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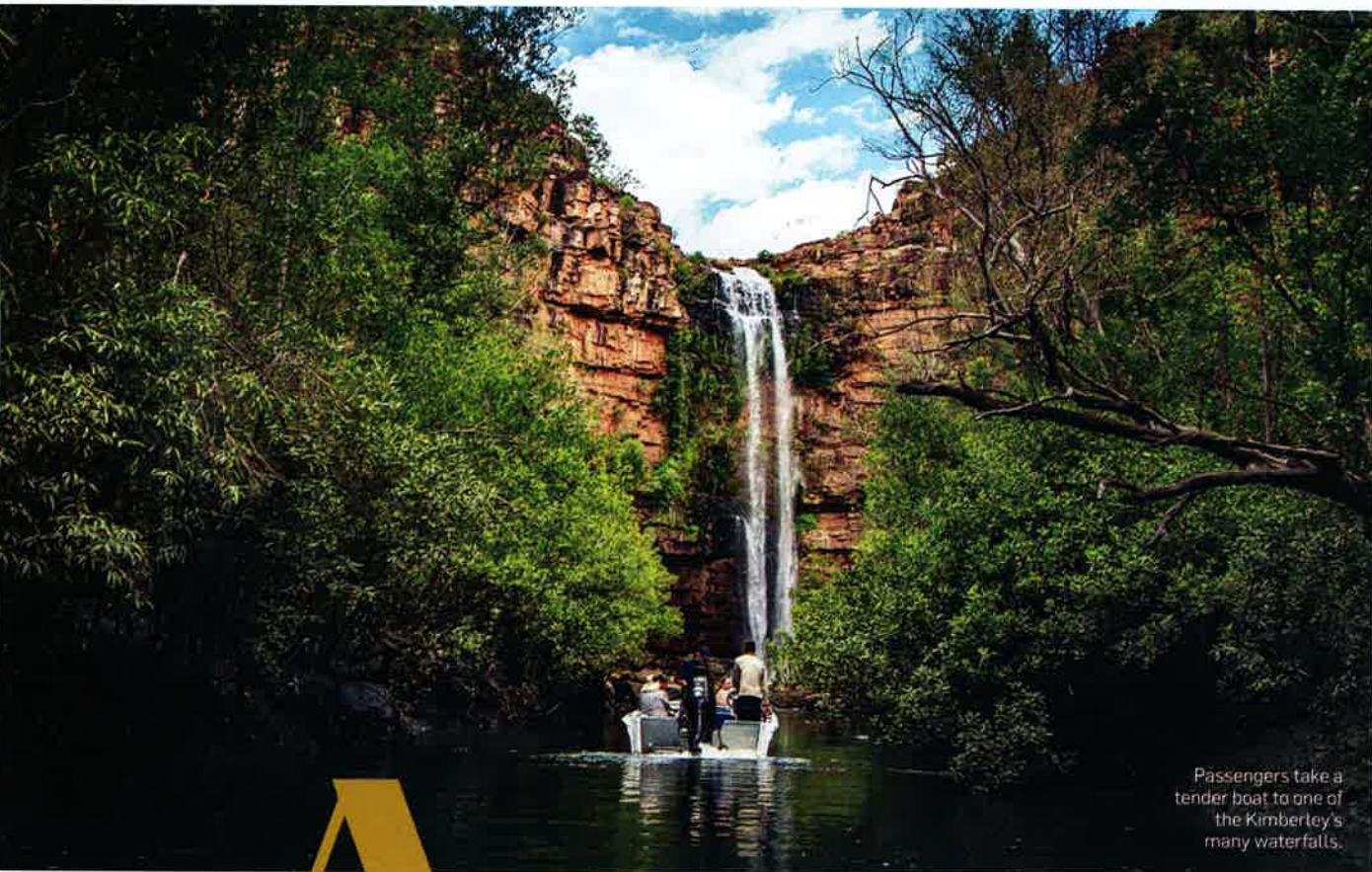
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WILD AT HEART

Australia's Kimberley Coast is an isolated region of dramatic waterfalls, tides, and cliffs—all best experienced by ship. **Ian McGuire** discovers one of the world's final frontiers.



Passengers take a tender boat to one of the Kimberley's many waterfalls.

As our helicopter flew low over brown bush cut by dried gullies and speckled with eucalyptus, I asked the pilot, Rob Colbert, if, in all the years he had been flying over the Kimberley, he had ever seen anyone on the ground. He shook his head: Never. I wasn't surprised. The land flashing below us looked raw and untouched, magnificently empty. A few minutes later, we landed

near a sand-colored rock formation, which was different from the hundred we had passed. Rob led us forward, and as the path climbed, he directed our gaze to a long, flat overhang, something like a shallow cave with a broad extended roof. There they were: Aboriginal rock paintings depicting the *wandjinas*—mythical, ghostlike beings with white mouthless faces and large staring eyes—that had been executed perhaps 4,000 years ago, but were as bright and striking as if they had

been made only last week. They were breathtaking in their boldness and power. Suddenly this landscape, which had seemed fiercely beautiful but also strangely inhuman, felt different to me, and much richer. The Kimberley was not empty or uninhabitable, I realized, but rather haunted by the presence of an ancient people, the original Australians who had for thousands of years found a way to flourish.

