

AUSTRALIA

WHALES AND MUCH, MUCH MORE OFF NINGALOO REEF

GEAR GUIDE

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CORNWALL

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Living the life of Riley

Tony Baskeyfield took his family Down Under and spent the Christmas break diving and snorkelling on Ningaloo Reef. As he reveals, it was a magical experience

Photographs by TONY BASKEYFIELD





Shore Thing at sunset



Lennie and Luke Riley

I first met Luke Riley in the Seychelles in 2005 where he was working as a dive guide for the MCCS whaleshark programme. He told me about a new diving operation he planned to set up onboard a sailing catamaran in Australia's Ningaloo Reef. We kept in contact by email and I received information on the great adventures he was having. He'd tell me about the tiger sharks he saw feeding on the carcass of a humpback whale, or the many manta rays, turtles, dugongs and whalesharks they were seeing. Australia is a long way away but I thought that it would be worth the journey to experience Ningaloo Reef firsthand. On the way there, I planned to visit Perth and the Shark Bay's World Heritage Area to sample Western Australia and take in the land attractions along the way, too.

The first thing I noticed about Western Australia is that it is nearly always windy, caused by a world-wide wind band 'The Roaring 40s'. This, combined with sea breezes from the land heating up and drawing in cooler air from above the ocean, makes Ningaloo Reef a blowy area almost all the time. Throughout the season the winds change. From March-May the land breezes flattens the sea, and from September-December, sea breezes and the cyclone season bring in the edge of tropical monsoons and occasionally very calm conditions.

Ningaloo Reef is the world's largest fringing reef, located off the north west coast of Western Australia, approximately 1,200km north of Perth. The reef is 260km long and is up to 20km wide in places.

We planned to get there via a combination of flights and a Greyhound bus from Perth. There's only one road, the North West Coast highway, which runs from Perth to Coral Bay.

"Just outside Ningaloo Reef, at the most westerly point at Steep Point, there is the healthiest population of 30,000 humpback whales in the southern hemisphere that pass by and mate in and around the reef"



Heading out for a snorkel

At Coral Bay we boarded Shore Thing, a beautiful liveaboard sailing catamaran with five cabins accommodating a maximum of ten guests. Shore Thing was going to be our home over Christmas for the next five days of diving and snorkelling on Ningaloo Reef.

The general depth of Ningaloo is around 10-12m, so the wildlife is easy to spot, especially while snorkelling. At first I wasn't sure what the diving would be like on such a shallow reef, having always equat-

ed great experiences and encounters with diving in deeper waters. After diving there for a week it became apparent that the confines of the reef and the shallowness of the area kept the wildlife in an area where they could be easily seen. The rays or turtles could not dive away into the depths and disappear from sight. In fact, we were able to snorkel with the mantas and see them being cleaned at a cleaning station. We visited and revisited this cleaning station several times as it was such a great opportunity to see them, often sighting up to seven mantas at any one time.

Limestone and algae attract turtles. In one particular area was a stretch of limestone ridges and smooth lumps covered with green algae. The depth here at the lumps was around 2-3m in a 50-metre wide strip for about a mile. Hence, the name of the site, 'The Green Mile'. There were pufferfish and octopus, but most notably this is a turtle-spotter's paradise. We snorkelled along the Green Mile with the flow of the current while Luke skippered the boat alongside us. Every so often we spotted a 'lump' on the limestone or in a dip between the ridges, which turned out to be green turtle feeding on the algae. Some of them allowed us to get very close while others, intent on feeding, were startled and dashed off with a flip of their front flippers. Between us we saw around 30 turtles in a most-relaxing hour-long snorkel.





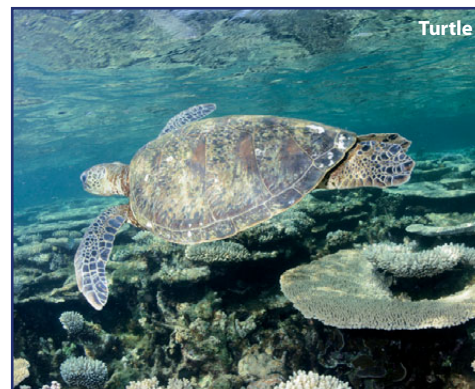
A pretty excited Sophie!



