

EXPERIENCING THE SPICE OF LIFE

Be swept along on a tide of adventure through Australia's remote north-west and Indonesia's exotic Spice Islands, on this 2015 Australian Geographic Society special expedition.

Story and Photography by Chrissie Goldrick,
Editor-in-Chief, Australian Geographic.

Cinnamon Dawn. The sun rises over eastern Flores Island as the ship steers towards the bustling port of Larantuka

A convoy of minibuses lines up at the boom gate to the Broome Deep Water Wharf, which juts into the turquoise waters of Roebuck Bay. Inside the vehicles, 102 excited guests glance towards the sea, hoping to catch a glimpse of the *National Geographic Orion*, the vessel that will become our floating home for the next fortnight. But where is it?

From this end of the 700m wharf, there is no sign of the 4000-tonne expedition ship. The minibus convoy slowly makes its way to the embarkation zone at the far end of the jetty. Soon, a few tall components of the ship's radio equipment rise into view, but the bulk of the vessel's gleaming blue-and-white hull remains obscured below the level of the wharf.

It seems as though the ship is flirting with us, coyly holding back its charms until we are aboard. But, in reality, this is our first taste of the Kimberley's legendary tides, the power and fury of which have pummelled

the fraying north-western edge of Australia for aeons, whittling it into a coastline of dramatic variety.

These daily tidal fluctuations will shape our journey for the next eight days, as we sail from Broome to Wyndham. This leg of our expedition will be the first half of a great sea adventure that will eventually take us north, to the exotic Spice Islands of the Indonesian archipelago.

Due to the exceptionally low tide, we board the *National Geographic Orion* via its top deck. This unconventional start to our trip sets the tone for the rest of our voyage, during which "expect the unexpected" becomes the catchcry. Among the benefits of cruising on smaller expedition ships such as this one is the opportunity for the captain to respond rapidly to changing conditions and to grasp opportunities as they arise. This is a clear advantage when you are cruising a course as dynamic as the one we are about to take.

The Kimberley is one of the world's last true wilderness areas, and a destination that many Australians harbour dreams of visiting. With most of its 423,500sq. km inaccessible by road, the coast often provides a first encounter for those lucky enough to realise those dreams.

The tides along here, and particularly those in King Sound, are the second biggest in the world after those of Canada's Minas Basin, in Nova Scotia. "Where you have the close orientation of the continental shelf to the coastline...you've got one of the three factors that allow for big tides," says Harry Christensen, the ship's marine biologist and resident larrikin. "Then there's the shape of the coastline, which here is a contorted, twisting type of geomorphology. That's the second factor," he says, adding that the third is having a number of large rivers feed into the shoreline.

"Having all three factors together allows for this region of the Kimberley to be extreme



Whale of a time. Humpbacks abound in the waters off the Kimberley



Cultures Seekers. Passengers make their way to a rock-art gallery at Freshwater Cove

in its tidal variations,” says Harry. The ship’s disappearing act at Broome was the result of a 9–10m variation, but the biggest tides of the year occur around the equinoxes, when king tides of 11–12m are often recorded.

The coastline remains accessible year-round, even during the Wet, when a land-based adventure is a near impossibility. Each season ushers in changes that mean every trip holds the promise of a new experience. Our expedition takes place during the height of the dry season. It’s a time of the year when the Kimberley’s famous waterfalls, which thunder so spectacularly during the monsoon, diminish to thin veils of mist, barely visible from a distance.

But the absence of a great deluge cascading over the top of the King George Falls, Faraway Bay, allows our party to scale its 100m cliffs and take in the spectacular views from the top. We then take a cooling dip in the shallow residual waters of the King George River, where there is no chance of encountering that ever-present resident of the Kimberley’s alluring azure coastal waters, the saltwater crocodile.

Another advantage of visiting at this time of year is the abundance of humpback whales. The waters around the Buccaneer and Bonaparte archipelagos are home to the world’s largest breeding population of humpbacks, which spend the winter months calving and mating here in the warm, sheltered waters of the many islands and inlets. During our expedition, we have



Rock Generation. Wayne and Ishmael tell stories represented in the Wandjina rock art gallery.

frequent close and lengthy encounters with the whales, with plenty of breaching, fluking and tail slapping on show. Luckily, the ship’s naturalists and photography tutors are always on hand to offer information and practical tips on how to best capture these moments.

The other major drawcard of the Kimberley is its rich indigenous heritage. Nowhere is this more evident than in the rock art that adorns seemingly every cave. In the Kimberley, Aboriginal culture is undergoing a renaissance, and, thanks to the passionate commitment of individuals such as Donny Woolagoodja, of the Worrorra people, ancient traditions are being passed on to

younger generations.

One afternoon, we board the *National Geographic Orion*’s fleet of inflatables and power along on a flooding tide to Wijingarra Bard Bard (Freshwater Cove). Here, we meet members of Donny’s family, who welcome us with ochre face painting and lead us to a rock-art gallery concealed under a sandstone overhang.

Two of Donny’s nephews, Wayne Rastus and Ishmael Buruga, interpret the images for us. We are enthralled to be engaging with these local people. For first-time Kimberley visitor Robyn Abbott, from Perth, it is a highlight.

“It was the first time that we had ever seen rock art up close...and it was lovely to meet

the beautiful people who look after these paintings,” she says. “They’re so proud and they love their culture. It’s not easy for them in urban life to show how proud they are of their heritage...but out here in the Kimberley, it’s their terrain and we were invited onto their land, and I loved the way they presented it through the art.”

