signature

LUXURY TRAVEL & LIFESTYLE

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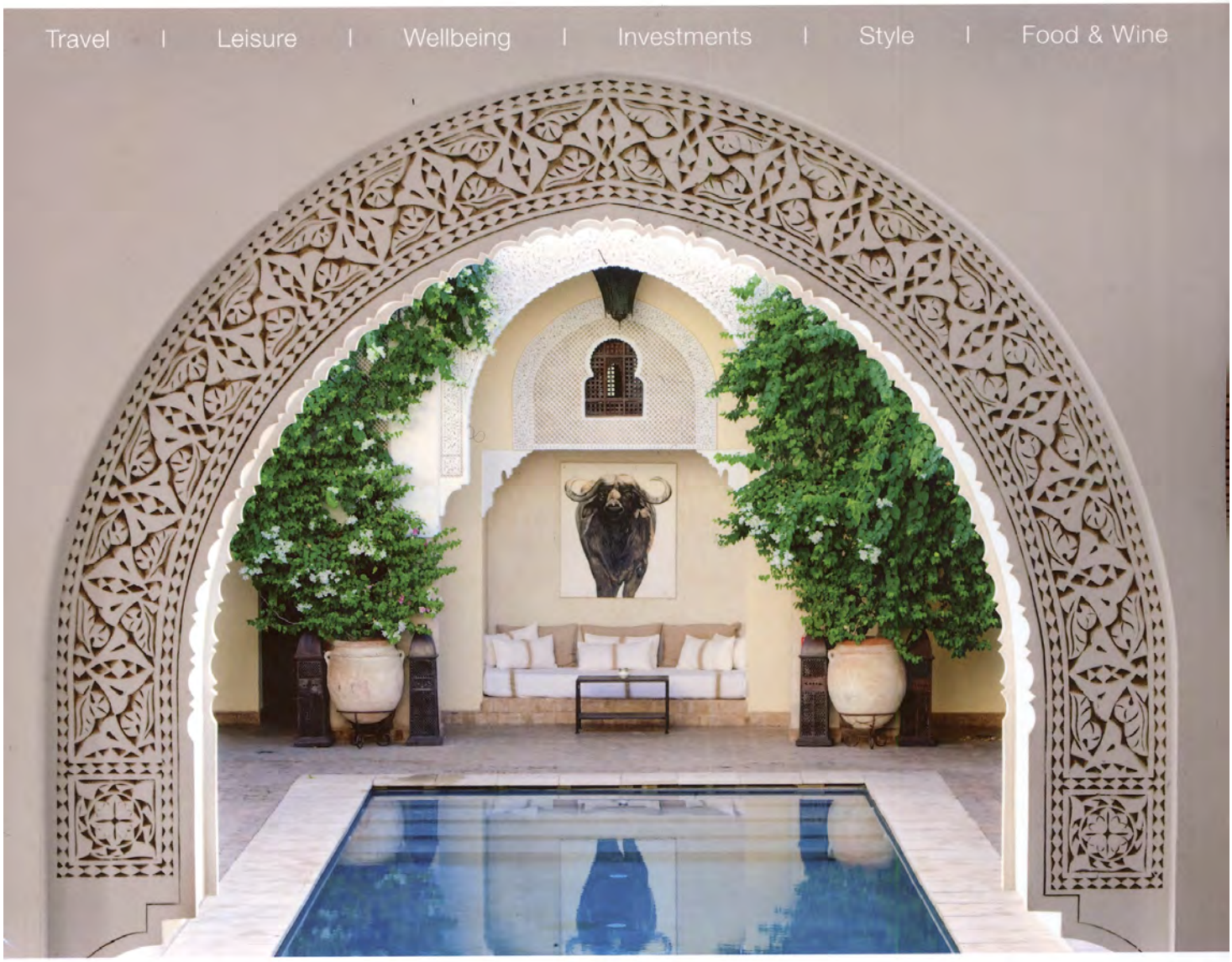

