitchell Falls with local operator Heliworks is hard to pass up.

After taking off from a conveniently-located remote beach, choppers travel 50km along the rocky red Mitchell Plateau, where the series of steep escarpments eventually flatten out to showcase an endless field of well, nothingness. It's in the middle of this nothingness that the helicopter gently lands before leaving me to explore the remote Mitchell Falls.

There are 17 types of sharp spinifex grass in this neck of the Kimberley and

within minutes at least half of them have poked my ankles. But, given that the luxury of the ship means I'm typically only minutes from a hot shower or ocean-side beverage, it's not exactly troubling.

In fact, onboard or off, it's difficult to find much to be troubled about at all. Certainly not the food, an extravaganza designed in collaboration with international chef Serge Dansereau, owner of Sydney's highly-regarded Bathers' Pavilion. Nor Orion's eco-credentials: the 102m German-built vessel is designed to be low impact, from its bulbous bow, which reduces fuel consumption even before the turbo-charged intercooled engines come into play; a fully enclosed black water system; and air-conditioning that harnesses its condensation for the ship's laundry needs.

If there is any trouble, it's in convincing my mind that nature isn't about to have the last laugh. After spending most of the trip being warned against dipping more than a toe in the water lest I end up in a saltwater crocodile's death roll, by the time we reach the clear waters of Cape Leveque I'm encouraged by Bennett and others to swim:

'The cros don't like these long sandy beaches,' he says. Then, after a pause: 'Of course, in the Kimberley, you can never say never.'

Sue White travelled to the Kimberley courtesy of Orion Expeditions. ■

FIND OUT MORE
Orion Expeditions travel the Kimberley from April to September 2011. Departures are from Darwin or Broome. www.orionexpeditions.com

Heliworks' optional excursion over Mitchell Falls (\$495) can be booked onboard Orion.