

Australian cruise: Bond Street meets outback

Peter Hughes

Last Updated: 11:25AM GMT 18/03/2008

On an expeditionary cruise in Western Australia, Peter Hughes enjoys the remoteness, the ancient cave art - and some solid home comforts.



Anywhere else they would have called this a safari, but safari is a tricky word in Australia. If it summons up visions of rhino roaming the savannahs, of slinking leopards and stalking lions, the Australian version may be a bit of an anticlimax.

The most dramatic wildlife encounters down under are notional. It is the thought of the homicidal that gives Australia its frisson: venomous snakes, toxic spiders, psychotic sharks, lethal jellyfish and crocodiles that can take off your leg before they are half grown. All lurk in the imagination's long grass but they are not really the stuff of tourist tick-lists. The reality is safer, if tamer.

That is why, on the second morning of my voyage into the Timor Sea aboard the expedition ship Orion, we looked at mangroves. And while our quarry did look like a load of undergrowth, there were compensations.

We were skimming up an estuary in Zodiac inflatables. It was low tide. Crocodiles slumped on the mud as active as granite, their thumb-sized brains having concluded that a Zodiac was neither a threat nor edible.

Orion was anchored in Prince Frederick Harbour at the mouth of the Hunter River off the north coast of Western Australia. Don't be fooled by the marina-sounding names: this is a place remote even to Australians.

Above us sheer curtains of coppery rock fell from a bumpy skyline of scrub. Up there was the lip of the Mitchell Plateau, a recently declared National Park and some of the most inaccessible country on the continent. Offshore is Naturalists' Island. It has only just got into the gazetteers; its English name was officially approved in 2004.

The sight of a yacht anchored in the estuary made me feel almost cheated out of total isolation. Which, of course, is nothing to what the yachties must have felt when five inflatables sped past and two helicopters began flying trips to the plateau.

The Zodiacs turned out of the main channel and pattered up a muddy creek in single file. Mud skippers, little newt-like creatures, twitched on the banks, flipping themselves along with their tails. We stopped and the expedition's botanist, Tony Roberts, delivered his spiel about mangroves and how they survive in salt water.

Launched in 2003, Orion was designed as an expedition cruise ship, with the emphasis on cruising. Or so it seemed to me. Yes, she has huge stabilisers for the rollers of the Southern Ocean and a draft shallow enough for the Amazon, and is so slim she can enter the locks of the Great Lakes. Yes, she has a lecture theatre, a fishing launch and fishing guide, an expedition team and those Zodiacs for beach landings. But such intrepid stuff brooks no discomfort.

The passenger areas are fitted out more for expeditions to Bond Street than the outback. With only 100 passengers, Orion is small enough for everything except the restaurant to be contained within three decks. Cabins are priced on size – though none is small – and window area. The best open on to French balconies.

Orion does expeditions in the way Ralph Lauren might do dungarees. After storming a beach from a rubberised inflatable, you come back to yacht-like quantities of wood panelling and buffed brass. The decks are teak, the bathrooms marble and the outdoor furniture varnished timber.

There is a shop, exercise room and plunge pool and huge quantities of attractive Aussie food. On two evenings prawns and much else were thrown on the barbie on the aft deck. Dressing for dinner means long trousers, rather than shorts. Apart from films the only entertainment is the crew show, which was rather like an early round of *Pop Idol* but better-natured.

The largest single species of wildlife you encounter is Australians. Only young labradors are more openly companionable. But even labradors are not quite so self-revelatory.

Within seconds of meeting Vera I learnt that she prefers wearing skirts to trousers, but as the ship has no hangers with clips, what is she to do? Esther's husband is back in Melbourne. She introduced me to her companion: "I travel with my medical adviser. My husband is very old and frail." And that was before the first glass of fizz.

At dinner I sat next to Jill, an effortlessly elegant septuagenarian, who was soon roaring through her racy life as a model and occasional film stand-in. There was one outback location where Chips Rafferty, then Australia's biggest star, picked her up at the airstrip. She was in an unsuitably short skirt; he was in a Land Rover. He insisted she join him in the front, opposite the gear lever. She saw what was coming. "Spread yer legs, girlie," he cried as he yanked the stick through a tactile semaphore of superfluous gear changes. "Ah, Chips. He was a character," Jill sighed.

