



Frontier Land

One of the last true wilderness areas in the world, Australia's vast Kimberley region remains little more than a concept to most. Paradoxically beautiful, yet dangerous in the extreme, exploring this remote area requires considerable expertise and local knowledge – but modern day explorers need not suffer the hardships of the original pioneers in this ancient land.

Story James McRory

Flying over The Kimberley is the only way to get any real grasp of its size. Even from a lofty perspective, coming to terms with the area is no small task, given that there's nothing you can use to introduce a sense of scale. Stretching out as far as the eye can see is an endless expanse of undulating dull green with burnt red trim, crisscrossed by river systems that carve their way through deep, ancient gorges too small to appreciate from the air, but are towering and humbling once you get back to terra firma.

Nary a man made structure or road is visible – because there aren't any. This is remote in the true sense of the word, unspoiled and unchanged for thousands of years. The vistas would have James Joyce agonising over how best to frame them in words and the pristine waters yield such a bounty of enormous fish to even the most hapless angler that even a modest catch sounds like an out and out lie.

Conversely, this paradise can be as dangerous as hell, and not one to go wandering in alone. To truly experience and appreciate the outer reaches, the waterfalls and the ancient places, in-depth local knowledge and specialist know how is a must, and that is how *True North* has



built its reputation as the ultimate in Kimberley travel.

A luxury, five-star vessel, *True North* is the flagship of North Star Cruises, an enterprise started by Craig Howson just over 25 years ago, looking to showcase the spectacular, but remote regions of the Western Australian coast and the rugged Kimberley region.

Although North Star Cruises has expanded over the years to include itineraries right around Australia and up into the more remote waters off Papua New Guinea, The Kimberley remains the signature destination, and it is here that the *True North* absolutely shines. At 50 metres in length she's big enough to offer all of the comfort and accommodation befitting a luxury vessel, but drawing just 2.2 metres (needing just one metre of water beneath to operate), she is perfectly placed to negotiate the often treacherous passages of The Kimberley with its extraordinary tides that can vary as much as 12 metres.


With just 18 cabins spread over three decks, maximum occupancy is 36 passengers, and with some 20 crew – two of whom are gourmet chefs – service is exemplary, but with a subtle, laid back approach.

There are no shoes allowed on board which helps

the relaxed feel from the start, and nothing is ever too much trouble, whether you are after a cocktail to accompany a sublime sunset at day's end, or need a hand into your life vest ahead of a trip on the ship's helicopter.

Relaxed it may be, but it is also all about the experiences, and they come thick and fast for those looking to take it all in. Within an hour of joining *True North* by chopper in the middle of The Hunter River, we were in one of her six, 20 foot aluminium tenders, dropping mud crab pots amidst the mangroves in the almost unreal turquoise water. Here, a first sighting of saltwater crocs, surfacing silently near the tender as if on cue, gave the initial impression of being clever animatronics – but these are the real thing, and nothing is allowed to protrude over the side of the tenders for good reason. Likewise on board *True North* the transom (lower back deck) is off limits except when boarding or alighting from the tenders in case opportunistic locals are loitering just below the surface of the water.

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An aerial photograph of a large white expedition ship docked at a rocky shore. The ship is viewed from an elevated angle, showing its deck with various equipment and a yellow circular marking. The water is a deep green color. In the background, a large waterfall cascades down a steep, reddish-brown rock face. A smaller boat is visible in the water near the shore.

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How you spend your time during the trip is very much up to the individual, but just try relaxing in your cabin or the lounge with a book when there is always something else on offer. *True North* has transformed the fortunes of novice fishermen and surpassed the expectation of seasoned anglers looking for ‘the big one’. Fingermark Bream, Mangrove Jack and of course Barra abound in these waters, and the excitement of reeling in a good sized catch is only matched later, when said catch is beautifully prepared by the chefs for the table.

For some, just viewing the natural wonder of the area is more enticing than catching it, setting out with the aptly named ‘Expert’ to discover the regions unspoiled flora and fauna, stopping along the way to visit ancient indigenous sites and historical milestones of early explorers.

There is a sense of wonder going ashore to gaze at the carved inscriptions on the ancient Boab tree at Careening Bay, where in 1820, early explorer Phillip Parker King stopped to careen (clean and repair the hull) his boat *HMC Mermaid*. It was during this stopover that his botanist, Allan Cunningham found and recorded a wealth of new species of plants and animals that had never before been seen by Europeans exploring the vast area. Happily, precious little has changed since their visit – but I’ll take our floating accommodation over theirs in a heartbeat.

As the crew of *HMC Mermaid* no doubt learned the hard way, a cooling swim is not an option in these parts, but there are in fact plenty of opportunities to plunge into the cooling waters of The Kimberley along the way. Standing under the thundering Kings Cascade Falls (named for the aforementioned explorer) is an extraordinary experience, as much for Captain Chad Avenell’s skill at maneuvering the bow of *True North* under the cascading water as it is for the unique outdoor shower.

A steep climb up along the side of the falls gives way to a veritable oasis in the form of a stunning, fresh water pool where swimming is perfectly safe. Salt water crocs may have survived and evolved over millions of years, but





they still haven't learned to climb.


A special heli-picnic day (one of many helicopter trips offered) also yields the opportunity to dive into remote, freshwater swimming holes, complete with their own waterfalls, while a gourmet bar-b-que is prepared by the ship's chefs nearby. Again, safely choppered up river and 'up water fall' from the nearest large carnivorous reptile, it is a rare luxury indeed to swim in these pristine waterways hundreds of miles from 'civilisation'.

This is an extraordinary part of the world, experienced on board an extraordinary vessel. From the sublime beauty of The Hunter River, to the enigma of Montgomery Reef – a vast reef formation seemingly rising out of the sea each time the tide drops away – there is nothing like this anywhere in the world. Or the pure adrenalin of battling the Horizontal Falls first hand, where the tidal change of 12 metres through two narrow gorges has the effect of horizontal waterfalls.

Although this is essentially a cruise, the term really doesn't do the experience justice. This is the sort of trip that brings the romance back into travel – not in a *Love Boat* type of way you understand, but rather by injecting real adventure into the trip. This is luxury travel that opens up a world of opportunities over and above kicking back with a good book or drinking in the spectacular landscape.

The scenery, service and surroundings would be reason enough in themselves – but the experiences along the way will stay with you for a lifetime. And the fishing... //

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