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Cruising Australia's last frontier

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CRUISING AUSTRALIA'S LAST FRONTIER

Surprises at sea: from Bungle Bungles to a Second World War wreck and pop-up bars

MIKE GREENE
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD
CROCODILE CREEK, AUSTRALIA

After all the warnings about crocodiles, this was the last place we expected it would be safe to go back in the water. However, it turned out the creek was named after a geologica l formation that looked like a crocodile. "And there have never been any reports of crocodiles," said guide Steve Ligen.

So we all hopped off the tinny and climbed up the concrete steps built by miners from the iron ore mine on nearby Cockatoo Island as a weekend retreat. Then we plunged in and swam under the waterfall — grateful for only the third opportunity to have a refreshing swim because of the cold water crocodiles that inhabit most of the area.

This was the final wilderness stop on our 40-day Orion Expedition Cruise along the Kimberley Coast, the last frontier here in northwest Australia.

With only 15 staterooms and suites, the 101-meter, 4,000-tonne Orion is small enough to sail into areas otherwise inaccessible only by air. The Orion does Kimberley cruises during the down under winter (April to September), offering the combination of expedition adventures and five-star luxury accommodation and dining.

Large cruise ships have their own appeal. But for a more exclusive, exciting adventure — combining nature with culture and history — we enjoyed being with a relatively small group and a simple daily program: buffet breakfast, a morning excursion ashore or on the water, back to the ship for an extensive buffet lunch, the afternoon expedition, an oral/photo rundown of the day's activities and then a gourmet sit-down dinner which we chose to eat on deck.

In the movie, The Adjustment Bureau, the protagonists keep opening doors on to new scenes and into new experiences.

We felt that way about this Kimberley cruise.

We boarded in Darwin, at the Top End of Australia. After two days'/orientation lectures while sailing in the Timor Sea with a brief stop in East Timor (a requirement because of Orion's designation as an international cruise line), we landed in Wyndham, the most northerly town in Western Australia.

Opening the first door, half the passengers took a two-hour flight to the honeycombed Bungle Bungles, discovered only in the 1980s when a TV crew was making a documentary.

The rest went up the Ord River in a boat with three 350-h.p. engines to find freshwater crocs that can be as big as cattle.

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Sand island, complete with a bar, emerges as tide drops off Montgomery reef.
AUSTRALIA: A surprise a day at sea

FRCM II

The next day we anchored in Koolama Bay, where during the Second World War three Japanese submarines bombed the Koolama, a supply ship about the same size as Orion, stranding 160 passengers and crew in this remote area.

So we opened our next door: a trip in the Zodiac along an eroded sandstone gorge — home to various birds, rock wallabies and saltwater crocodiles — to King George River Falls, the highest in the Kimberley at 83 metres. Some passengers then hiked to the top of the twin falls, while most of the rest of us settled for the view from the base. A few of the Z-discs "luminated" their passengers with a swing under the falls, somehow managing to leave the drivers dry.

And then a delicious surprise: Tucked behind a rocky cliff we found a Zodiac from the ship serving champagne and orange juice along with gourmet croissants. That lit the spot after a couple of hours on the water.

The next day and another door: We visited Vanillia Bay and Jar Island, named after Malay earthware jar fragments found on the beach. We hiked aero to visit three galleries of Aboriginal rock art — known by two very different names: "Gowon Gowon art because legend has it the Gowon birds pecked the rocks until their beaks bled, then used a tail feather and [the] own blood to create the paintings. Then also known as Budawang's paintings after the explorer Joseph Bradshaw. The paintings are estimated to be 10,000 to 30,000 years old.

Afternoon, yet another door opened when we visited the wreckage of a C-53 plane, the military version of the DC-3, which had made a forced landing on Feb. 28, 1942, after faulty navigation left it short of fuel. The plane was still fairly intact and well preserved; we could imagine what the crew who all survived, felt like on this deserted spot until they were rescued. The story is being told by a Qantas flapsfare.

The aeronautical mood continued the next morning when we went through a door — or rather no door — to board a helicopter which had landed on the beach for our flight to the top of the Mitchell Falls.

It was an unexpected thrill to sit on an outside back seat — truly outside as there were no doors.

After we took off and the wind whipped in, we relaxed why we

IF YOU GO

Kimberley cruise fares range from $5,000 to $15,000 per person, double occupancy. For more details about Orion II cruises, go to www.orionescapades.com.

In transit we had been told to put all loose items into a bag which had then been safely stowed before takeoff.

Before flying back over the vast Kimberley Tableland, we had time for a swim in the pools atop the falls, again after being reassured no crocodiles had ever been seen in the area.

Throughout the cruise, passengers signed up for fishing trips, hiking in (and usually releasing) sea perch, fingermark, coral trout, red emperor, golden trevally, grey reef shark, bas fish and countless batfish.

About now we started to lose track of the number of doors we had opened, as we landed at Raft Point to hike up to an amazing gallery rich with Wandjina style rock art, characterized by figures with large mouthless faces and large black eyes.

We hiked the occasional bottle-shaped baobab tree along the way, iconic of the Kimberley. In the afternoon a door opened on to Montgomery Reef where, with a quiet roar, the ocean cascaded off 400 square kilometres of reef.

As the tide goes out, it actually looks like the reef is rising out of the water. During spring tides, the reef rises above the surrounding falling ocean by as much as four metres.

Seabirds feed on fish stranded on the reef, while sharks, turtles and various fish feast on the creatures washed off the reef. We fed on lunch provided by the beach bar set up on a sand island that also emerged as the tide fell.

Turning tides featured on the following day when a door opened in such we could see Talbot Bay's horizontal waterfalls. It took a 450-hp engine to propel the fast boat with its passengers through the narrow gap as the changing tide forced a torrent of water to rush from one side of the gap to the other.

Nearby we saw the dramatic uplifting of sedimentary rock caused by ancient land mass collisions.

We were reluctant to open the last new scene/experience door the next day when we came to Yampi Sound and Crocodile Creek. My companion and I lingered in the water as long as we dared and stayed to help dismantle the margarita bar so we could all catch the last Zodiac back to the ship.

Photos: Mike Grooby for the Calgary Herald

Wreckage of a Second World War C-53 at Vanillia Bay, which crashed in 1942 after running out of fuel.

Hugging a baobab tree during a hike near Raft Point. The trees are icons of Kimberley.

Day 11 and all the ship's doors opened as we disembarked in Broome, the pearling town on Australia's west coast, meeting the new passengers who were about to embark on the Orion's return voyage to Darwin.

We held the doors open and wished them bon voyage.

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Taking in a view of the King George River twin falls from a Zodiac. At 83 metres, they are the highest in Kimberley.