

T R A V E L

A tender peels away from the Great Escape to explore Montgomery Reef, which covers an area of around 400sq km and is Australia's largest inshore reef.

KIMBERLEY ESCAPE

The custom-built MV Great Escape and her crew make exploring Western Australia's remote Kimberley coast an adventure and a pleasure.

STORY + PHOTOS MARK MULLER



Gillian Murray, Nerredab Hillier, Alan Murray and Lewis Marshall take in the sunset views of Collier Bay from above Raft Point.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Great Escape at anchor in Talbot Bay; guests view Wandjina paintings at the Ngumbri (Raft Point) site; crew members (l-r) pilot James Gillespie, stewardess Emma McArthy, chef Martina Page, stewardess Alysba Priddis, deckhand Sam Belotti, skipper Dan Barrett-Lennard and deckhand Liz Vaughan; travellers relaxing between expeditions on the back deck.

As the sun sinks towards the horizon, the chink of glasses and relaxed, enthusiastic conversation drifts through the warm Kimberley air. From a vantage point over the Indian Ocean on a cliff above Raft Point, guests from the purpose-built 26-metre catamaran MV *Great Escape* bask in isolation, beauty and subdued luxury – courtesy of the spectacular view provided by mother nature, and good nibbles and cool drinks delivered with themselves via helicopter. Everyone is, understandably, beaming.

This cliff-top sojourn marks the last light of the first full day aboard *Great Escape*. The previous 12 or so hours have been filled with exploring, swimming in rock holes, visiting Aboriginal art sites, fishing, eating and drinking. Later that evening everyone gathers for a bonfire and dinner on a small beach on nearby Steep Island. It's been an action-packed day and one that sets the tone for the four-night 'quintessential Kimberley coast escape' that the diverse group has signed up for.

Skipper Dan Barrett-Lennard smiles quietly at the obvious pleasure of his charges. "It is so good to show Australians their own country," he says. "There are so many people who don't know that what we've got up here.

"I love it when people have new experiences – things they've never done before: hiking into remote waterfalls or flying into amazing rock-art sites, catching a fish or going mudcrabbing. There are all of these firsts. It can be a bit of a life changer for people."

Dan himself is experiencing something of a life change. After 20 years in the Kimberley – 17 of them in the pearling industry, he is relishing working in tourism and sharing his experience and knowledge aboard the *Great Escape*. "People are so blown away by the experiences that they have every day. They're so thankful for it, and that's really rewarding," he says. "It's long hours for the crew, but to have that appreciation, it's all worth it."

TRAVEL

This is exactly the sort of thing brothers Chris 'Trippy' and Jeremy 'Jez' Tucker, and Trippy's wife Kylie Bartle, had in mind when they commissioned *Great Escape* back in 2006. With decades of experience between them, they built the boat they wanted to spend time on. *Great Escape* accommodates 14 guests in seven staterooms, all with ensuite bathrooms, air-conditioning and large, comfortable beds. Six crew members, plus a helicopter pilot, see to guests' needs. The catamaran design gives exceptional stability and space, and the 1.8m draft means that *Great Escape* is well able to navigate the river systems and tidal estuaries that are such a part of the wonder of the Kimberley coast. Hard-won local knowledge ensures that the 10-metre tides integral to the Kimberley's ecosystem can be capitalised upon.

For Kylie, the combination of activity and adventure in an amazing wilderness environment, coupled with a degree of comfort and luxury, is vital to the operation. "When we started this business it was because we loved it," she says from the Broome head office. "The key is to get good people, and then it's the environment that makes it so special. It's stunning and unique. About 95% of our guests are Australian, and they love the experience."

Kylie has been in the Kimberley for more than 20 years, and Jez and Trippy have spent more than 30 years exploring the region, especially from the water. Trippy was a shipwright, worked as a pearl diver and charter boat operator, and with the legendary Malcolm Douglas, among

other things, before setting up the family operation. He says the drive comes from wanting to share an area that has given them so much joy over the years.

"I believe that when you first get people on board you're taking them out of their comfort zone," Trippy says. "You're in the croc-infested waters of the remote Kimberley and you're living with 14 guests plus crew for however many days – up to 14, depending on the trip. People come on board and are involved with everything straight away. It takes a day or so for people to unwind. We understand that a lot of our guests have very stressful jobs. After a while I see people get off their stress and enjoy themselves."

The stresses that shape the lives of guests pale into insignificance when compared to the stresses that formed the Kimberley itself. Two mornings after the cliff-top drinks deckhand Liz Vaughan is giving an impromptu geology lesson in the stunning surrounds of Cyclone Creek. The *Great Escape's* three dedicated tenders nestle together beneath a yawning red cliff face as Liz (who has an honours degree in archaeology to complement her coxswain ticket) explains something of the physical history of the region. To a rapt audience she talks about the collision of continental plates some 2 billion years ago that pushed massive mountain ranges into the air. Over millennia these ranges were eroded and washed into a shallow sea layering the deposits that became the sedimentary underpinning of the visible geology of the Kimberley sandstone, mudstone and siltstone. Further periods of erosion, extrusion, intrusion >



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The chopper makes back country exploration widely accessible; Gillian Murray photographs Montgomery Reef; guests and crew enjoy the water; spa time; powering into Horizontal Falls; Lewis Marshall holds up a tidy fingermark.