At 164,000 square miles, the Kimberley is about the size of California, but with a population of less than 40,000 and only a handful of paved roads. Even in a country like Australia, which has more than its share of vast empty spaces, the →



The *True North* stops at King Cascades.

region is considered to be a true wilderness and a place set apart. One of the best ways to see it is by cruise ship, since much of the terrain along the coast remains inaccessible by car. My helicopter adventure was actually an excursion organized by the *True North*, the sole vessel of the Australian-owned North Star Cruises. This 36-passenger expedition ship sails regularly between Broome and Wyndham, with cruisers leaving the comforts of their plush cabins to explore the shore on tenders or via helicopter. The experience on board rivaled a five-star hotel, and passengers (mostly couples) could be found sipping martinis in the lounge or feasting on miso-glazed salmon and soba noodles paired with fine wines at dinner. The energy of the all-Australian crew was infectious. The *True North* has been cruising the Kimberley Coast for more than a decade, and I quickly realized I was in the hands of experts who understood this landscape intimately.

Passengers could do as much or little as they wished, but most, like me, were inspired to try everything. On some days, our group took tenders through shallow, silt-gray channels past dense mangroves and towering escarpments. With the help of our guide, Andy Lewis, a naturalist, we spotted crocodiles and turtles, azure kingfishers and white-bellied sea eagles. We saw the huge and magnificent Montgomery Reef emerge out of the sea at low tide like a legendary lost city and then, when the tide turned, disappear again beneath the waves. Back on dry land, we clambered up scree slopes thick with eucalyptus and past silvery baobab trees and bushes of delicate Kimberley heather. In the north of England, where I live, most of my swimming takes place in indoor pools or in the cold waters of the North Sea. So it was a rare pleasure to hike, on multiple occasions, to midnight-blue swimming holes fed by waterfalls and surrounded by cliffs of dark rock. The more adventurous among us searched out high ledges to jump from, but I took it easy and floated on my back, looking up at the ragged circle of cloudless blue sky, letting all my cares drift away.

Not every day was so peaceful. I hadn't held a fishing →

Make Your Trip More Eco-Friendly

Though newer ships are being designed with fuel efficiency in mind, they're still not 100 percent emission-free. Consider buying carbon offsets or supporting sustainable-development and renewable-energy projects. TerraPass sells offsets for flights, and myclimate.org has a program for cruisers to donate to nonprofits.

EXPEDITION-CRUISE GLOSSARY

ZODIAC



A motorized inflatable boat used both as a tender and a touring vessel. Zodiacs don't require a pier to dock, allowing cruisers to land in undeveloped destinations. In the Galápagos, they are often called *pangas*.

WET LANDING



When passengers aren't able to step directly from their Zodiac onto terra firma (what's known as a dry landing), they may need to disembark in shallow water that's usually ankle or knee deep.

SURVIVAL SUIT



Also called an immersion suit, this full-body flotation device keeps the wearer dry and protects him or her from hypothermia. In colder climates, they may be worn during kayaking trips or on Zodiac excursions.

ICE-CLASS CRUISE SHIPS



Vessels with strengthened hulls designed to operate in varying amounts of sea ice. They range from ships that can navigate Arctic waters year-round to others that can sail only in lighter ice conditions.

ICEBREAKER



This heavy vessel, with a hull designed to slice through sea ice, is often used to keep shipping routes open in the polar regions. A select few offer trips for tourists to destinations that others can't reach—like the North Pole. —*Yolanda Craus*

rod in years, but after listening to some of the tall tales coming back from the daily fishing trips about the famous Australian barramundi, I felt I should give it a go. There were four of us cruisers on the tender that afternoon, and the other three seemed to know what they were doing. I was fortunate that our captain, Shaun Hutton, was a man of patience. It all sounded simple—drop the lure and hold on. It was a beautiful day, warm but not hot, a clear blue sky... what could be more relaxing? Then I got a bite, and things suddenly became very hectic. Before I knew what was happening, I was on my feet and the rod was bent nearly double in front of me. By the time the fish's silver flank flashed into view, I'd been through a grueling upper-body workout. When Shaun pulled the fish into the boat, he told me it was a queenfish, not a barramundi, but my delight was undimmed, and in the photographs (I made sure there were plenty of photographs) I look as gleeful as a child.

On the last afternoon, I spent an hour or so beachcombing in the suitably named Tranquil Bay. I found conch shells and intricately patterned fragments of white coral skeleton and walked over high dunes to a long saltwater lagoon. But it was the rocks, not the water, that caught my attention. They weren't yellow, umber, or orange this time, but pink, violet, and purple. Lying at the foot of a low cliff, lopsided, crammed with subtle inner stripes and swirls, they resembled a Zen garden raked and tended by the motions of the

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tide. As I bent down and traced the patterns of erosion on their surface, I noticed the ways they had been sharpened to a fine point or bored into by the actions of wind and water. I felt that this must be art, not nature—that the rocks were too well composed to be the result of mere chance.

Indeed, the landscape of the Kimberley was almost too beautiful to be believed. More than once, as I turned a corner and saw an entirely unexpected view, I was struck by the uncanny thought that what I was looking at must be man-made, that it was so perfect it had to be unnatural. Whenever this happened, I had to stand there, shake my head, and let the visual clichés drop away before I could see the landscape for what it was: not a copy, but an original, not something remembered or dreamed about, but something I had truly never encountered before. ■

northstarcruises.com.au; screen nights from \$9.825 per person, all-inclusive.