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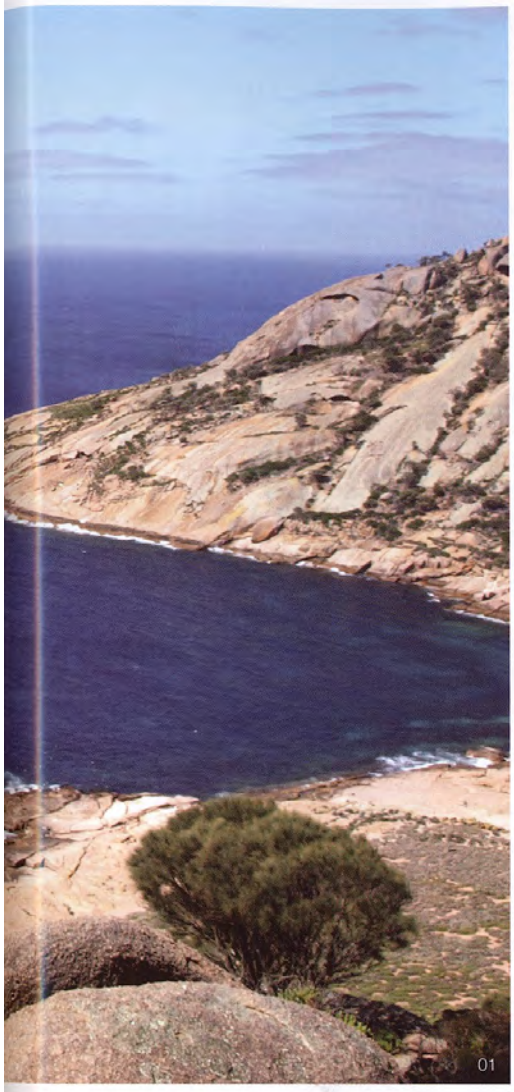
Great Southern Land

A seafood safari across the Great Australian Bight gives Sue Wallace the chance to get cosy with creatures both fearsome and beautiful amid some of the most stunning scenery in the country.


01

02

Plump juicy oysters topped with fine slivers of bacon languishing in a tasty tomato-based sauce and blue mud crabs served with a sharp wasabi dip seduce us as we watch the blood red sunset streak across South Australia's Coffin Bay.

It's drinks time aboard the sleek True North, an adventure boat that oozes laidback luxury and caters for 36 passengers along with 20 crew aiming to ensure this is the cruise of a lifetime.

With a glass of chilled French bubbles in one hand and seafood treats in the other, the blue waters lapping the boat serenade us in rhythmic waves.

One thing is for sure, the seafood couldn't be any fresher. The Pacific oysters were plucked from Coffin Bay's pristine waters this afternoon and freshly shucked by the crew.

I can also vouch for the mud crabs. They are the bounty from our morning's mud-crabbing expedition, all part of the activities on an eight-night South Australian adventure cruise across the Great Australian Bight.

Following drinks, we head to the downstairs dining room – its large, panoramic windows ensure you don't miss anything – and await the culinary creations of star chef Andy Tonge, who worked with Shannon Bennett at Melbourne's much coveted Vue de Monde.

From the small kitchen, the affable chef produces an ongoing stream of gourmet dishes and tonight's offerings of seared King Snapper with Avocado Tian and Clam Beurre Blanc and a decadent finale of dark chocolate fondant, berry sorbet and vanilla anglaise, have everyone praising his efforts.

Talk is of today's activities. Some

03

passengers have been fishing, while others have spent a few hours beachcombing, island hopping or lazing horizontally with a good book.

That's the great thing about True North – you can be as busy or as laidback as you like. There is one stipulation, however. As soon as you board you are asked to kick off your shoes. This is a barefoot-only zone that quickly puts everyone in holiday mode.

