

WILD WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Cruising Australia's less visited west coast

SUZANNE MORPHET





WHEN IT COMES to visiting Australia, most of us choose to tour Sydney and the country's East coast, where most Aussies live. If we're feeling daring, we might try Darwin and the North coast, and the stunning Kimberley where most saltwater crocodiles live.

Yet, Australia's West coast – which was charted 130 years before Captain Cook got around to mapping the East coast – offers the things many of us seek today: nature and solitude.

The clincher for me was learning that I could snorkel and dive with Coral Expeditions while exploring this less-travelled coast. Their ships carry scuba equipment and when traveling through regions with spectacular coral reefs – which is much of the time – they have a master diver on board. Even non-certified divers are invited to give the sport a try.

Each of Coral Expeditions' three ships is small and compact, carrying between 72 and 120 guests. All state-rooms face outwards and most have

private balconies. But what makes the airy public spaces unique is the large collection of Australian indigenous art, from vibrantly colourful acrylics to ochre on bark.

Something else that's special are the company's patented Xplorer tenders. You board them directly from one of the ship's main decks, after which they're lowered into the water, making excursions safe and accessible for everyone.

After departing the port of Fremantle, near Perth, on a mid-March morning, 110 of us eagerly gather in the ship's spacious lounge to meet the expedition team and hear what's in store.

Over 12 days, our ship – the *Coral Adventurer* – will cruise north, usually staying within sight of the rugged coastline, but sometimes venturing further offshore to explore some of the hundreds of islands. We'll enjoy hot and cold buffet breakfasts, two-course lunches and three-course dinners with complimentary drinks and wine. Our days will be full, with morning and afternoon excursions in either an



PHOTOS COURTESY CORAL EXPEDITIONS



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Xplorer or Zodiac followed by pre-dinner cocktails and hors d'oeuvres in the lounge or around the outside bars.

Something I notice almost immediately is that most guests are Australian – there are only two other Canadians – and many are here for their third or fourth Coral Expeditions cruise. Over welcome drinks and canapés the first night, Bruce, from Sydney, tells me, "They do everything just right", his wife Jan nodding agreement. "If you have a chance, do the Kimberley," chimes in Ros, another fan of Coral Expeditions, referring to the company's popular route between Broome and Darwin. "It's just unbelievable!"

The next morning, we start exploring, going ashore at Post Office Island, one of dozens of coral islands in the Houtman Abrolhos (*a-BROL-us*) group. It's a wisp of a place; pancake flat, with colourful fishing shacks and turquoise water lapping the white shoreline.

We meet third-generation lobster fisherman Jesse Liddon, who holds up a feisty western rock lobster longer than

his forearm. Catching them takes skill and knowledge, as they hide in coral crevices. But when Jesse tells us he works only 90 days a year to catch his quota and spends the rest of the year relaxing in northern Italy, we don't feel sorry for him!

That night we feast on rock lobster, appreciating them all the more because we know exactly where they came from and how they were caught.

While anchored off another of the Abrolhos Islands, we get our first chance to scuba dive. Wearing wetsuits – the water this far south is surprisingly cool – my husband and I join master diver Maddy and roll over the side of the Zodiac into a vastly different world. Just ten metres under, we discover a thick forest of blue-tipped staghorn coral with tiny iridescent fish darting amongst the branches. Silently we drift along, occasionally seeing the antennae of rock crab waving from crevices in the reef.

That evening we retire to the lounge to watch the terrifying but true docudrama *The Batavia: Wreck, Mutiny*

Facing page (from top): Coral Expeditions' unique Xplorer tenders allow guests to board directly from the ship's main deck before being lowered into the water.

Dining room. Stateroom.

Views from the deck. Facing page (from top):

Snorkelling in Shark Bay.

Easy access with the Xplorer tenders.

Western rock lobster at Post Office Island.

and Murder. In 1629, the Dutch flagship Batavia ran aground enroute to the Dutch West Indies. *National Geographic* has called it 'the world's worst shipwreck' and it happened right here.

Most of the 300-odd people survived but a few of the crew turned mutinous, raping and murdering more than 100 men, women and children over five months. Those crew were later executed, except for two. They were banished to the mainland, becoming the first European residents of Australia.