Grey reef shark



Turtle



Manta



Diver admiring a wobbegong



Where else in the world can you see a kangaroo on the beach? On Christmas Day at Point Cloates, near an old whaling station, we went ashore to watch the sun go down with a beer and a glass of wine. As I walked up a sand dune I spotted a large red kangaroo hopping along the beach, which then disappeared off into the scrub. This area is so wild - there is more here than just kangaroos. Wild goats, snakes, emus, lizards and birds are everywhere. The only thing I didn't see or miss were people. This

area is so remote, it's great to get away and not see anyone for five days.

To get a deeper dive of more than 20m you have to go outside the reef, where with the prevailing winds make the sea a bit rougher. Diving in Daigon Gap, just outside the Ningaloo Reef, is a real contrast. Firstly, the reef's topography is completely different, with a distinctive wall line and a sandy bottom. The visibility increased to around ten to 15 metres and the water was a bit more green, with

pieces of weed suspended in it. As soon as we hit the seabed at around 25m, a group of six grey reef and a nurse sharks came to investigate. Then we saw a green turtle swoop by. Along the dive route we spotted a bull ray, wobbegong and a huge crayfish with one-metre-long antennae. As we surfaced from the first dive, we unanimously agreed it was so good that we should definitely dive it again. It was an incredible dive.

In the summer months this area is a super highway for migrating humpback whales. Just outside Ningaloo Reef, at the most westerly point at Steep Point, there is the healthiest population of 30,000 humpback whales in the southern hemisphere that pass by and mate in and around the reef. There are so many here, Luke has had 12- to 15-metre-long humpback whales riding the bow wave of his boat. They were en route to their birthing area north of Broome. Luke does not have a license for customers to swim or dive with marine mammals. However, if you're in the water when they are passing in June-September (which is very likely), you're not going to swim away from the experience!

This area has a history of whaling, with old whaling stations close by at Point Cloates. Although whaling was stopped in 1963, there are the remains of an old sunken whale chaser that we snorkelled, with the boilers standing half submerged and the engine with the crankshaft underwater at 2m.

One afternoon we sighted 30 pink whiprays feeding in a group on a shallow sand bank about 3-5m deep moving slowly from our boat. We couldn't get our fins on quickly enough





WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...



NINGALOO REEF, AUSTRALIA

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly to Perth in Western Australia, and then take flight to Exmouth - Qantas offer daily flights from Perth to Exmouth, and Skywest fly three times per week. You can then hire a car or take a mini bus transfer to Coral Bay (the Greyhound bus is no longer operational).

WHEN TO VISIT

Remember this is the southern hemisphere and it is winter there when it is summer here. You can see humpback whales from June–October, whalesharks from March–July, and dugongs from March–July.

“Luke’s marine safari combines diving and snorkelling with the best onboard food I’ve ever experienced”

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Valid passport with six months to expiry.

CURRENCY

Australian Dollar (£1 = \$1.54).