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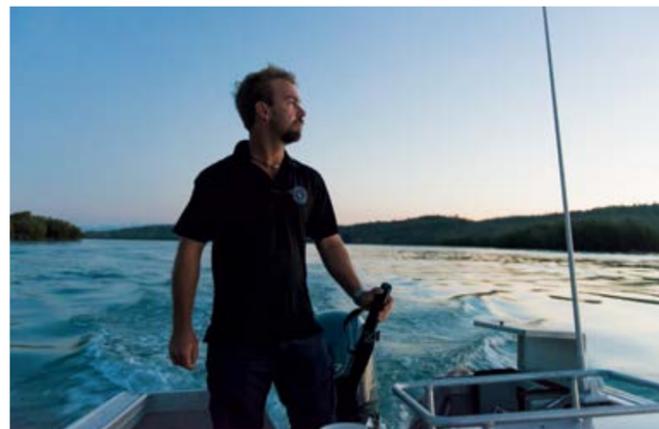
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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Swimming under pristine waterfalls is all part of the experience; skipper Dan Barrett-Lennard takes in first light; chef Martina Page gets her flambé on; comfortable cabins are serviced daily; poached egg, avocado and baby spinach salad makes breakfast more than just fuel.

TRAVEL

and uplifting continued to shape the landscape until the eventual drowning of the coastline within the past 1 million years to form what we see today. The great folded slabs of cliff around Cyclone Creek are a marvellous example of this.

Another of Liz's abiding interests is rock art, and her respectful and informed explanations of both the Worrora people's Wandjina sites, and the Gwion Gwion (Bradshaw) galleries visited during the expedition are well regarded by guests and crew alike.

"I really like doing this, rather than staying in uni," Liz says. "I love talking to people about heritage, education and archaeology. It's good to have a broad knowledge of world archaeology, and Australian archaeology in the Kimberley because it informs the things we do."

All of this is great fuel for the mind and spirit. More physical fuel is provided courtesy of chef Martina Page. Martina cut her culinary teeth in some world-class restaurants in her native Ireland, the UK, US and New Zealand before a two-year stint as head chef at The George in Perth, from whence she was enticed aboard the *Great Escape*. Freshly caught fish figures large, and the subtle flavours and controlled aesthetic of a chef at the top of her game are a delight to dig into. Meals like cedar smoked salmon, chia pot with berry compote, delicate laksa, pulled lamb with kohlrabi slaw, and duck confit with cauliflower puree are prepared and served with little apparent effort, but much evident skill.

"It's definitely a different perspective being a chef on here," Martina says. "The fish is just great – fresh as you can get it. On my first day we did a helicopter flyover of Montgomery Reef. I was crying and I was a wreck. Then we went oystering and had a whole table of oysters and fish. I couldn't believe it!"

The crew's enthusiasm is infectious, and guests are swept along in the spirit of exploration and adventure that imbue operations aboard *Great Escape*. Lewis Marshall, a gregarious Perth medico whose work experience stint with the RFDS in

Wyndham as a young medical student led to him living and practising in Broome during the '80s, and to ongoing clinic work throughout the Kimberley, describes the trip as the best holiday he and wife Kate have ever had.

"Once the Kimberley is in your blood it stays in your blood," Lewis says. "It's the colours and it's the sense of wilderness. We've travelled a lot and have been very fortunate, but something like this is extraordinary. Yesterday was the most action-packed day I've ever had!"

"It's about exploring and experiencing the environment. That's the privilege to be able to get to these places. This is going to live with us forever. The staff have been just amazing. They're really out to give you a great time. We've been lucky – a disparate group getting on so well – that's great. I suspect that the staff respond to that as well."

Listening to this, deckhand Sam Belotti's face splits into a characteristic grin. "People said if you want to further your career, then do something you love," he says. "I just love seeing the smile on guests' faces when they see the places, when they catch the fish, taking them to these great places and sharing them with people. That's really rewarding."



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*ABOVE: Bonfire night on Steep Island makes for a picturesque evening – within hours the rising tide covers the fire.
MAIN: The tenders are towed behind Great Escape as the sun sets on Collier Bay.*

Dan emphasises that working with the guests to ensure everybody gets to experience the extraordinary to the best of their abilities is central to how tours are run. “It’s adaptable,” he says. “If people want to go and fish, we can do that; if they want to walk, we can do that. It just depends on what people are interested in – within reason. Really the trip is planned around the guests we’ve got on board. We take into account age and ability, then plan it accordingly.”

It works. There is no pressure to do anything, but the opportunities are there, and the crew have the enthusiasm, knowledge and skills needed to share this remarkable part of the world. At its best, the entire group of guests and

crew morphs into something akin to a family.

“At the end of the day we treat everybody the same and they’re coming to do the trip of a lifetime,” Trippy says. “I love the way people bond and meld. If someone’s having a bit of a bad day, we ask others to look out for them. Then the dynamics of a group of 14 people take over. Everybody’s here for a good time, and that’s what takes over. People look out for each other.”

*Prices for tours start at \$3,395 per person, twin share.
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