We see more rock art on stunning Bigge Island, about 5km from the mainland, where powerful tidal forces have hewn the soft sandstone cliffs into a labyrinth of sea caves. Some of these house outstanding examples of contact art, including depictions of 18th century sailors smoking pipes and wearing clogs, and portrayals of their sailing ships.

Later that evening, on another part of the island, we are whisked into a vast sea cave that is only accessible when the tide is particularly low. The cave’s resonant acoustics induce an impromptu sing-along among the guests and crew, evidence of a growing camaraderie among the passengers.

After a week of cobalt waters and red-gold cliffs, we head north, into the Timor Sea, leaving the Kimberley in our wake. Indonesia is one of Australia’s closest neighbours, but, with the exception of Bali, it’s not high

on the bucket list for many Aussies. This trip will take us first to Timor-Leste (East Timor) and then up into the culturally vibrant chain of islands that comprise Indonesia’s Nusa Tenggara provinces (the Lesser Sunda Islands).

Our first impressions of Timor-Leste exceed our expectations of this recent conflict zone. Jaco Island, at the easternmost tip of Timor, is a picturesque paradise. Just a short step off a dazzlingly white beach is a pristine coral reef teeming with myriad species of fish, which glisten beneath the surface,

tempting snorkellers into the sea. The more energetic among us don scuba gear, or head out to explore the reef by kayak. Others simply take advantage of a day lazing on the beach and frolicking in croc-free waters.

A more active day follows in the capital, Dili, with a climb up 500 steps to the Cristo Rei (Christ the King) statue standing sentinel over the entrance to the harbour. Dili still wears the scars of its battle for independence from Indonesia, which began on 7 December 1975, when Indonesian forces invaded the city just nine days after



Land of the Giants. The Komodo Dragon, the world's largest lizard, is one of the major drawcards of this voyage.



Beach Beauty. Jaco Island, off the easternmost tip of Timor-Leste, is a snorkelling and diving hotspot.



Barrelling Through. A buffalo racer charges through the rice paddies at Pamalung village on Sumbawa Island.

its colonial rulers, the Portuguese, pulled out. For the next 23 years, the East Timorese resistance fought the invading power until, in 1999, the country was placed under UN supervision. Finally, on 20 May 2002, Dili was designated the capital of the newly independent Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.

The consequences of this protracted and bloody struggle for independence are apparent from the moment we disembark. Susan Walsh, a Sydney doctor accustomed to volunteering in confronting situations, wasn't surprised by the conditions in Dili.

"I think it may well become a place that people will want to go to but it's only just getting on its feet," she says. "It's got a long way to go to become a real tourist destination, but...I found it very interesting."

The web of cultures and beliefs that define Indonesian society makes the next few days of island hopping through Nusa Tenggara a colourful experience rich in song, dance and vibrant traditions. Our visits to the islands of Flores and Sumbawa reveal Christian, Hindu and Muslim communities living alongside each other. Older indigenous cultures are also present and active.

Sandwiched between Flores and Sumbawa lies Komodo Island. It's flatter than its neighbours, with a more arid climate and dry savannah-type vegetation. It's here that we have our most thrilling wildlife encounter, when we come within metres of the world's largest lizard, the fearsome Komodo dragon, famous for its size and

aggressive behaviour. The World-Heritage-listed Komodo Island National Park has a population of about 5700 individuals distributed across the islands of Komodo, Rinca, and Gili Motang, and in some coastal regions on Flores.

A big attraction of this expedition for AG subscriber John Cockbill, from Torquay, Victoria, is the Indonesian culture, but the wildlife is an added bonus. "The Komodo dragons, because they are so unique, are an important part of it and we were so lucky... because we saw ten," he says. "Three were in the bush and the rest were around the rangers' accommodation, all on the move, drinking and tongue spitting."

For expedition leader Darrin Bennett, this trip's varied itinerary is particularly appealing. "It gives you the best of what the Kimberley has to offer...and the Spice Islands add that cultural angle," he says.

Harry Christensen agrees, but, for him, having the chance to get his feet wet in Indonesia was a real winner. "In the Kimberley, there's very limited opportunity for swimming because of the crocs, so we get to enjoy the rugged beauty, but then we combine it with the Spice side and the combination works so well," he says.

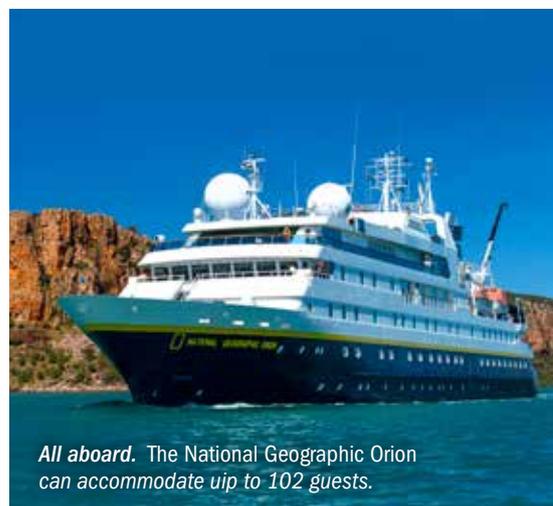
This exciting and varied itinerary will run in August 2015 as an Australian Geographic Society Expedition. AG Society councillor Todd Tai will be on board as host. For every Australian Geographic subscriber who books a place, Lindblad will donate 5 per cent of the ticket back to the AG Society.



Music meet. A Pamalung village band heralds the arrival of the ship's passengers.



Best dressed. A colourful welcome from Mudakeputu villages on Flores Island.



All aboard. The National Geographic Orion can accommodate up to 102 guests.