

THE LUXURY ISSUE travel

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Paspaley Pearl takes lucky visitors up close to the stunning Kimberley coastline. Photos / Supplied, Lisa Garner, Tiana Templeman

BAREFOOT LUXURY

Exploring the Kimberley on a 30-passenger yacht offers the plushiest way to experience Australia's wild coast, writes Tiana Templeman

I thought I already knew the Kimberley well, but a luxury cruise on the 30-passenger Paspaley Pearl proved me wrong.

On this voyage along Australia's remote northwest coastline, it wasn't just the landscape that surprised me. It was also the ship.

The dramatic scenery, abundant wildlife and sense of remoteness I remembered from my previous voyage on a much larger expedition vessel were still there. However, the way we experienced them felt different this time around.

Paspaley Pearl belongs to a third-generation, Australian-owned pearling company that has been sailing the Kimberley's waters since the 1930s. The boutique expedition yacht had a low-key, indulgent vibe that took the concept of barefoot luxury literally.

Shoes were only required to be worn in the ship's plush dining room.

On board, the feeling was contemporary yet traditional. The cabins and dining room on the lower deck had oval portholes, creating a classical cruising aesthetic.

This was enhanced by black and white photographs of Broome's early pearling industry. Thanks to Paspaley's longstanding connection with the Kimberley, the ship offers a unique and very personal look at this remote region.

For example, at the family's pearl farm in remote Kuri Bay, a laconic worker took us on a tour around work sheds that had been repaired many times because of cyclone damage.

Much to the disappointment of the women on the cruise (and the relief of their husbands), there was nowhere to buy pearls.

Instead, we watched in amazement as a worker popped shimmering pearls out of an oyster's fleshy shell. He told us pearling is like a lucky dip. You never know what you're going to discover when you wake up each day.

The same could be said of our experience on board Paspaley Pearl. Because the ship carried so few passengers, excursions had a feeling of spontaneity.

Dining also involved a surprise or two. Eating freshly grilled wagyu steak at linen-draped tables



Checklist KIMBERLEY

DETAILS

A 10-night "Timeless Kimberley" cruise from Broome to Kununurra (or vice versa) on Paspaley Pearl is priced from \$24,435 per person twin-share.

The writer travelled as a guest of Paspaley Expeditions.

inside a huge cathedral sea cave took the concept of a beach barbecue to a whole new level.

Daily excursions included sunset drinks on the beach, weaving through mangrove forests and into secluded bays, and spotting crocodiles and sea eagles.

Laughter bounced off the red cliffs at King George Falls as our guide, Rod Newnham, positioned the Zodiac under tumbling plumes of spray until we were thoroughly soaked.

In a destination that is one-and-a-half times larger than New Zealand, and on a ship that was able to visit places that larger vessels couldn't, we were spoiled for choice.

One afternoon, passengers joined an extended excursion to a secluded waterhole for a swim. I opted for the trip to a beach with a secluded

rock art site. Here we discovered pristine Aboriginal artwork hidden from the elements (and most other tourists), by a rocky overhang. Seeing it felt like a precious gift.

On board the ship, staff quickly got to know their passengers and had our preferences down pat in the first 24 hours.

From day two onwards, two cafe lattes arrived one after the other at breakfast and every afternoon my favourite sundowner drink appeared at the bar on the top deck a few seconds after I did.

Expedition leaders knew who liked going fast in the Zodiacs, who preferred to take things slowly, and which passengers might need extra support.

They always seemed to be in the right place at exactly the right time to assist those who needed it.

This meant less-mobile passengers could participate fully, without the indignity of asking for extra help.

It's moments like these that help to define why a boutique luxury Kimberley voyage is different to a cruise on a larger ship. There were some different excursions on offer too.

I'm not into fishing, but the ship's fancy "tinny" and expert angling guide earned a legion of loyal fans.

One day, passengers hauled in so many huge coral trout that the ship's chef, Alex Bentley, had to ask people to start throwing them back.

Speaking of food, this was another surprise. On an expedition ship, the focus is generally on the destination rather than what's on your plate. Paspaley Pearl is different. This mainly comes down to Bentley who previously headed up the famous Byron Bay restaurant, Raes on Wategos.

In the ship's plush 30-seat dining room, freshly caught fish came with Champagne beurre blanc, and desserts wouldn't have looked out of place at a hatted restaurant.

Dining on exquisite dishes was an unexpected pleasure after days spent spotting crocodiles, navigating narrow gorges and discovering hidden corners along the coast.

The cost of a cruise on Paspaley's expedition ship is akin to the price of the company's exquisite jewellery. Expensive but worth it.

There's a sense of belonging that comes with travelling with just 30 people through one of Australia's most remarkable landscapes.

In a destination that's famous for its grandeur, it was the smaller details that stood out on my voyage.

In a world where bigger often seems better, this felt refreshingly rare.