

{ MAKING A DIFFERENCE }

Luxury expedition vessel's missions of mercy



Jerry and Gloria with their three children

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THINK of North Star Cruises, the Broome-based company that pioneered adventure cruising along Western Australia's Kimberley coast more than 25 years ago, and luxury immediately comes to mind.

Owner Craig Howson wanted a vessel in a class of its own to carry just 36 passengers and a crew of 20 when he ordered the purpose-built 50m mono-hull True North.

Looking like a super yacht from a James Bond movie, True North has a sundeck, a forward observation lounge, alfresco bar and a fine-dining room with enormous windows that offer uninterrupted views.

There's even an airconditioned helicopter permanently on board.

Yet there is another side to this up-market cruise line that not many people, other than its passengers, would know about.

True North has operated numerous mercy missions since it began cruising around Papua

New Guinea seven years ago.

As senior master Gav Graham puts it, "We came as strangers, became acquainted and now we are family."

One such True North mission involves Jerry, a guide at Sebutuia in Milne Bay, where passengers are taken to see the rare and threatened goldie's bird of paradise (named after Scotsman Andrew Goldie, who discovered the bird in 1882).

"When our guests and crew first met Jerry's pregnant wife, Gloria, we thought she was carrying twins by the size of her belly," Graham says.

"When we returned 10 days later, Jerry was not there to meet us. He had taken Gloria and their daughter Glenda in a dugout canoe to a nursing post a day's paddle away.

"When we arrived there, a nurse simply said: 'Problem inside. Maybe baby die. Maybe both mother and baby die.'

"Gloria was not looking at all well, so we brought them on board True North and steamed over-

night to the hospital in Alotau, the remote provincial capital in eastern Papua New Guinea, making sure Jerry and Glenda had money, food and accommodation.

"A few weeks later we received news that Gloria had a healthy baby boy named Gav Junior — after me, I'm very pleased to say — and that she was on the way to recovery."

Jerry and Gloria have since had another baby, Jendalina, and the crew and passengers of True North visit the family every year.

Another of True North's remarkable stories relates to Joyce, an 11-year-old girl who lived on a remote island in the Louisiade Archipelago with her family, including five sisters.

Joyce suffered horrendous burns to 40 per cent of her body when her grass skirt went up in flames at an open fire that was being used for cooking.

Nitty Oregioni, a True North cruise director, went to visit staff at the Catholic Mission hospital on Nimoa Island, where she found Joyce in dreadful pain.

The nuns were doing their best to soothe the wounds on the little girl's back, thighs, buttocks and arms with fresh dressings and antibiotics, but they didn't have the specialist facilities needed to treat burns victims.

For months on end, Joyce, who could not roll on to her back, had to lie on her front while dressings were peeled off and her wounds were sponged. "Imagine her suffering," Graham says.

With assistance from Rotary Oceania Medical Aid for Children, the True North team and two passengers, Doug and Ann Rathbone, arranged for Joyce to be flown to Melbourne for treatment at the Monash Medical Centre, where burns specialist surgeon Chris Kimber performed the first of a series of skin grafts.

Graham tells me, "Joyce had just the warmest smile when we found her [again] and today she is 14 years old and living a normal life."

• northstarcruises.com.au/
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