

ADVENTURE IN CANADA
A rookie in the Rockies

HOBART IN THE HOT SEAT
Tasmania's capital comes of age

HOTELS WITH HISTORY
From the Pierre to the Peninsula

QANTAS

THE AUSTRALIAN WAY

04
2013

GOOD
IN BEDS
An A to Z of
luxe Australian
sleepovers

NEW CULTURAL HUB

A date with DUBAI

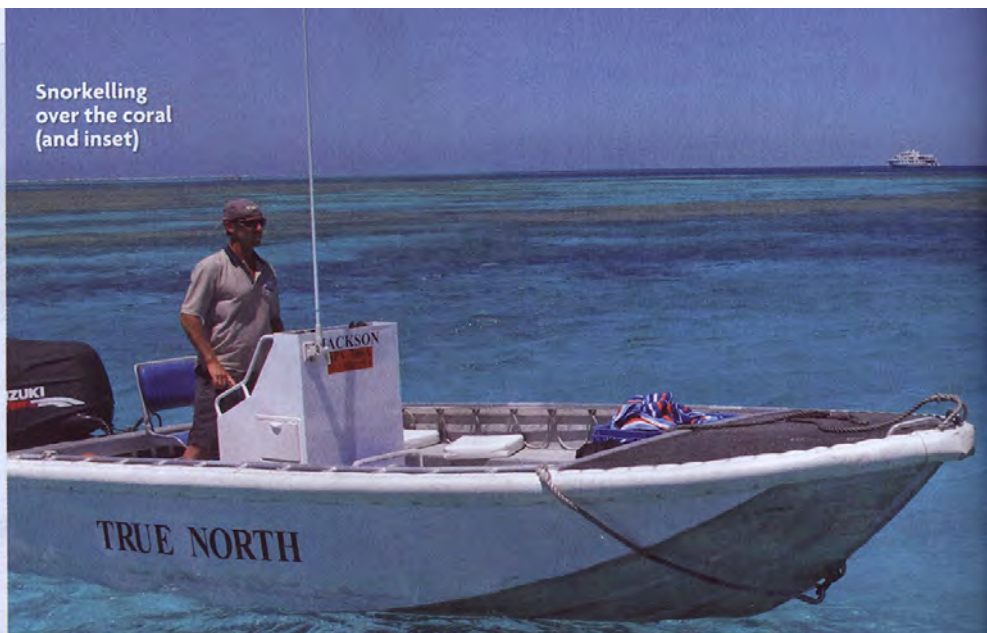
Celebrating a city
with connections

ONLINE: QANTAS.COM/TRAVELINSIDER



the
big

Snorkelling
over the coral
(and inset)



BLUE

Multihued fish and coral abound as **Amruta Slee** explores what lies beneath at Rowley Shoals off the WA coast.

Sometimes the best thing you can say about a place is that there is nothing there. That's the case with the Rowley Shoals, a triplet of coral atolls lying about 300km off the coast of Broome. If the tide is high, the reef shoals are invisible, just beneath the turquoise ocean. There are often no boats in the vicinity in this remote location, no signs of human life... nothing.

Out here, the real action is underwater. With a reputation for being one of the best snorkelling, fishing and diving spots in Australia, the shoals, part of a vast marine park, host only 200 people a year

during the short season between September and November when the sea and wind is calm, before the cyclone season hits. The water is warm and clean, the fish population healthy and it doesn't hurt that the 12-hour overnight journey out has been conducted aboard a floating five-star hotel, *True North*. Fifty-metres in length, accommodating 36 passengers and almost as many crew, *True North* is large enough for comfort and small enough to reassure passengers who would normally run a mile from the words "cruise ship".