The next day we explore Beacon Island, also known as the Island of Angry Ghosts, where much of the tragedy unfolded. Today, it's a peaceful spot, with sea lions sunning themselves and sea birds resting.

A new morning brings a new destination – this time Shark Bay on the mainland, where we walk the red cliffs of Francois Peron National Park, watching for dugongs in the water below. One of the world's largest populations of these sea cows live here, about 11,000.

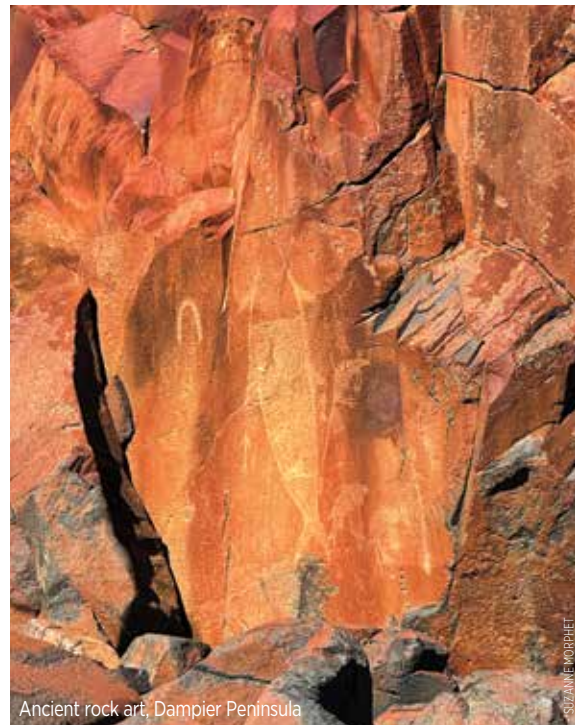
Shark Bay is also where another Dutch ship floundered in 1712 on its way to the East Indies. The crew of *Zuytdorp* was never seen again.

Back onboard, we learn from guest lecturer and author Howard Gray that Australia was once called New Holland, even though the Dutch really had no interest in the continent. There were "no towns or cities or mines or anything of value to trade with," he explains. "The ships were told to just get to Indonesia as quickly as they could, you know, don't bother mucking around on the West coast."

We, on the other hand, are happy to muck around. We go ashore at remote beaches strewn with sea shells and not another person in sight. We snorkel with manta rays and turtles, and dive in coral gardens that are so exquisite they could have been designed by a professional gardener. One evening, under a full moon, we watch dolphins and sharks hunt for small creatures in the light of our ship.



