

THE SUNDAY TIMES SECTION 6 | SEPTEMBER 16, 2012

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travel



CRUISING: THE COMPLETE GUIDE

Winter-sun sailings, river voyages,
bargains and far-flung adventures P14

PLUS Australia's other reef ★ Autumn fun in the forest ★ A hip City hotel

Monica and Michael Sweet/Getty; Suzanne Long/Alamy

FANCY SEEING YOU HERE

Australia has a new diving hot spot, and it's not on the Great Barrier Reef. Susan d'Arcy has a (humpback) whale of a time underwater at Ningaloo

Turquoise waters, bone-white sands, colourful corals and a rainbow's worth of fish — it could be any of the world's premier dive destinations, but, once you learn the name of this site, you'll know it could only be Australia. It's called Old Farts.

So now you'll assume it's on the Great Barrier Reef, but, these days, Aussies don't go to Queensland when they want to see their best underwater treasures. They travel to Ningaloo, a ribbon of reef that runs for 186 miles along the pristine west coast, from Exmouth to Red Bluff, 90 miles north of Carnarvon.

For years, this was the Cinderella of the snorkelling world, overshadowed by its east-coast equivalent. Yet with more than 300 types of coral and 450 fish species, as well as up to 500 whale sharks and countless humpback whales passing through each year, it's extraordinary. The reef's recent elevation onto the Unesco World Heritage List has thrust it into the spotlight. Qantas has increased flights to Exmouth, making access easier, and a handful of small, eco-sensitive accommodation options have sprung up, making it an irresistible package.

Among them is the area's only live-aboard sail boat, the Shore Thing, and I boarded the 51ft catamaran at Coral Bay. Like Exmouth, where I saw emus walking the streets, Coral Bay is so superbly "outback", it practically has corks hanging from its window frames. The town has seen huge expansion recently, up from three streets to four, but it still has only one pub, two cafes and no resident police. Should you fancy dressing up for dinner, it's a 90-mile drive to the nearest cocktail bar. (Don't be tempted to speed, though: a kangaroo might leap out at you, although at least the police no longer use planes to catch offending drivers.)

Fortunately, things are a whole lot more interesting on the water. Luke

Riley, a former investment banker and our captain, asked us for our shopping lists. I said I'd love to see dugongs, my husband, Gary, was after manta rays, while Chris and Don, from Sydney, wanted to swim with Nemos (aka clownfish). Luke nodded confidently. I assumed this was one of those "If you had to marry Brad Pitt or George Clooney..." conversations, but, as we watched red swirls streak the sky, and the divemaster and cook, Vicky, served us canapés and drinks, we heard something draw breath beneath us.

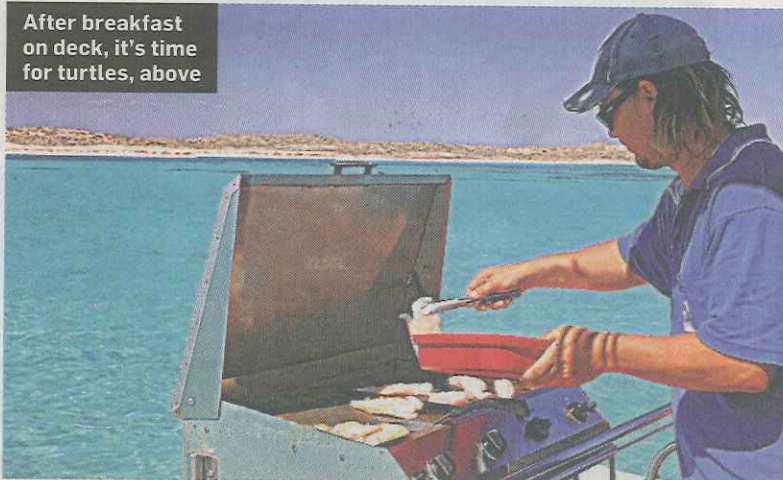
We looked down to see a turtle taking a lungful of air before bobbing back into the sea. A few seconds later, another popped its head up, just feet from our toes, then another. We must have seen about 20 in 40 minutes, and I started to believe I might see a dugong (like a manatee, sometimes called a sea cow), which I had never yet encountered.

The Shore Thing can take 10 holiday-makers, although there were only four on this trip, which meant plenty of choice for wildlife-watching, from the crow's nest to the bow's "trampoline

nets". Chris, Don and I were sticking to snorkelling, but Gary wanted to dive, so, while we breakfasted on baked eggs and bacon, he and another divemaster, Prue, put on their tanks and sank to 30ft, where they immediately came face to face with a tiger shark, the world's second most deadly. Gary almost drowned with fear. Prue, on the other hand, swam towards it, reasoning that it was far too well fed on the reef to bother with her. Thankfully, She was right.



After breakfast on deck, it's time for turtles, above



My first snorkel was more sedate, but no less successful — a turtle swam underneath me and we saw fields of dazzling corals, angelfish, reef sharks, stingrays, shoals of tiny chromis and Nemos. It was blissful and ridiculously easy. We decided when to slide off the back of the boat and when to call it a day; on our return, Vicky was taking freshly baked bread out of the oven. During lunch on deck, we saw a dolphin, a humpback whale and, finally, my first dugong.

In between snorkels, we strolled along beaches littered with starfish and backed by dunes. At night, nature put on an even better show: a red moon, a trick that occurs when there is so much desert dust in the air that only red, rather than green and blue, light can penetrate, so the moon appears to blaze as scarlet as the sun while it rises. It was mesmerising.

Then the humpbacks arrived. Pods are spotted along this coast from June to November, travelling north to their calving grounds in the waters off the Kimberley, then back to the Antarctic to feed. Gary and Prue had gone for a dive, and the rest of us were sunning ourselves when we spotted the first one. It was bigger than a bus. More arrived, and we looked into their eyes as they swam alongside the boat. We saw rainbows arc from their tails. They breached so close that, as they exhaled, our faces were misted in the spray from their blowholes. Actually, that's whale snot,

said crew member Bryony, quite clearly an Australian.

Underwater, the divers could hear the whales singing as they swept by. Humpbacks produce the longest and one of the most complex songs in the animal kingdom, an unforgettable soundtrack that reverberated through Prue and Gary's bodies. Who cares if you never see manta rays after that? Well, Luke did.

Just when we had almost persuaded him it didn't matter, he caught sight of a shadowy something. Seconds later, we were floating over a manta ray. I'd swum with mantas once before: it was a bunfight, with 25 of us thrashing about as instructors blew whistles to attract our attention, while screaming instructions to move left or right for a better view. Here, we quietly followed the manta until a dugong came along and spooked it.

There was one thing we'd rarely spotted: other people. For four days, we'd had the world's largest fringing coral reef all to ourselves. That's what I call luxury.

Susan d'Arcy travelled as a guest of Bailey Robinson and Tourism Western Australia

Travel details: Bailey Robinson (01488 689700, baileyrobinson.com) has four nights, full-board, on the Shore Thing (sailningaloo.com.au) and three nights' B&B at the Richardson Hotel & Spa, in Perth, from £4,320pp, including Qantas flights from Heathrow to Perth, via Singapore, and transfers. Or try Tailor Made Travel (0845 456 8050, tailor-made.co.uk) or Bridge & Wickers (020 3642 9252, bridgeandwickers.co.uk).

For more information on Western Australia, see westernaustralia.com.

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ST See a slideshow of Ningaloo Reef's extraordinary wildlife at thesundaytimes.co.uk/travel

"As we were being served canapés and drinks, we heard something draw breath"