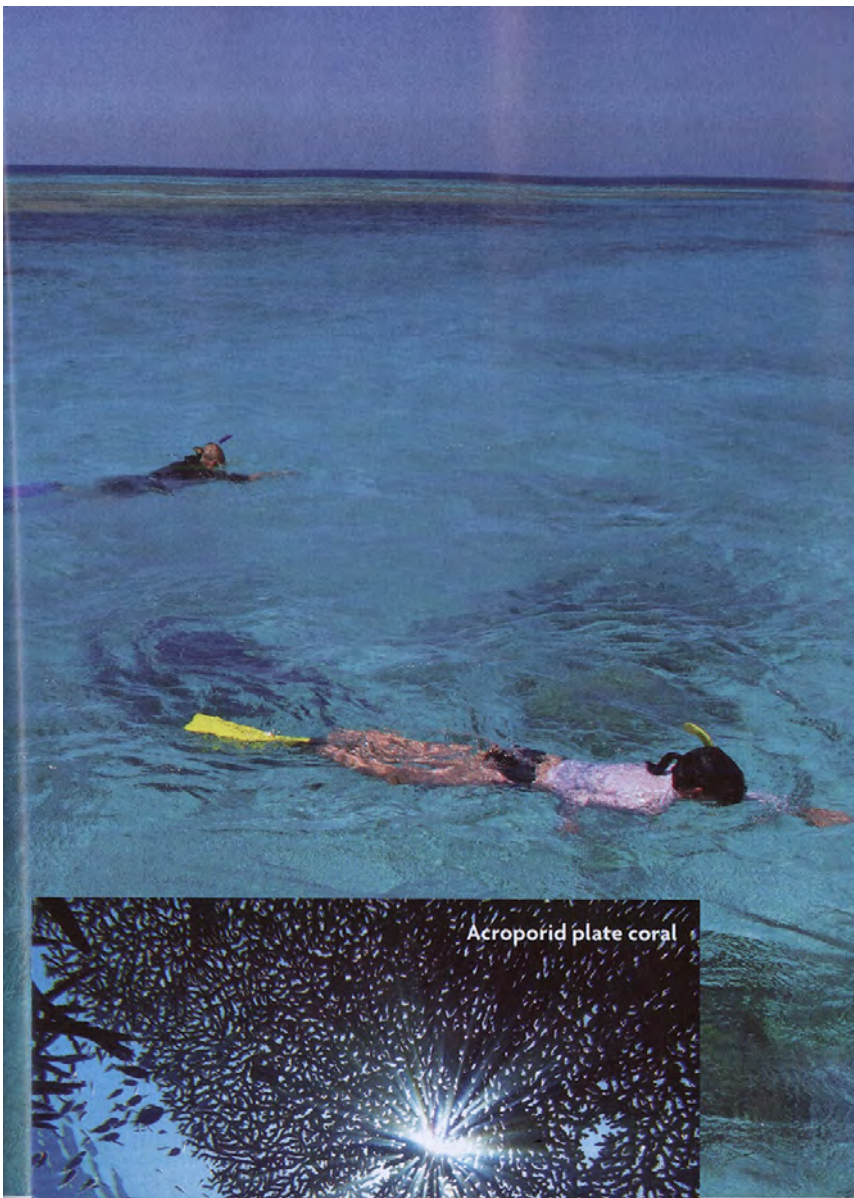
For four days and six nights it will be home, anchored off a

reef as passengers leave on "tinnies" to various designated activity spots, returning to base when it's time for lunch, dinner or a nap.

On offer is a civilised mix of adventure (reef sharks), ecology (onboard marine biologist Andy Lewis can name species in Latin or English), glamour (Jagger-ex Jerry Hall did take one of the cruises) and an away-from-it-all atmosphere (no phone coverage, no TV). Not too *Robinson Crusoe*, of course – on board are such essentials as a well-stocked bar and sunny spots to relax.

This is the new face of cruising, although in *True*

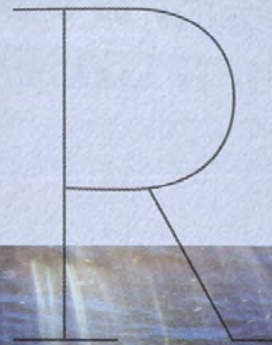
North's case, the evolution has taken 25 years. In 1987, founding director Craig Howson took six guests and two crew members on a converted crayfish boat for a tour through some of the isolated spots he'd seen while fishing around the WA coast. It was enough of a success for him to turn it into a business and, over time, to start adding extras – a helicopter for trips to inaccessible spots, longer itineraries that eventually included circumnavigating Australia and, recently, trips to more unusual destinations in the Indo-Pacific such as Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and West Papua.