WHERE TO EAT AND MEET

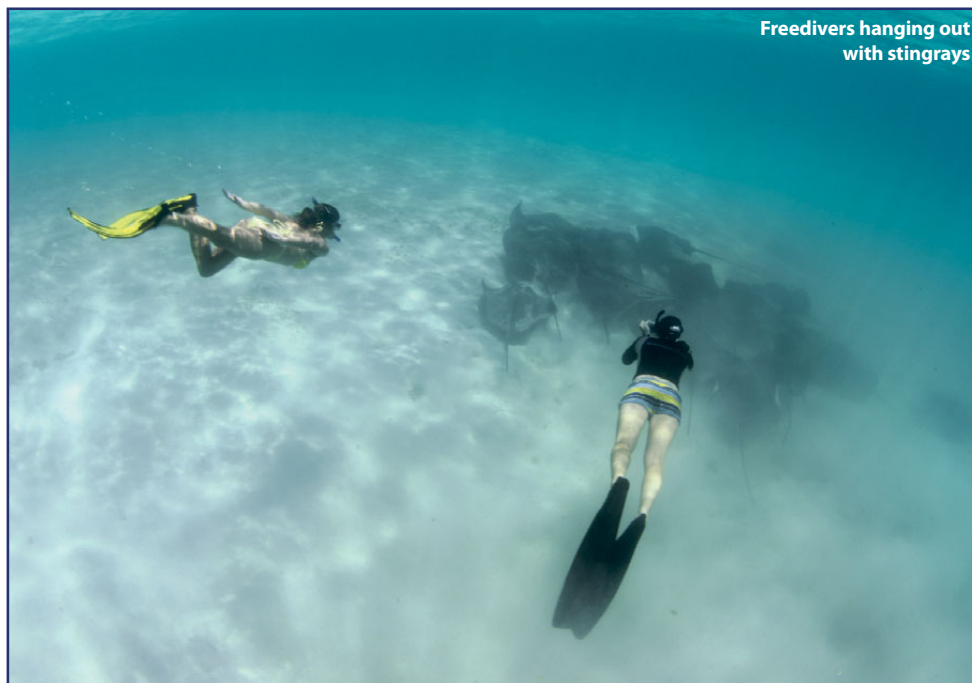
There are many bars and restaurants in Coral Bay. A meal out for one with a beer in a pub is approximately \$30–40.

THE LOCAL BREW

Tooheys. A beer in a bar costs \$7.

VERDICT

Ningaloo Reef offers plenty for all levels of diver, with much of the diving taking place in 10–12m, plus great snorkelling means the family can join in too.



Freedivers hanging out with stingrays

“This area is so wild – there is more here than just kangaroos. Wild goats, snakes, emus, lizards and birds are everywhere. The only thing I didn’t see or miss were people”

and went in the water to snorkel among them for 30 minutes. The rays were not bothered by us swimming over them and bunched closer to each other. The crew onboard our boat said that they had seen this grouping behaviour before. There were some large cobia along with giant trevally hanging around for bits of food that was stirred up by the rays. Pink whiprays are a common species of stingray found in Ningaloo Reef and almost always occur in aggregations, sometimes partially buried in the sediment and even stacked in piles. These stingrays are very social creatures and school in synchrony to avoid predators by gathering in a mass when feeding. The group foraging offers the benefit of better protection against predators and more chances of capturing prey with greater efficiency when exploiting a food source. Stingrays are demersal (living on the seabed), so have evolved to hunt invertebrates living in the sediment. To uncover prey, they beat their ‘wings’ and jet water into the sand, a process known as ‘bioturbation’, to feed on small crustaceans like prawns, crabs, molluscs and clams. Because they can only penetrate the sediment to a certain depth, rays tend to ‘dig’ and move on. Stingrays play a significant role in the marine environment. Their hunting behaviour turns and aerates the sediment. Rays themselves are important prey for sharks, which hunt them by night. So these rays normally feed during daylight hours and go for cover under rocks or in the sand at

night in piles with their tails poking outward.

Luke’s marine safari combines diving and snorkelling with the best onboard food I’ve ever experienced. It was fresh, healthy and could be described as Australian haute couture. I was amazed that Lannie (Luke’s wife) was able to prepare the elegant and simple food and also had time to dive with us! If everything fails and the weather is bad, Lannie said the food must be fantastic with the best service.

Shore Thing with Luke and Lannie has been going for three years. His diving operation (www.sailningaloo.com.au) is one of a kind in a very special place with a crew that is keen to share the experience. He told me that Ningaloo is the perfect environment to explore, and Luke has a big backyard to venture out into. He enjoys seeing it all and it happens so quickly, in a fraction of a second. You can see a whale breaching, manta rays, passing tiger sharks and beautiful sunsets. He has personally explored and found all of the diving locations and all the dive sites we dived and is still finding more. So the places we visited and dived have only been seen by a handful of people. The area we covered was around 100km from Coral Bay and as the reef is 260km long, there’s a lot more to discover. He plans to explore more of the reef and intends to go to the Mortobello Islands, which are 200km north of Coral Bay. This was a nuclear test area in the 1950–60s and has now been opened up for diving. ■