Cape Leveque, Dampier Peninsula



Ancient rock art, Dampier Peninsula



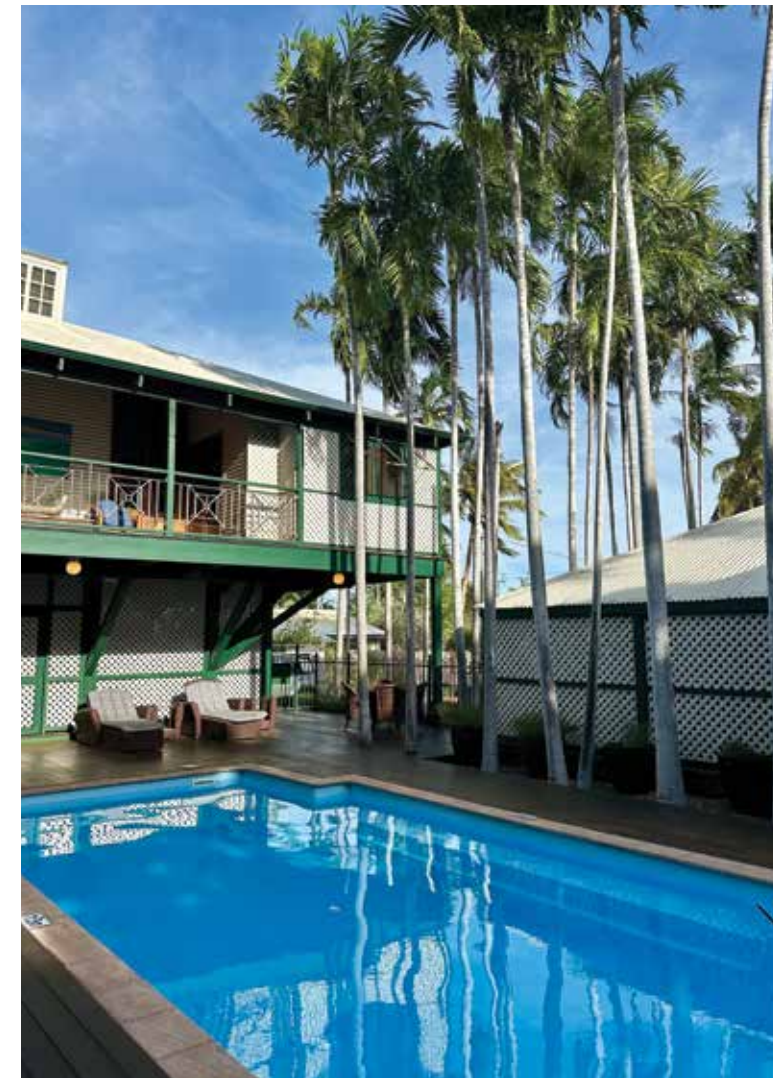
Whale shark

In Exmouth, once a busy US Navy communications station, the local economy now depends on tourists like us who come to snorkel the UNESCO-designated Ningaloo Reef, one of the longest fringing reefs in the world. Whale sharks congregate here by the hundreds from April through September. The reef is pristine, but we can see oil rigs in the distance and can't help pondering its future on this cyclone-prone coast.

When we reach the Montebello Islands, we go ashore on Trimouille, but cautiously. A sign warns people not to stay more than one hour and not to pick up anything due to elevated radiation levels. The British exploded three atomic bombs here in the 1950s, the last one six times larger than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

Our last stop, on the Dampier Peninsula, gives us a glimpse of Western Australia's rich aboriginal history. Members of the Murujuga Rangers take us to see rock art thought to be 20,000 to 30,000 years old. Their ancestors chose rock that's resistant to erosion, explains one ranger as we admire the still-vivid outlines of fish and kangaroos.

When we pull into Broome, once considered the pearling capital of the world, we're sad our cruise is over. But we've made new friends, precious memories and have new insight into a coast of Australia that's delightfully cruise-worthy. ■



MOST HOTEL ROOMS these days have bathrooms with two sinks, but have you ever stayed in one that has two toilets? That was one of the delightful surprises when we checked into Pinctada McAlpine House in Broome, Western Australia.

Surrounded by flowering frangipani trees and tall palms waving in the breeze, the boutique property is a throwback to another era, when Broome was the Pearl Capital of the world.

Built in the early 20th century for a Pearl Master, there are just eight rooms, each with its own style and private outdoor space.

We're staying in the McAlpine Suite, named for Alistair McAlpine, a British Lord who bought the property in 1982 and built additional rooms while preserving the architectural style of the day.

Historically, buildings were constructed with corrugated iron because it was inexpensive and easily assembled. Large, latticed verandas were added to block the tropical sun and provide privacy.

The McAlpine Suite not only has 'his and her' toilets and sinks, but also his original clawfoot bathtub and a four-poster bed dressed in crisp linen sheets.

Walking barefoot to breakfast, we pass the swimming pool with chaise lounges at each end, pause in the lush garden to admire a magnificent old mango tree and listen for parrots calling from the aviary.

In the dining room, we're greeted by Ronaldo, the ebullient manager, who makes breakfast from scratch, according to our liking and what's available in the market.

The Pinctada McAlpine House

Stay in the former home of a Master Pearler



We learn that the owner of Pinctada McAlpine House – Marilynne Paspaley – is from the most prominent local pearling family. The Paspaley's have been in the business since the 1930s and today sell pearls all over the world.

"She fell in love with the place when they were having a Master Pearl's dinner in the garden," Ronaldo tells us and we can see why. This private, gated sanctuary lets you escape from both the heat of the day and the cares of the world. — SUZANNE MORPHET