Acroporid plate coral



Ornate butterfly fish and lemon damsel fish



Dolphins out of the blue

The current *True North* is customised for navigating the shallow Kimberley waters for the company's signature cruise and with it Howson and his partners have positioned themselves as unashamedly top-shelf, with plenty of crew to attend to guest's needs and a spotless ship.

But this ship in the middle of the sea is carrying salt-encrusted people in swimmers and snorkels - so the term "barefoot luxury" takes on a real resonance. There are no shoes permitted on board and evening wear, while in the smart-casual range, tilts heavily towards the "casual" end of the spectrum.

THE CORAL Atoll

Cruise to the Rowleys is four days of water-based adventure and its passengers have come prepared. There is a smorgasbord of gear and experience on display, from the full wetsuits with feet and head coverings to swimsuits and a leaking mask. There are *hijab*-like sunhats and astonishingly compact and capable underwater movie cameras. There are veteran divers who have found wrecks and wrestled with great whites, snorkellers who have been in the water only once before, and a pair of very young twins experimenting with throwing their luggage overboard. At times the deck resembles an audition for *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. >



True North cruising the Rowley Shoals (left); cabin (below); snorkel style (bottom)

ROWLEY SHOALS BROOME

A HIVE OF 3-D ACTIVITY, THE REEF IS A MASSIVE TRUFFLE OF CORALS, CLAMS AND ANEMONES

Very quickly, it also becomes clear that there is enough going on in the water to keep people entertained. The two marine reserves, Rowley Shoals Marine Park and its neighbour, Mermaid Reef Marine National Nature Reserve, are big enough to offer a different dive and snorkel outing every day. They are crowded with sufficient life (233 species of coral, 688 species of fish) to make each venture feel fresh. Below its flat, calm surface is a hive of multihued 3-D activity. The reef itself, a massive truffle of corals, clams and anemones, creates a playground of channels, caves, bommies and sheer walls dropping away to midnight depths.

In case all that gets boring, the crew have dreamed up

different types of snorkelling. On one day there's an early morning expedition designed to see fish as they wake and start to hunt for food; to glimpse the reef in the dappled light of the sun's first rays. On another, the instructors, satisfied that no-one is in danger of drowning, set up for "drift snorkelling". This will be a free-form, rapid ride down one of the channels where the current runs at up to three or four knots.

IT SOUNDS fun, but it involves just enough peril to change our mild-mannered guide, Andy Lewis, into a military commander. Lewis tells us we should approach this snorkel as if we were Navy SEALs. He tells us as the tinnie approaches the drop-off point he will give us *one minute's* notice, during which we should have all our gear on – and then a signal for everyone to leap in *together* in one fluid motion. In the channel,

the tinnie won't be able to reach us, so we should *stay out of trouble*. Don't bump into the coral walls. Be mindful that at the end the current could wash us right or left, but *don't panic*; if we float off, a tinnie will come out to grab us. Ready?

"Sure you have the right group?" I ask as our motley crew struggles with flippers. "Once we have you terrified, you'll listen," he replies.

In the channel, caught by the current, the whole group is pulled past surprised schools of fish, washed by the jagged walls (behind me a woman yells, "Watch the coral!" as her son somersaults by) and spat out the other end, bumping into each other; more exhilarated dugong than SEAL.

Fishing and diving yield their adventures; night dives, deep-sea catches, undersea death battles between fish and

predator, a whale sighting. When someone hooks a shark, the instructor must lean into its mouth to disengage the lure. Yesterday's warehouse becomes today's seared fish with mango and crab salad lunch. Today's tuna becomes sashimi. Passengers exchange tall tales of what got away, passing around photos of oddities they have seen.

At dusk on the final day, we have farewell drinks on Bedwell Island, a small stretch of white sand. Sitting on the cay, watching the sun go down while the sea and sky deepen from pastels to primaries to inky black, our presence fades with the going of the light, leaving nothing behind. The world is just as it should be.

✦ For more information about cruising Rowley Shoals visit www.northstarcruises.com.au

