



The KIMBERLEY ROCKS

BY RODERICK EIME

*Find your true north as you cruise amongst
20,000-year-old cave paintings.*



Heaving myself up onto the rock ledge, I peak over the top and there he is, commanding all those around him. We stare at each other for a few moments and then he carries on as if I were never there.

Well, as far as he's concerned I don't exist. He's held that pose for at least 20,000 years and I am little more than a speck of dust blowing in the wind. Who is this mysterious figure and where did he come from?

Gwion Gwion (or Bradshaw) rock art is believed by many researchers to be amongst the oldest cave paintings on Earth dating back perhaps 65,000 years, and here I am staring at him rudely. The Gwion Gwion people of Australia's Kimberley are long gone, but their art remains in abundance, decorating sheltered rock caves and overhangs, lookouts and frescos throughout an area twice the size of Victoria. These finely detailed and intricate figures remain a mystery to researchers and academics, fuelling vigorous debate about their origins and meaning.

I've travelled to this secret spot aboard the modern and luxurious superyacht, *True North*, deep inland along the ancient Prince Regent River in Australia's remote North West. The stark and rugged landscape that surrounds us dates back almost to the dawn of time. And you won't find any fossils in these rocks because when they were formed countless millions of years ago, there was no life yet to fossilise. Let that sink in for a moment.

When I make my way back down the crumbling slope to the dinghy, still puffing from the combined effects of exertion and excitement, Gavin is there waiting with hand outstretched. "How was that?" he asks as we make our way back to our 1000 tonne mother ship across the choppy river. "Lost for words?" For once, I was.

Gavin Graham is the master on *True North*, but also spent many years as expedition leader aboard the 36-passenger luxury adventure yacht and still spends most of his working life among the billion-year-old, Precambrian landscape of the Kimberleys. An expert fisherman, boat handler and unrepentant conservationist, Gavin rarely shares his most

NOSE DIVE

Left: *True North* can nose right under the beautiful King Cascades on the Prince Regent River.

Opening image: The ship's tender drops passengers ashore to explore at Piroso Creek on the Hunter River.

coveted Bradshaw art sites with guests.

"If people show a genuine interest in seeing some Braddies," Gavin tells me, "we can usually find something on short notice. You and a handful of others are the only ones who've ever seen that site."

Yet his extensive catalogue of cave art sites is not recorded anywhere, instead the locations are closely guarded secrets entrusted to a few of the North Star Cruises masters and senior guides alone.

"They're up here," he replies, jabbing a finger purposefully to his temple. I glance back across the wake of the dinghy trying to spot the high outcrop I had just scaled for my tantalising glimpse of the most ancient Australians, but it's quickly consumed by the enormity of my surroundings.

Precipitous, golden-hued sandstone cliffs, vast mud banks and mangrove forests typify the landscape that has remained largely unchanged since before the first dinosaurs set foot here. Our brief incursion is but a blink of the eye in the planet's geological calendar.

Suddenly my trance is interrupted by the ship's jet helicopter racing above us, ferrying goggle-eyed passengers back from a swim and frolic in some crystal clear, spring-fed water hole miles inland.

Two more dinghies join us, fishing rods poking out from the stern. Gavin glances across to our escorts and receives an enthusiastic thumbs-up. "Looks like we'll have barra for dinner tonight!"

Many newcomer cruise lines have "discovered" the Kimberley, touting this latest hotspot as the 'must-do' cruise for the growing number of soft adventure seekers looking for gratification closer to home than Antarctica, the Amazon or Greenland.

"It all began as a glorified fishing trip more than 25 years ago," owner Craig 'Craigie' Howson tells me as we share a crisp ale on the back deck, "word got out pretty quickly and soon we had to get a bigger boat!"

There's no disputing Howson's local knowledge. His family has roots going back generations in Broome and the surrounding region where they have fished for lobster and farmed oysters. The giant pearl hanging from his neck is a giveaway.

As we chat, it becomes abundantly clear that his intimate knowledge, and that of the hand-picked all-Australian crew, makes the world of difference in this unforgiving land where uncharted rivers are patrolled by enormous saltwater crocodiles and six metre tides are normal.

The bigger cruise ships can only amble past miles off shore and stop by the port of Broome occasionally for retail excursions and sightseeing, whereas the smaller, purpose-built expedition vessels can explore the rivers and canyons at will, launching their helicopter to investigate inland features and the coveted rock art sites.

One magical day the whole kitchen is loaded into the



BIRDS' EYE VIEW

Above: View from the top, overlooking the King George River.

Right: The helicopter carries guests to places they would be unable to go otherwise, like Eagle Falls for a picnic.

chopper and ferried, along with all of us, up to an exquisite freshwater pool where our chef sets up his kit under a shady gum tree. Steaks, whole barramundi and chicken fillets sizzle on the BBQ while we swim in the cooling waters well out of reach of any giant marauding reptiles. Pinch me please.

While most *True North* itineraries mix up the activities in a seven-, ten-, or 14-night blend of extreme fishing, edgy flightseeing and shore excursions for hikes and nature walks, a couple of departures are set aside each season for specialist pursuits like scuba diving and hardcore barramundi fishing.

'Barra Bonanza' is the last sailing of the Kimberley season, typically the first week of September, where the signature game and sport fish are sought. Trevally, queenfish and tenacious Spanish mackerel are all on the hit list as well as the kings of the Kimberley, the wild Barramundi.

Directly after that are the famous Coral Atoll cruises, a series of three five-night expeditions where *True North* heads out to the Rowley Shoals Marine Park, 300 kilometres offshore from Broome where some of the best diving and snorkelling in Australia exists. In between dives, there's time to seek out the big pelagic species; black marlin, sailfish, wahoo and yellow-fin tuna.

65,000 years ago, when the Gwion people arrived in the Kimberley by boat from Asia as many researchers believe, life must have been pretty good. There was time for fishing, painting, dancing and dressing up. Just where they went is still a mystery, but it's easy to carry on the bountiful aquatic lifestyle aboard *True North*. I'm sure they will barely notice. •

Photography by Oli Oldroyd/North Star Cruises Australia



travel facts

FURTHER INFORMATION

- *True North* is an Australian-flagged, state-of-the-art, purpose-built coastal expedition ship perfectly suited to exploring regions like the Kimberley.
- Cabins come in three classes, spread among three decks. All have private facilities.
- Meals are served in the single-sitting, unreserved dining room and are described as "modern Australian cuisine" utilising local produce and the day's freshly caught fish. *True North's* gourmet chefs consistently receive great reviews.
- There is a large and comfortable top bar/lounge with an outdoor area as well as a quiet room.
- All passengers and staff are required to leave their shoes outside, so be ready to go barefoot!
- North Star Cruises: 08/9192-1829; northstarcruises.com.au