

April 23-24, 2011

The Weekend West

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travel

A WHOLE HOLIDAY WEEKEND
OF TRAVEL READING



Sun rays above, stingrays below

- The remarkable worlds of Ningaloo Reef
- Plenty to do in Coral Bay

Water world

Above and below the surface on a luxury sailing expedition

Stephen Scourfield, Travel Editor

For a moment, just before dinner, I walk forward to the catamaran's bow nets, and lie there, in the warm night, with a cooling breeze, listening to the low rumble of the ocean breaking on Ningaloo Reef, and the gentle lap of water around the hulls. An orange fingernail-clipping of Moon arcs low. And a weird picture montage flashes through my head — staghorn coral, fish of the brightest purple and yellow and electric blue, the crunch of parrot fish eating the hard corals. A dugong, dolphin, and turtles darting through the turquoise water like flying dinner plates. A leopard shark apparently fast asleep on the bottom, with a sucker fish near its mouth, curved like a smile. A ray pumping the bottom into a crater, filtering the white sand for food. And various blues. This silky turquoise water inside the 260km of the world's longest fringing reef. Inky blue outside. A cornflower blue sky. But the montage doesn't just include the underwater wonders of Ningaloo Reef south of Coral Bay. It also includes the wonderful tastes and textures of lunch — the wild rice salad, and chicken and artichoke kebabs — and the inspiring company of Luke Riley and John Bailye. It is all mashed together in one incredible, indelible day.

Sail Ningaloo's catamaran Shore Thing under sail south of Coral Bay.
Pictures: Stephen Scourfield

But let me go back to the beginning. Sail Ningaloo's 15.5m (51-foot) catamaran Shore Thing, which is owned and run by the two husband and wife teams of John and Leonie Bailye and Luke Riley and Lannie Hasler, is embarking on its second season of sailing the Ningaloo Reef out of Coral Bay.

And that is where Lannie had met us this morning, to take us to the marina. Shore Thing looks a picture, set against the placid, turquoise bowl of the

Indian Ocean, cupped inside the world's longest fringing reef.

John ferries us out in the tender and, once on board, the catamaran lives up to that first impression. Shore Thing is purpose-built for what it does — give a high quality, personalised, beautifully cared for and catered liveaboard experience.

It is 8.23m (27-foot) wide, making it stable and comfortable, and giving plenty of space. There are four cabins. The two king staterooms have a big bed and ensuite with freshwater shower, basin, toilet

and plenty of stowage space. They can be configured to sleep three. The two deluxe cabins are slightly smaller but comfortable and with access to a bathroom. There is a big main cabin, with comfortable seating, and plenty of room around the boat — from the bow nets to the easy-access stern. Spots to sit quietly and enjoy the environment.

While couples will mix easily on the boat, it would suit families, groups of friends and corporate groups. The boat is surveyed for 12, but John and Luke say they generally don't

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John Bailye on the tender of Shore Thing off Pelican Point.

take more than 10 and prefer eight guests. Their minimum number is two.

“We have been in tourism long enough to know that you have to offer consistency,” says John. He and Leonie have lived in Coral Bay for 13 years and been involved in developing and operating eco-based tourism.

Lannie has been an interpretative tour guide in Tasmania, the Red Centre and Northern Australia, and is coordinator for the Ningaloo Turtle monitoring program around Coral Bay — and a wonderful cook.

Luke took to the water in the Whitsundays, and for almost four years was involved with marine monitoring programs in the Seychelles. For two seasons he was team leader with Marine Conservation Society Seychelles’ whaleshark program. He is in Ningaloo, he says, “for this reef — it is just amazing what you can see.”

Luke is a knowledgeable marine life observer and interpreter, keen conservationist, and supports manta ray and whaleshark research projects.

Sail Ningaloo is working with researcher and Murdoch University scientist Frazer

McGregor to collect manta ray data. (With the Coral Bay community, he has identified more than 530 individual manta rays). Whalesharks have arrived to feed and will be there until July, with the whales migrating up and down the coast from June to early November. In February, scientists announced that they had identified a new species of stingray in Ningaloo Marine Park. Part of the maskray family, it has a wingspan of just 30cm.

The UNESCO World Heritage Centre is expected to announce in June whether the Ningaloo Coast will be added to the World Heritage List.

The Sail Ningaloo crew has also just done a dive reconnaissance trip. “One amphitheatre had four great big cod and big manta rays came in to be cleaned,” says John. “There were fan corals, sponge corals and good structures . . .” There will be a compressor to refill dive tanks.

We chat about “comfy dives”, particularly for casual divers who also want fine food and service, or couples where one dives and the other wants to lie in the shade and read. Dives inside the reef might be only



Luke Riley preparing lunch.

6-12m deep, and 15-20m outside. But the light and the beauty is also near the surface. John and Luke tell how they have had to gently coax keen divers into just snorkelling (“we’re divers, not snorkellers”) — “and by the third day we were battling to get them in the water for a dive.” They just wanted to snorkel.

The four partners had been planning Sail Ningaloo for three years, applying for the licence to operate in this delicate area and finding the right vessel for the job. “We had felt for some time that Ningaloo Reef was lacking in high-end activities,” says John.

Now they are providing that. The rates are based around \$500 a day for exclusive, quality tourism. Priceless memories and great care and comfort.

fact file

- Sail Ningaloo has extended its three-day, two-night Coral Garden Spectacular tour as a special deal. It now departs Coral Bay at 4pm on the day prior to the departure date, so guests will be out exploring for three days and three nights and return to Coral Bay at approximately 4pm on the last day of the tour. From now until October 31, a king stateroom is \$1850 per person, a deluxe cabin is \$1550.
- The Ningaloo Escape Tour is extended to five days and five nights and is \$3000 for a king stateroom, \$2500 for a deluxe cabin.
- The nine-day Ultimate Ningaloo Tour package includes a bonus extra two nights accommodation and meals and is \$4900 for a king stateroom and \$4100 for deluxe cabin.
- See www.sailningaloo.com.au or phone 9942 5869.
- Stephen Scourfield travelled with Australia’s Coral Coast.



Luke Riley with a feeding ray. Pictures: Stephen Scourfield

And so the day passes with easy conversation, the sound of the ocean, sun and salt, all under the canopy of cerulean sky. And, after a wonderful entre platter, there is a tasty dinner of fresh fish, on a bed of sweet potato and potato, and with a lively salad. All fresh and delicious — followed by a lime tartlet.

And I lie back again, but this time on that big bed in the stateroom, with the big hatch above me open, the breeze blowing through and the stars rotating overhead — spinning like the mash of memories of this one incredible, indelible day.



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