



The Kimberley in north-west Western Australia has it all: pristine landscapes, rich biodiversity and ancient heritage.

# KIMBERLEY CRUISING

**ALIX CLARK DISCOVERS THAT THE KIMBERLEY'S ANCIENT LANDSCAPES AND STARRY SKIES ARE BEST WITNESSED FROM A LUXURY CATAMARAN.**

As far as an impressive start to a holiday goes, it doesn't get much better than the sheer rock-star style of a 20-minute helicopter transfer to a luxury cruiser moored in pristine waters off the coast of a vast tract of ancient wilderness.

My rock-star insouciance is somewhat marred, however, by the "Eek!" I gasp when the chopper pilot kindly points out that the three logs with legs lazing near our boat are, in fact, crocodiles, and they're considerably larger than I am. I clutch my crocodile-skin travel wallet a little tighter and reconsider my plans for a dip before lunch.

Welcome to the Kimberley in north-west Western Australia. I board the MV *Great Escape*, a 26-metre catamaran motor cruiser that will be my home away from home for the next week,

ready for a journey that will see us winding our way from our starting point on the Hunter River (a two-hour flight from Broome) along the picturesque rivers and bays of the Kimberley coast and, finally, back to Broome.

Though this week-long cruise is an opportunity to relax and rejuvenate, there's also a chance for action and adventure every day if you want it. Best of all, you can participate at a level that suits you.

After I check that all the crocs are still safely lazing in the water, I snack on freshly baked quiche prepared by our onboard chef as the stewardess shows me around this informally luxurious boat. The vessel and its five crew cater for just 14 guests at a time and all the cabins are fitted with queen-sized or twin beds, air-conditioning, TV/DVD, an ensuite and a bar fridge. ▶

My cabin has large portholes that give me a perfect view of the horizon, but I pause for just long enough to put on the swimming costume that will be my uniform for the next week before I head back up to the deck.

Soon enough we're joined by the remaining passengers. Introductions are made, cold drinks are opened and, by the time we raise anchor, the first barramundi of the trip has already been caught.

### IN THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT

The Kimberley is an ancient land spread over a huge area that is approximately three times the size of England. More than two billion years old, the rock formations in this remote

today. Truly comprehending and absorbing that thought is enough to take my mind off the crocodiles in the water – for a moment or two, at least.

Despite the initial impression that it is a desperately empty land, the Kimberley, I soon realise, is like the Discovery Channel come to life.

### INTO THE WILD

While the landscape speaks for itself, *MV Great Escape's* skipper, 'Jezza' Tucker, adds invaluable information he has gleaned from living and working in the Kimberley for 26 years. He leads the expeditions for The Great Escape Charter Company, including shore-based excursions to view ancient rock art, and is the first one up to do a 'bombie'

“It's hotter than 30°C at 6.30am, but that doesn't stop us piling into the tenders to go fishing.”

locale are among the oldest on earth. It's thought that at least seven species of dinosaurs walked the Kimberley coast up to 120 million years ago.

Things went a little quiet after that, until around 30,000 years ago when indigenous Australians arrived in the Kimberley region from the Indonesian islands.

European settlement began in the 1860s, and in 1879 the region was named by Alexander Forrest (after John Wodehouse, the Earl of Kimberley and the British colonial secretary) who, along with the Durack family, established immense farming stations in the area, some of which are still in use.

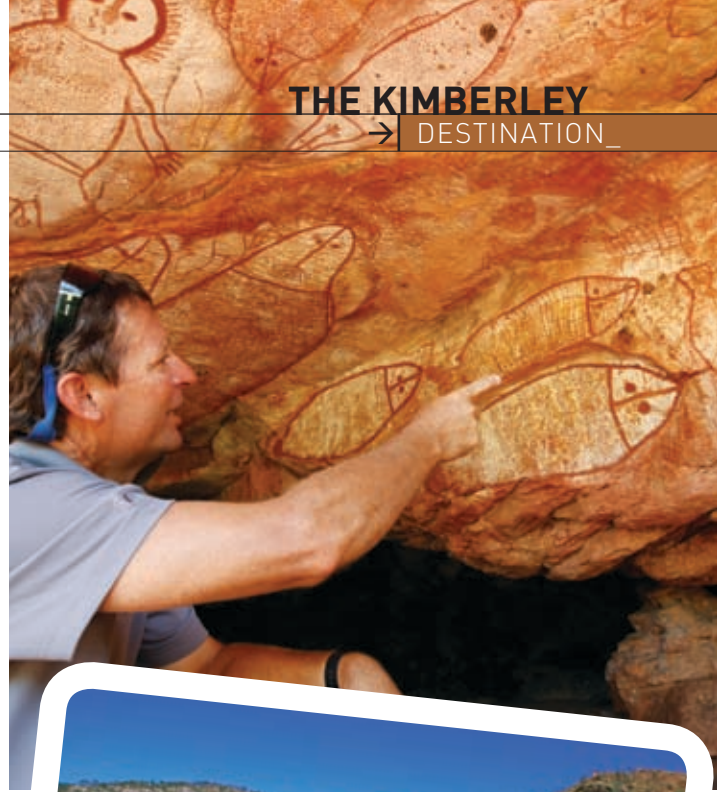
Taking in the vast vistas around us, it isn't difficult to imagine that the landscape those first human visitors to the Kimberley saw 30,000 years ago is almost identical to the landscape I'm seeing

