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The last wilderness

When the world is closing in around you, head for the sublimely beautiful remote northwest coastline, writes **Terry Sweetman**

SOARING cliffs and treacherous rivers are the ramparts and the moats of our first and last frontier, Western Australia's Kimberley coast.

It's a frontier where mysterious artists of unknown origin left their mark in the form of lively paintings known as Bradshaw figures.

It's where the first Europeans – probably Dutch – had their pipe-smoking presence recorded by Aboriginal rock painters.

It's where buccaneer explorer William Dampier whetted British interest in the continent and where he may – or may not – have hidden a fortune in pirate gold.

It's where Phillip Parker King carried out one of the lesser-known epics of early colonial navigation and left his name on a still-healthy boab to proclaim his presence in 1820.

It's where a party of settlers in 1864 demonstrated blind faith and limitless ignorance in an ill-fated attempt to settle Camden Harbour, an enterprise

as forlorn as any in our history.

It's where Indonesian fishermen regularly visited, traded and worshipped long before the time of European settlement.

It's where cattlemen built their grass castles and where the flotsam of nations won fortunes in pearls and revelled in what is now the tourism magnet of Broome.

It's where Japanese airmen bombed and strafed towns in World War II.

And it's where Australians are cautiously trespassing on their last wilderness, although it remains a place of isolation and danger for the unwary.

In the first seven days' cruising south from Wyndham to Broome in the charter boat Great Escape, we met just one lonely barramundi fisherman.

It was barra fishermen like this who found many of the secret ways through the barriers of the Kimberley while in search of fresh water.

That's where Great Escape skipper Jeremy Tucker learned the hidden

paths beyond the cliffs and the muddy tidal rivers to the sparkling and curiously cold freshwater pools and falls that cascade from the plateau.

That's where he discovered the favourite haunts of the succulent mud crab, the barramundi and the myriad varieties of fish that make this voyage a joy for fisherman and gourmand. But the Kimberley coast does not surrender its secrets easily, demanding a toll in sweat from those who seek its treasures and pleasures. It is physically demanding country, where nearly every venture means a clamber into a bouncing dinghy, a wet-foot landing on a beach, or a clamber over rocks and a climb above the crocodile zone. And the silent, patient saltwater crocodiles are the ever-present reminder that this is no country for novices.

"There's nothing there," said deckhand Deon as we drifted up a silent tidal creek, "but there's always something watching."



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IMPRESSIVE: Horizontal Waterfall at Walcott Inlet. Picture: Tourism Western Australia

And watching – alert to the vibration of something as small as the slap of fish bait – are the crocs, ranging from curious and greedy juveniles to monsters sunning themselves on the bank arrogantly oblivious to passing tinnies.

It is a savage and extraordinary world that seems surreal when surveyed from the back deck of the Great Escape, cold drink in hand and tantalised by the aromas of an approaching silver-service dinner.

The Great Escape – a 26m catamaran with a crew of five and 14 passengers, max, in comfortable double cabins with ensuites – seems the ideal way to explore this coast. It's big enough for comfort – and a helicopter – yet small enough to nose

into tight creeks and inlets.

With three 5m tenders on call, excursions are no-nonsense, efficient and a comfortable mix of fishing, exploration, curiosity, classroom and straight-out fun, if not craziness. Luxurious informality rules, OK?

Programs are tailored to take into account the age, personalities and interests of the passengers, the vagaries of the weather and the enormous tides.

Itineraries read like a romantic frontier roll call: Wyndham, the Berkley, King George, Mitchell, Hunter, Prince Regent, Roe, Sale rivers, capes Londonderry and Voltaire, Bigge Island, Kings Cascade, Careening, Vansittart, Treachery, Doubtful and Talbot bays, Mt

Trafalgar, Mt Waterloo, Langii, Ruby Falls, Koolan Island, Yampi Sound, Dampier Archipelago and Broome.

Our program included daily fishing (I landed the first barra), mud-crabbing, visits to rock art sites, splashing about in rarely seen rock pools and under waterfalls, sightseeing, exploring a crashed World War II transport aircraft, history lessons that revealed our eastern-state ignorance, nature studies, and lolling on white sands as Indian Ocean wavelets washed away the day's sweat.

A standout – a memory for life – was a dinghy trip along the magnificent Montgomery Reef, where massive falling tides make the coral appear to rear up on each side, creating 4m waterfalls down their flanks.



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Wish you were here

VIRGIN Blue and Qantas fly from Melbourne to Broome. Prices start from \$680 return.

Great Escape runs various cruises along the Kimberley coast. Kimberley cruises range from five to 13 nights, departing from Broome or Wyndham. Prices range from \$3600 a person (twin share) for a five-night Rowley Shoals underwater adventure to

\$16,150pp (panoramic view cabin) for the 13-night Kimberley Classic cruise.

Escape readers' deal: Book one guest on any remaining Great Escape Kimberley cruise or Rowley Shoals dive adventure for 2009 and the second guest can travel for half price. Valid for new and direct bookings only and subject to availability.

More: www.greatescape.net.au



Now, whenever the world closes in, I recall two beach bonfires where we sat around driftwood pyres, drank beer and wine, ate freshly harvested oysters, pondered our insignificance under an endless, star-studded sky and thanked our good fortune in having this wonderland to ourselves.

The late-evening disappearance of

one sand island under a tide that snuffed out our fire and washed away every trace of our presence seemed somehow to express the faintness of our footprint on the vastness of the Kimberley coast.

The author was a guest of The Great Escape Charter Company.