



The land where time stands still

Leaving behind the hectic modern world to explore the epic landscape of the great Kimberley leaves a lasting impression. *By Lynn Gail*

I didn't know the sky could be purple pre-dawn. I also didn't know the startling beauty its hues could create when mirrored in pristine water at the first hint of daylight.

Like a curtain rising on a theatrical performance, the plum panorama morphs into daybreak blues as the star of the show emerges. It needs no introduction as it casts morning rays upon a landscape so ancient, yet so unspoiled, it belies its billion-year-old history.

I'm exploring the Kimberley region on an 11-day voyage with adventurers Heritage Expeditions. The area's 422,000 square kilometres is vast – starting in Broome, Western Australia, and ending on the border of the Northern Territory. As our Zodiac snakes past dense mangrove swamps yet to emerge from night, nature's sound technicians play the accompanying soundtrack – birds chirping the sweet dawn chorus. The moon fades, 100m-high cliffs glow like leathery pitted orange peel, and fox bats flap above, signalling the great Kimberley is awake.

We're searching Porosus Creek for the Kimberley's most notorious predator – the saltwater crocodile – one of earth's deadliest creatures. "At 6m long, 'salties' are the largest croc ever recorded, and can weigh around 1000kg," says Steve Todd, our expedition leader and driver. "Their bite force can measure 200 tonnes of pressure, the strongest of any animal in the world. So, keep arms, legs, everything, inside the Zodiac," he warns, as all eight of us slide inwards.

True to the region's reputation, we soon spot a distinctive Toblerone spine jutting from the water. The beast's hazel-speckled eye watches us stealthily as if ready to rip into moving prey. He is still as stone. It's a stark reminder we're in crocodile country, and he's not alone. We spot others sunning themselves as they blend into muddy banks snapping up mudskippers and flame-backed fiddler crabs with a quick flick of their giant jaws.

Dwarfed by towering sandstone cliffs, we meander back to our floating home, the *Heritage Adventurer*, passing craggy rock faces shaped into golden honeycomb by constantly changing tides.

LEFT: King George Falls is a Kimberley highlight © Tourism WA



“We go full throttle, pushing against water so strong it spits us out like a rubber ducky in a surging wave.”

The Kimberley experiences the largest tidal ranges in the world and extreme tides here can reach 15m at high tide and fall to a mere couple of metres at low tide.

Without the constant background din of traffic, the power of the land's layers – where the ancestors of this land's Indigenous owners once journeyed across the untouched earth, living in harmony with nature – is affecting. More so because of yesterday's Welcome to Country at Wijingarra Butt Butt (Freshwater Cove) which, at 55,000 years old, Australian scientists have dated as one of the oldest occupied sites in Australia. Wijingarra Tours senior guide and elder Gideon Mowaljarlai told us about two famous Dreamtime characters who had fought each other, Jurnkun and Wadoy. “Wadoy's

blood was dark, Jurnkun's light,” he'd told us. “These are the colours I use for ochre when welcoming people to Country.”

Mowaljarlai described how his clan shares everything in kinship – a complex system that dictates social responsibilities and a marriage system that keeps bloodlines pure when deciding who can marry whom from their moieties, Jurnkun or Wadoy. Adorned with ceremonial ochre, we'd hiked to caves where Wijingarra Tours owner and Arraluli Clan Country elder Neil Maru talked about cave art dating back an estimated 20,000 years. Protected by an overhang, paintings included Wadoy and Jurnkun, Arraluli's spiritual beliefs, weather patterns, animals and knowledge of their land, all in their encyclopaedic library, only etched in rock.

Our days are spent exploring pockets of untouched land, hidden bays and islands where high-ceilinged sandstone caves called Hathaway's Hideaway (named after the wife of Peter Satori, an explorer and fisherman) look as though they've been modelled on Europe's centrepiece cathedrals. On board we indulge in five-star cuisine, soak up talks by the highly knowledgeable expedition team on subjects covering the Kimberley's otherworldly geology, extensive bird and sea life, and its 60,000-year-old cultural history. When we cruise through rust-blushed landscape it's easy to imagine First Nations people roaming the land, reading the ecosystem, being at one with Country.

The expedition crew also create adrenaline rushes, and midway through



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: The *Heritage Adventurer* was purpose-built for remote expeditions; The incredible colours of the Kimberley; Cave art dates back an estimated 20,000 years BELOW: Up-close views via Zodiac

the cruise I find myself in a Zodiac on a 9m-high tide executing practice ‘donuts’ before entering the turbulent washing machine waters of the famous Horizontal Falls. Matt, our driver, says with a twinkle in his eye: “Lean in, death-grip the ropes, don’t let go and smile for the camera.” He knows what’s coming. My breakfast threatens to rise as we go full throttle, pushing against water so strong it spits us out like a rubber ducky in a surging wave. I soon see why Sir David Attenborough described the falls as “one of the greatest wonders of the world”. They challenge all notions of gravity. We go again, ‘yahooing’ into the abyss, abandoning restraint, releasing childhood glee. It’s what adventures are made of.

On our last day, we slide into Zodiacs before first light and head across Koolama Bay towards the ancient red sandstone cliffs of King George River gorge. The guiding lights of Jupiter, Venus and the Moon point the way along the 15km stretch to the twin waterfalls. Steve Todd

is at the Zodiac helm, and en route his binocular-strength eyes spot the silvery back of a crocodile in the distance. “Mate! You could spot a tadpole at night,” laughs Tansy, the guide in our buddy-boat over the two-way radio. She’s right. Two minutes later he sees a thick orange and white rope dangling in an overhang. An explorer at heart, Todd glides much closer as a brown tree snake slithers back into a slit.

The falls, reputed to be desert-dry late August, are all but forgotten as we stay, adding sightings to our wildlife list: an elegant long-legged white-faced heron, leathery Mertens’ water monitor lizard, and a graceful brahminy kite soaring high on a breeze.

When we reach the falls, gentle cascades trickle down a sheer 80m rockface polishing the surface until it shines like marble. But the towering tapestry of the Warthon Sandstone cliffs – upright, strong and powerful, with timeworn crevices and deep chasms – create the final curtain finale as we motor back along the mighty King George River. 🦘



TRAVEL FACTS

CRUISE NAME

Kimberley Explorer – Expedition
Cruising Australia’s Iconic
Kimberley Coast with Heritage
Expeditions. During 2026, prices
start from AUD\$8928 per person.

GETTING THERE

The cruise starts from either
Broome, Western Australia, or
Darwin, Northern Territory.

MORE INFORMATION

heritage-expeditions.com

