



AUSTRALIA'S BIG ADVENTURE

The Kimberley Coast is one of Western Australia's last truly wild, untamed places. Dan Avila gives in to its irresistible pull with a cruise (or two) aboard an expedition yacht made for sailing amid the region's stunning gorges and cascading waterfalls.

They say the world is getting flatter, or more accessible. Once-distant and exotic places and experiences have become more homogenised as they open to more visitors. It's inevitable, really. Infrastructure and services tame the once-wild lands. Even in Australia, arguably the wildest of all, pristine and hard-to-reach treasures can be found with warning signs and handrails. Yet there remains one part of the country that fights compliance and domestication. That is Western Australia's Kimberley Coast. It is unforgiving, completely remote and wild, yet so

seductive that once it gets under your skin, you'll be forever pining to return.

It's a love affair

My personal love affair with the Kimberley is inextricably linked to my time aboard a unique and special vessel, *MV Great Escape*. It was a few years ago that I spent a week aboard cruising the lower half of the Kimberley from the Mitchell Plateau to Broome. It remains indelibly etched on my mind. I flew off the Mitchell Plateau in a JetRanger helicopter, strapped into the front seat with the doors off.

Leaving the pindan-red land, we circled *Great Escape*, which was moored like a gleaming white beacon in the bright green waters of Porosus Creek, said to be home to the greatest density of estuarine crocodiles in Australia.

I recently spent another glorious two weeks on board, exploring the entire Kimberley Coast from Broome to Wyndham with a small group of 14 guests and a supremely talented crew. In the end, close friendships were forged, sharing the discoveries and experiences together as a small group of explorers.

Never-ending highlights

Great Escape was specifically designed to cruise these waters. A shallow-draught twin hull, she is completely stable and small enough to navigate far upstream to pristine locations that no large vessel can reach. And yet this catamaran is still large enough to be a floating holiday home for seven couples, replete with helicopter and three tenders in tow. The access afforded by this combination is a big part of The Great Escape Charter Company's success, clearly realised when standing on the bow of the vessel under the waterfalls of Kings Cascades on the Prince Regent River.

Every day is action packed and exciting, or not; it is completely up to the individual. Want to go for an early morning fish? Catch the sunrise for an epic photo? Fly out in the chopper to see rock art? Or just laze about the boat with a book and glass of bubbles? The answer is always 'yes'. With such a small group, everything is available for everyone.

Rock art and photography

Much of the ancient Wandjina art that guests experience - and the Gwion Gwion (Bradshaw) art that predates it - was discovered by the owners of *Great Escape*. These pristine sites are some of the oldest in the world and are completely inspiring. For any keen

photographers, Captain Dan Barrett-Lennard is always on the lookout for the best opportunities and light. One dedicated photographic excursion includes an early-morning jaunt in the chopper to the top of the cliffs above Raft Point for a sunrise photo. The sense of inspiration and awe as the Kimberly sun rises against your back to illuminate the landscape is overwhelming. Chasing this feeling is the reason I became a photographer and the crew cater for this beautifully, maximising the opportunities throughout the trip.

Disappearing worlds

After a quick stop in a sheltered bay, we set off to collect some enormous oysters from the rocky coast at low tide. As we motor off in the three tenders, a school of northern bluefin tuna begins leaping out of the water around us. I look back to Michael Tropiano, our decky and marine biologist, who shoots me a smile and says, "Feel like a cheeky troll, Dan?" I bag a single fish in an epic battle and we enjoy the world's freshest sushi, thanks to chef Mitchell Alomes' superb culinary skills.

Heading out from Raft Point through humpback whale breeding grounds, it doesn't take long to reach Montgomery Reef, one of Australia's relatively unknown natural wonders. At about 12 nautical miles off shore, Montgomery Reef covers 400 square kilometres, making it Australia's largest inshore reef. 'The Montys' are dominated by extreme tidal movement. As low tide accelerates, the reef appears to rise from the ocean like Atlantis reforming from the deep. As the waters recede, the ocean rushes from the surface of the reef resulting in deep channels, navigable by our vessel. The surrounding walls of reef are awash with thunderous cascades as the reef appears to rise before our eyes.

