



WILD, ISOLATED

AND TEEMING WITH RARE BEAUTY

AND ANCIENT HISTORY,

THE KIMBERLEY

IS HOME TO A DIFFERENT KIND OF

CRUISING EXPERIENCE.

STORY BY MAX VEENHUYZEN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JARRAD SENG

Millions of litres of water surge through gaps in the McLarty Range, forming the Horizontal Falls

THE KIMBERLEY IS A RUGGED, UNPREDICTABLE PLACE.

Grey clouds can sneak up on a blue-sky day like a pickpocket and the rain feels almost spiteful in its intensity. The thunder booms loud enough to startle the unwary while jagged forks of lightning shatter the sky, temporarily staining it lurid shades of magenta.

Such a storm is upon us now and from the captain's deck of the Kimberley Quest II in the Camden Sound, it feels like we're in the eye of it. Australia's north-west is a part of the world where age is measured in billions of years

and where weather conditions can swing like a pendulum from sunny to stormy and back again, all in the space of an hour.

It's a corner of the globe where local knowledge – and a local boat – is key. The Kimberley Quest II isn't your average cruise vessel. There's no mini-golf course or rock-climbing wall on its main deck, nor is there a casino below it. And unless the band was playing really, really softly, my search for a cabaret lounge or nightclub came up empty. But when your day is spent darting in and out of the waterways of one of the world's last great wildernesses, there's scant need for those sorts of distractions. Blue skies. Bluer waters. Ancient pindan-stained rock formations stretching dramatically towards the heavens. All calling cards of the Kimberley.

The Kimberley coastline, in the far north of Western Australia, hugs some of the country's most isolated terrain, with many sites accessible only by sea or air (in some cases, a combination of both). Measuring 25 metres in length, the Kimberley Quest II "is like the four-wheel drive of boats", says Jeff Ralston, the ship's owner and skipper. "It can go places bigger vessels just can't."

Passenger numbers are capped at 18 and ensuite cabins are spread across all three of its decks. My comfortable quarters are about the size of your average Tokyo hotel room but there's still enough room for a double bed and a panoramic porthole. I also have access to essential mod-cons: wi-fi, Foxtel, hot showers and a decently stocked bar. The helicopter strapped to the roof lends a certain Bond-villain element to the journey, while easy-going crew keep the mood relaxed and casual.

But nature is the hero of this adventure. The Kimberley has some of the largest tides in the Southern Hemisphere, with spring tidal ranges as high as 12 metres. The phenomenon manifests itself in various, often spectacular, ways throughout the trip.

Day one of our adventure begins with a one-hour seaplane flight from Broome to the prosaically named Horizontal Falls at Talbot Bay. As the name suggests, the violent rush of water through two gorges creates the

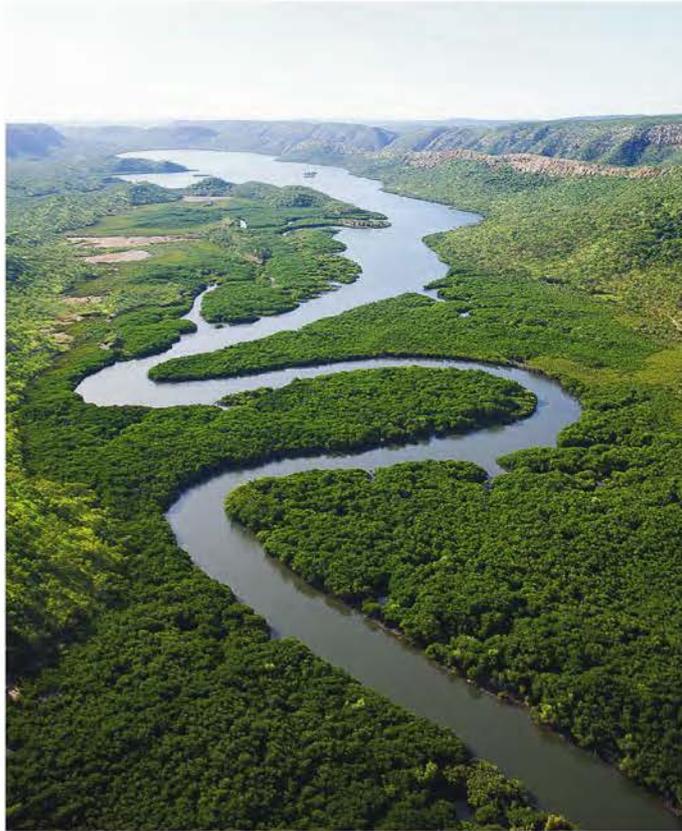


Wild frontier: in the wet season, WA's north-west is prone to sudden, dramatic shifts in weather





(Clockwise from above)
Cooling off in the waterhole above Kings Cascades falls; the Kimberley Quest II; onboard chef Steve Damianopoulos; sunset on the Prince Regent River; angling for barramundi, the region's prize catch; exploring the remote Kimberley coast by tender; Poulton Creek snakes its way into Talbot Bay, just behind Horizontal Falls





FLIGHT PATH

BME

Qantas and partner airlines fly to Broome from Perth, Darwin and Melbourne, with connections from other Australian capital cities. qantas.com

illusion of a waterfall spilling across – rather than onto – the bay’s surface. It’s a spectacle that photographs beautifully from the air but at sea level it’s all about the thrill of a high-speed jet-boat ride and crashing across the Jules Verne-style whirlpools, the wind in your face... and cap and sunglasses probably somewhere else.