whenever we come across a large natural pool or waterfall.

On a trip this intimate the crew becomes an inherent part of the experience, and Jezza and his team couldn't do more to make the week memorable for all the right reasons, whether providing delicious food at every opportunity, pointing out pods of whales as we cruise down the coast or ensuring that our chances of catching barramundi are many and varied.

One such experience begins on the morning of my second day aboard. It's hotter than 30°C at 6.30am, but that doesn't stop us piling into the three five-metre tenders and heading out to try our luck at fishing.

In the space of five minutes we spot a large croc within a few metres of our dinghy, we have a line with live bait taken by a shark and we catch a 76-centimetre barramundi. Extend that time ▶



From top: Discover ancient rock art; Take a guided tour on one of the catamaran's tenders; Marine life is abundant in the bays.





From top: the MV Great Escape is decked out in informal luxury; Disembark and explore terra firma; Take a dip in the freshwater pool at Melaleuca Falls.



frame to an hour and we spot an Irrawaddy dolphin and an osprey and catch four fingermark bream, which are delicious when we later eat them, grilled, with a light salad for lunch.

### RAISING ONE'S SIGHTS

While we do most of our sightseeing aboard the boat's tenders, the *MV Great Escape* is also equipped with an onboard helicopter and, when one has a chopper at one's disposal, it seems a little churlish not to make good use of it. There are chopper-based excursions leaving the boat on most days and onboard guests can choose which, if any, flights they would like to do for varying costs. I sign up for the full package and by the end of the week I'm comfortable

lying on the deck while we gently sway at anchor, I'm reminded how many stars are dimmed in the city sky by ambient light.

Early one evening, towards the end of the trip, we launch the tenders in a secluded bay near the pearl farms in Talbot Bay, 250 kilometres north-east of Broome. As darkness slowly falls we watch the stars come out, one by one, before we lose count and make our way back to the boat, guided only by the phosphorescence in the water.

While I remain a city girl at heart, the Kimberley draws a surprisingly visceral reaction from me daily. Given the isolation and relative inaccessibility of the region, I feel incredibly privileged to be among the few people to experience this truly

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in my flight headphones and I'm becoming an expert at spotting wildlife from the air.


During one chopper expedition we land at the spectacular and isolated Melaleuca Falls near the Prince Regent River, our rotor blades seemingly just inches from the dramatic red walls of the gorge. We all alight for a swim in a freshwater pool that is pure enough to drink.

Other typical excursions may include going out to sight crocs (of course), wild cattle, whales and ever-dramatic landscapes. I'm sure that large white shark is just playing kiss chasey with that smaller grey one, right?

### LOOK TO THE STARS

In the Kimberley the days are filled with blue skies and blazing sunshine while the nights are enveloped in inky blackness punctuated by a million stars. The Milky Way is visible and,

stunning place. This sense of wonder, which I feel over and over again during my week in the Kimberley, literally renders me speechless – and I'm rarely at a loss for words.

We disembark in Broome, each with our own sense of the Kimberley as well as a shared experience that is unlikely to be repeated. Often, I recall that experience when I'm gazing at the stars dimmed by the city lights, knowing they are shining brightly over that vast, ancient land in the north-west. 

**Getting there ::** The Great Escape Charter Company offers a range of four-, seven- and 13-night Kimberley cruises departing from Broome. Call +61 8 9193 5983 or visit [www.greatescape.net.au](http://www.greatescape.net.au). To book your Virgin Blue flight to Broome visit [www.virginblue.com.au](http://www.virginblue.com.au) or call 13 67 89 (in Australia) or 0800 67 00 00 (in New Zealand).