Although the True North, part of North Star Cruises Australia, is best known for its iconic Kimberley cruises, it also sails in other Australian, Indonesian and Papua New Guinea waters.

Fear Factor

Its trademark helicopter that whisks passengers to inaccessible places is available on most cruises, but on this there's an adrenaline adventure of another kind – cage diving with great whites.

I can't say it's high on my bucket list but the opportunity to see a shark up close and personal from the safety of a cage has its appeal – I think.

I am still tossing around the decision as we head to the Calypso Star Shark Cage Dive boat, however I give it the thumbs up.

Awkwardly, I pull on a wetsuit, adjust my goggles and regulator then slide into the protective cage. As I become accustomed to the green water, I spot a huge white-and-grey shadow rising gracefully from the depths. It glides by, eyeballing me on the way, and I am both mesmerised and terrified.

Tough sand-papery skin reveals battle scars and, just when I think it's leaving, the shark lunges ferociously at the meaty bait thrown from above, and whacks against the side of the cage. That's when I make a hasty retreat. I scramble up the steps and am happy to watch the rest of the action from the back of the boat.

Later that day, the pace changes with an underwater encounter at Hopkins Island with doe-eyed Australian sea lions that are just so cute and playful. The mothers and pups salute the sun as they laze on the weather-ravaged rocks. Well aware the sea lions are often shark tucker, I wade just into the shallows. Next, they are diving through the waves around me and every so often they pop their heads up to see what I am doing. It is one of those precious True North moments – just me, the sea lions, a deserted beach (the others are fishing) and a perfect day.

My third underwater encounter is with southern bluefin tuna and, again, I pull on a wetsuit, goggles, snorkel and fins, and jump into a tuna pen on the Swim with Tuna tour, 15 minutes out to sea from Port Lincoln.

These tuna are among the fastest fish in the world and swim up to speeds of 70km. They dart towards me then, at the last minute, change direction.

Dolphins also like the company of True North and its six tender boats, often riding in the wake and showing off, spinning through the air and surfing the waves.

As well as the wildlife encounters, it's the feeling of being where few have trodden before that makes this cruise so special, with landings on desolate, wind-swept islands. My respect for English explorer Matthew Flinders and his crew grows by the minute. He and his crew discovered the area in 1802.

Cruise Appeal

True North captain Gavin Graham says the South Australian cruise is one of his favourites, as passengers have time to experience the stunning coastline and do things that take them out of their comfort zone, while enjoying five-star luxury.

"It's pretty isolated and it gives passengers a taste of what early explorers experienced; I hope they leave with a greater insight into this part of Australia," he says.

True North devotee Debbie Boyes of Adelaide, who has notched up nine cruises, says even though it's in her own backyard, it is an opportunity to see the stunning coastline from the water. Small ship devotees, she and husband Ron keep returning to True North because of the laid-back informality, the crew's 'can-do' attitude, great food and good company. I have to agree. It sure doesn't take long to feel at home on the compact, yet spacious boat complete with sun deck, observation room, lounge, alfresco bar and sports deck.

Days are so action-packed that there's little time to spend in the comfortable cabins. Still, the cabins contain all you might need.

Cruise over, the hardest thing is slipping back into shoes and resisting the urge to kick them off – barefoot bliss and laidback luxury are acutely addictive.

Getting there: The eight-night Southern Safari Cruise costs from $7,295 per person Ocean Class, $10,495 per person River Class and $11,995 per person Explorer Class.
It will operate from Adelaide to Ceduna/Adelaide January 15-23 2014.
Activities: Scenic walks, fishing, snorkelling, picnics, exploring and nature-based tours.
For details, see www.northstarcruises.com.au

01 The South Australian coastline
02 The locals in flight
03 An underwater adventure
04 Fresh seafood is enjoyed each day
05 Gourmet fare for on-board luxury
06 Adventure boat True North
07 An Australian fur seal in the wild