Cruising into the inner expanse is otherworldly, but it's only once back in the air high above the reef that the scale and artistry of this event can be

fully appreciated. At high altitude, the reef looks like a painting. The marine life is abundant with hundreds of turtles in reef holes, crocs cruising the shallows, sharks on the hunt, while water birds feast on stranded eels.

In proximity of The Montys, far from shore, a sand spit reveals itself quickly at low tide, providing an opportunity for a bonfire and dinner on a new, fresh sand island, under the impossibly bright Milky Way. As the tide rises, we leave the island before it is swallowed by the ocean, washing away any trace of our visit.

Travelling on board *Great Escape* has changed the way I look at travel and luxury. It's less about ostentatious exorbitance. It's more about understated craftsmanship, exclusive access and 'money can't buy' experiences. This does not feel like any other cruise product. It feels like a private trip, with a group of friends. It's wonderfully indulgent, yet totally relaxed and constantly inspiring. ♦

Travel file

Experience

greatescapecruises.com.au
The Kimberley Coast voyages are accessed via Broome and Wyndham.



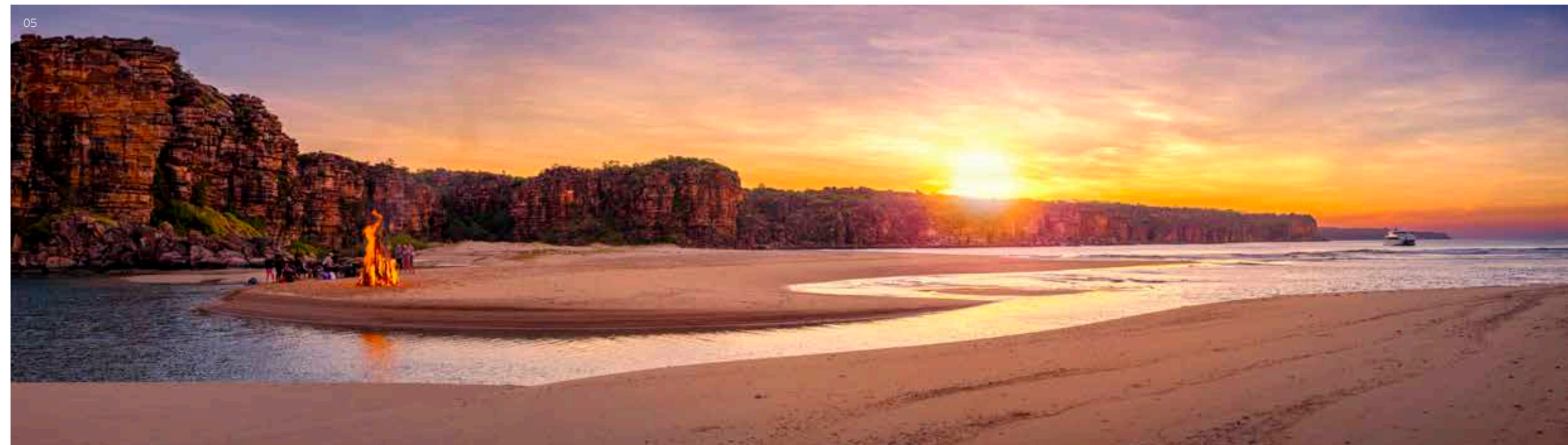
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01 The mighty King George Falls at sunset is a spectacular sight from the surrounding cliffs, and from the bow of *Great Escape* when positioned directly under the thunderous cascade 02 Daniel 'Doc' O'Connor guiding guests through the Wandjina art at Raft Point 03 Cruising deep within the reef alleys inside Montgomery Reef at sunset 04 Three tenders and a helicopter take guests to hidden and otherwise inaccessible locations 05 Sunset bonfire and canapés on another perfect Kimberley beach. All images © Dan Avila