The 11-night Kimberley cruise goes from Darwin in the Northern Territory to Broome in Western Australia and back, an 800-mile arc of coast with barely a vestige of human habitation, at least few that were not several hundred years old.

Bradshaw Art is a style of rock painting that is believed to be the most ancient in Australia. Joseph Bradshaw was the first white man to see it in 1891. The examples we saw are on Jar Island, some 315 nautical miles south-west of Darwin. They are the rock art equivalent of L S Lowry, spindly little prancing figures unlike any other aboriginal paintings. It has been suggested that they may be the work of a completely different ethnic group.

We gathered on deck. Kitted out in bright blue buoyancy collars, we looked like troops prepared for D-Day or, in our case, veterans about to take part in a re-enactment. At the beach we paddled ashore to find towels laid to dry our feet, cold fruit juice and a pile of walking canes cut straight from the bush and ready-fitted with rubber finials.

The paintings were on two ledges a short walk from the beach through spiky spinifex and up a clamber of rocks. The paint has reduced to a dark brown stain. The rock itself is more highly coloured; it's almost tangerine. With no pigment left, the paintings cannot be carbon-dated. But dating of a wasp nest, which covers one of the figures, suggests the figure underneath is at least 17,000 years old.

The most graphic examples of native art were on Bigge Island. Shallow caves open into a wall of sandstone blocks so regular they look more like ruins than rock. Inside are some remarkable illustrations of "contact art", the natives' record of their first sight of Europeans. A sailing ship, sketched in blue, is believed to be Abel Tasman's, the Galiot, from which he mapped the coast in 1624. In another scene three men appear in a dinghy. The boat has rowlocks – introduced at the beginning of the 19th century. The men have wide-brimmed hats and, in their mouths, huge pipes.

The caves are narrow and, for all the warnings, the less agile scrape their backpacks against the pictures. "It's a contentious issue," admitted our expedition leader, Robin West. "We as tourists can visit these sites, but the aboriginals can't get to them. And in a cave system like this people rub against the paintings and touch them. I don't think we shall have the same access in a few years' time."

Whatever the Kimberley lacks in exotic wildlife it makes up for in camera-sating scenery. We watched the tide fall at Montgomery Reef, a 150-square-mile plateau of tawny coral. Water cascaded off its flat back as if it was a monster surfacing. As the reef was exposed, patrolling sea egrets, white and grey, scavenged for any fish left stranded.

There can be a 30ft to 33ft tide here, the third biggest in the world. So at Talbot Bay even a ship the size of Orion does not have the power to pass through the narrows when the tide is running. At the end of the bay the tide races through two pinched gaps – 50ft to 65ft wide – with such force they have been called the Horizontal Falls. As the tide was turning the Zodiacs staggered against the churning current, just managing to get through. Above us towered rough piles of rock, rust red, the colour of decay. It was like a scrapyards of geology. Scrawny little trees sprang from the cliff face; turkey bush ruffled the skyline. It is rock, not water that defines the Kimberley.

Two days later we took the Zodiacs up the King George River. Its wide blue waters glide through a shallow canyon whose amber walls rise vertically 300 feet. Here is a Lost World landscape. If there were dinosaurs they would be here in this primeval gulch. Again the rock is derelict – cracked and disintegrating. The shattered valley ends in a smooth rock face stained black with algae from which spout two 250ft waterfalls.

Nearby, in an anchored Zodiac, a barman was mixing buck's fizz. Another compensation.

Cruise basics

Peter Hughes's cruise on Orion was arranged by Tailor Made Travel (0845 456 8050, www.tailor-made.co.uk), which is offering similar expedition cruises to the Kimberley this year from £4,199 per person. The price includes two nights in Darwin, 10 nights on the ship, return economy flight from London to Darwin, taxes and airport transfers in Britain.

Orion (www.orioncruises.com.au) runs other cruises, also bookable through Tailor Made Travel, to the Antarctic, the Solomon Islands, the Coral Sea, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand.