

By Angela Saurine

ROCK STARS

Oyster hunts, Aboriginal art sites,
swimming in waterholes... a Kimberley
cruise is a feast for the senses



Here's a big one, it's like a steak," skipper Brad says as he hands me half a shell with a large, plump oyster attached. I slurp it down, savouring its salty, tangy flavour. Now it's my turn: he inserts the screwdriver between the shell and the rock and encourages me to bang on the end with an axe. "Harder," he says. Soon I'm relishing another big, juicy mollusc. As a blazing orange sun sinks towards the horizon off Camden Harbour, on Western Australia's Kimberley coast, we wander from rock to rock in our reef shoes devouring oysters, collecting others in a bucket to take back to our ship.

"I love oystering," Brad says. "It's the best part of my job I reckon. I would do it every day if I lived here, like the Aborigines would have done. You don't get oysters like this anywhere else in Australia." Brad's passion for this remote wilderness area is infectious. Suddenly a woman's voice breaks our concentration. "Braaaaaaad," she calls. "The boats are getting stranded."

He dashes to the shoreline, where one of the area's famous 11-metre king tides, receding, has left our three dinghies high and dry on the muddy bank. People come from everywhere to help relaunch them, claps and cheers erupting when the last boat is freed. It is dark by the time we return to the *Kimberley Quest II*, our luxury cruiser. We are halfway through an eight-day voyage from Broome to the Hunter River, a group of 18 passengers and six crew, and the mood is jovial.

We embark from Broome in the

late afternoon, leaving behind the grey nomads watching the sunset in fold-up chairs beside their 4WDs. Cast-off is followed by a quick briefing – the times for each day's activities will be listed on the back deck's whiteboard every morning. "But don't be alarmed if nothing on that board actually happens," Brad warns. "Everything here is dependent on the tides." We find our cabins, then head to the bow for champagne and cheese.

My fellow passengers are a well-travelled bunch who talk of past adventures in Antarctica, Greenland and Canada – where they spotted polar bears and swam with beluga whales. Many have previously driven through the Kimberley along the Gibb River Road and have returned to see the region from the coast.

Thereafter we slip into a groove, spending our days fishing, exploring rivers, spotting wildlife, hiking and scrambling up rocks to see rock art or swimming in beautiful waterholes, even sighting a humpback whale on her return migration south to Antarctica with her playful calf, breaching and flapping its tail as if to say hello.

Brad sets the bar high with our first stop on our first full day of cruising. At Silica Beach, a blindingly white strip fringed by turquoise water and orange lichen-covered rocks, powdery sand squeaks beneath our bare feet. Larrikin guide Joe, the son of a cray fisherman, patrols the shoreline with a cast-net, looking for fish.

The beach is defined as fit for swimming – that's to say, the water is so clear that it should be possible to see the crocodiles coming. But we are cautioned not to venture past the three dinghies anchored in a semi-circle where the crew stands watch.

We visit the famous Horizontal Falls, where the king tides push huge volumes of water through two narrow gorges, then sail through the Buccaneer Archipelago and past Koolan Island, where one of our crew, Bec, grew up in an iron ore mining community. Another crew member, Trent, previously worked on boats in Queensland and the Northern Territory. "The big difference is in Queensland there'd be boats everywhere," he says. "Here you'd be lucky to see one or two."

The exposure at low tide of Montgomery Reef – where we cruise in the dinghies the next day – leaves hundreds of terraced waterfalls. We spot stingrays and turtles as slender reef eplets forage for stranded fish.

We reach the first Aboriginal art on



Adventure: clockwise from above, Joe with his cast-net; Trent in Serendipity Creek; sunset bonfire; skipper Brad



1. Broome
2. Hunter River

our fourth day, walking in from Raft Point, a hot, uphill climb to Ngumburi Cave. Estimated at 3000 years old, the pictures of Wandjina spirit beings, painted in red and white ochre with eyes and nose but no mouth, tell the story of a *Romeo and Juliet*-like tragedy in which two beings from different skin groups fall in love. There are also handprints and pictures of kangaroos and dugongs. Traditional owner Donny Woolagoodja has the rights to repaint the art and has given permission for *Kimberley Quest II* guests to visit.

The following day we take the dinghies through tranquil Serendipity Creek, between Deception Bay and





Camden Sound, passing piles of shells marking Aboriginal middens, before reaching a waterhole and another rock art site in a cliff overhang. We relax on the ledge, laughing as the crew takes turns somersaulting and backflipping off the five-metre embankment.

That afternoon we reach Camden Harbour and the oyster hunt – heaven for a seafood lover like me. But the first settlers of WA's north-west in 1864, enticed from Victoria by the promise of fertile land, found what one described as “a God-forgotten and God-forsaken place”. About 120 people and 1500 sheep arrived on three ships in what was – and still is – one of the most

remote and isolated parts of the country. Within days, three had died of sunstroke in the scorching heat and others were speared by Aborigines. Nine people are buried beside a boab tree in the cemetery on Sheep Island opposite the former settlement, which was abandoned after just two years.

The oldest rock art we see on the trip awaits us the next day, a Gwion Gwion site discovered by the *Kimberley Quest II's* naturalist Tim Willing while birdwatching from the deck 10 years ago. Dated at between 17,000 and 20,000 years old, it is also known as Bradshaw art after pastoralist Joseph Bradshaw, the first to document the style. The intricate paintings depict tall, skinny figures with elaborate headdresses, sashes and boomerangs.

While some of the larger vessels in the area run lectures from ecologists and marine biologists, being on a smaller ship has its advantages – for example, a larger vessel wouldn't be able to get right beside King Cascade, on the Prince Regent River, where we eat lunch on the back deck to the sounds of water flowing over the 1.8 billion-year-old rocks while a crocodile circles the ship.

It's also a more hands-on experience. “Are you ready for an adventure?” Joe asks that day, as we embark on a tricky climb to reach a croc-free waterhole. There we find dozens more small waterfalls and relax against the rocks, the water massaging our backs, before jumping from pool to pool to avoid scorching our feet. Later we collect driftwood for a sunset beach bonfire.

Finally, we arrive at the Hunter River where it enters York Sound. We leave the ship like rock stars, picked up from the roof by helicopter and flown over the 80m-high Mitchell Falls – the highest tiered waterfall in the Kimberley – before transferring to a light plane for the trip south to Broome. The aerial view gives a true understanding of the size of the region, with nothing but wilderness as far as the eye can see. In just two hours we cover the 478km route it has taken a week to cruise. ●



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