

## TIME & TIDES BY PAUL RUSH

Cruising Western Australia's dramatic and isolated Kimberley Coast is a great adventure

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A black monolith rises slowly, spilling millions of litres of water from its flanks as it emerges from the ocean. The flat-topped reef covers an area of about 270sq km and is a staggering 80km long. At high tide it becomes a 10th of this area, showing up only as a cluster of tiny islands, but any boatie who lingers over it on the ebb tide will be left high and dry.

As the changing tide slowly uncovers the reef, the water scours out races around the perimeter, creating raging nutriment-filled rivers that attract hawksbill turtles to feed on the prolific sea grass.

Over millennia, nature has created many wonderful landscapes in the Kimberley region, but one stands out: Australia's largest and least-known inshore reef system, the Montgomery Reef, which lies about 20km off the central Kimberley Coast.

I'm on the MV Great Escape, a 26m catamaran that has been custom-made for coastal cruising. With its air-conditioned en suite cabins, comfortable lounge, formal dining room, alfresco dining area, deck spa and rooftop helicopter, it offers five-star luxury for up to 14 guests.

My four-day cruise is known as the Quintessential Kimberley Coast Escape, and includes a flight from Broome to the remote Buccaneer Archipelago, exploration of Doubtful and Talbot Bays, then a return flight.

Captain Chris 'Trippy' Tucker is a 26-year veteran of cruising these waters. He has a competent crew and trusts them to carry out their duties. The merest nod or wink seems sufficient to set in motion a crab-netting expedition, a fishing trip, a waterfall swim excursion, a cave rock art foray or a reef ramble - activities that materialise at timely intervals.

Tucker, who grew up on African tea plantations, loves the Kimberley Coast. 'The place is becoming more accessible but still remains raw and rugged - last frontier territory,' he says. 'The landscape sells itself and people often come back, bringing their friends. Brenda is here on her seventh voyage and she's determined to achieve her goal of catching a metre-long barramundi.'

Crewman Callum becomes animated when a fishing excursion is planned. He guides our tender to 'spot X', then lets us troll beside mangrove-fringed islets. We hook black bream, snapper, queen fish and trevally, but soon learn there are determined predators lurking beneath the boat.

We haul in a giant trevally that flashes in the sunlight, providing all the inducement a waiting tiger shark needs to leap after it and cleanly snap off its tail section. Later, a three-metre saltwater crocodile approaches, regarding us with a malevolent yellow eye. We frantically reel in a good sized trevally as the croc menaces it. Even a hefty whack on the head with a paddle doesn't deter this saurian. After chomping the fish in half, it slides silently away.

Spring is in the air and new life is everywhere. An osprey is nurturing its chick and humpback whales and their calves are breaching on the horizon. Baby turtles and clusters of fish are drawn to the truncated channels around the Montgomery Reef. Miraculously, the coral polyps on the draining reef plateau suffer no adverse effects from sun exposure. The clever little mites secrete a mucous that acts as a sun block; it's rated at SPF45 by scientists.

As dawn breaks over the broad expanse of Talbot Bay, we take our last excursion from the boat as the high tide is about to turn. Our aluminium dingy makes a white-knuckle, full-power-run at a narrow gap in the cliffs as the pent up water behind starts its bid for freedom.

During high spring tides, one million litres a second flows through the outer gap. The tidal variation can reach 11m here - the second largest in the world after Nova Scotia's Bay of Fundy. The big tides are matched by formidable landscapes: spectacular red-rock gorges and amphitheatres that cradle emerald-coloured freshwater pools and waterfalls.

Evenings on the Great Escape are a delightful experience. The boat rests as steady as a rock on her mooring. The air is still and warm, the sun paints the rugged Kimberley escarpments a deep red and slides quickly beneath the western horizon as a brilliant orb, laying out a golden pathway across the Indian Ocean. The landscape conveys the feeling of absolute isolation, as if we're the first people to venture here.

The relaxed atmosphere and camaraderie we enjoy in the outside dining area is an outstanding feature of the cruise. Nothing is too much trouble for the crew in attending to their guests. Chef Mitch aka 'Fridge', assisted by stewardess Emma, surprises us with a variety of meals, from smoked salmon to honey chicken and eye filet steak with saffron mash.

The name The Great Escape sums it all up perfectly – the sublime grandeur of the red rock escarpments, the onboard comfort, exciting activities, great weather, laughter and friendship. Living in this new world of sights and experiences is an inspirational experience.

THE END

Paul Rush travelled to the Kimberley courtesy of Tourism Western Australia, Air New Zealand, Sky West and The Great Escape.

**FACT FILE**

## **Getting There**

Air New Zealand has regular services from Auckland to Perth, featuring their special lie-flat business class seats on 777 aircraft.

Sky West operates between Perth and Broome and King Leopold Air fly The Great Escape guests out to the Buccaneer Archipelago.

The Great Escape Company offer a range of coastal cruises from the 4 night Quintessential or Barra Bonanza cruises to the 7 night Southern Experience and the 13 night Kimberley Classic Adventure, originating in either Broome or Wyndham.

In October and November dive charter cruises operate for 5 to 12 nights as the Rowley Shoals Adventure

## **WEBSITES**

[www.westernaustralia.com.au](http://www.westernaustralia.com.au)

[www.airnewzealand.com.nz](http://www.airnewzealand.com.nz)

[www.skywest.com.au](http://www.skywest.com.au)

[www.greatescape.net.au](http://www.greatescape.net.au)