The next morning we pull up along Montgomery Reef, Australia’s largest inshore reef, just as the tide is on its way out. Courtesy of the fast-moving water, the reef looks like it’s rising Godzilla-like out of Camden Sound, the fleeing tide forming spot waterfalls across the jagged rock mass. As islands and mangrove forests come and go with the tide, sea turtles, reef sharks and migratory birds frolic around the reef’s fringes.

Later that afternoon, our ship is treated to a water show of a different kind as we edge up to Kings Cascades waterfall. We’re here in March at the tail end of the wet season, when the greenery is lush and the falls are in full flow. We watch, captivated, as thousands of litres of water cascade down terraced rocks.

All this water, naturally, means there’s plenty of fish. The prospect of landing threadfin salmon, mangrove jacks, barramundi and other distinctly Australian fish lures many anglers up north. Some are proficient. Others are like me. After a fruitless few days, our final morning provides one last chance. Following 15 minutes without a nibble, my rod bends like a gymnast and it’s game on. My struggle isn’t exactly *The Old Man and the Sea* but the determined estuary cod gives me a workout. Eventually, the mottled fish – and some semblance of male pride – is in the dinghy. Onboard chef Steve Damianopoulos prepares the catch and it goes down well with a cold one at the end of the day.

While the Kimberley’s oppressive humidity lends itself to a beer or two, my most memorable drink of the trip occurs on an outing to a hidden waterhole. Believe it or not, playing under waterfalls builds a wicked thirst and I’m forced to ask Greg Quicke, our voyage’s resident astrologer and Gandalf look-alike, if his drink bottle is nearby.

He motions towards the water spilling around us. “Purest water in the world,” he says, “Filtered through rocks that are I-don’t-know-how-many-million-years-old.” I cup my hands and take a cautious gulp. He’s right. Greg shoots me a knowing grin. “I should have told you but if you drink the water here it means you’ll always return.” I smile back and hope that’s true. ●



KIMBERLEY DREAMING

From food to farmstay, Australia's north-west offers unique experiences. Here are five ideas to add to your itinerary.

LEARN FROM THE LOCALS

uptuyu.com.au;
desertriversea.com.au

Acquire a deeper understanding of the Kimberley by seeing it through the eyes of the people who have called it home for more than 40,000 years. The Western Australian Indigenous Tourism Operators Council (waitoc.com) lists tour operators that offer authentic insights into their homelands. Uptuyu Aboriginal Adventures, for example, can teach you about bush medicine and the history of the region while taking you to rivers, gorges and ancient rock-art galleries.

If you're interested in more contemporary art, check out the Desert River Sea project's Kimberley Aboriginal Art Trail Map – a self-drive guide to art centres across the Kimberley that welcome visitors.

EXPLORE HOME VALLEY STATION ON HORSEBACK

hvstation.com.au

Home Valley Station is a working cattle station covering some 250,000 hectares. Stockmen and women lead guests on horseback through the property, retracing parts of the graziers' original 1800s stock route.

TAKE A DAYTRIP TO ECO BEACH

ecobeach.com.au

A three-hour round trip from Broome, Ramada Eco Beach Resort is suitable for a daytrip or overnight stay. Keep cool at the white-sand beach or, for guests, in the resort's infinity pool. The on-site restaurant specialises in mod-Oz flavours.

VISIT AUSTRALIA'S OLDEST OPERATING PEARL FARM

cygnetbaypearls.com.au

In 1946, when coastal town Broome was a rough-and-ready outpost, Dean Brown skippered a pearling lugger to Cape Leveque, 200 kilometres further north, and established Cygnet Bay Pearls. Today you need only

Rock art at Raft Point depicts the Wandjina, or spirit ancestors of the Kimberley's Indigenous people (opposite); mangroves line the Saint George Basin floodplain

a 4WD to get there. Once you've toured the farm, stay for lunch or a night in the safari tents.

EAT DINNER AT CABLE BEACH CLUB

cablebeachclub.com

Or possibly dinners. You can enjoy Malaysian flavours at Rambutan or Australian classics like Surf and Turf at Sunset Bar & Grill. From March, Zensai reopens for the season. Executive chef Joji Iwama's elegant Japanese has only added to the appeal of Broome's most popular resort.