



the great escape

All aboard for an adventure that is big on experience and grand on design.

WORDS JULIE HOSKING MAIN PICTURE ROB MALCOLM/YALLINGUP GALLERIES

PERHAPS IT'S THE LOCATION in the great outdoors — and I mean great. Maybe it's the fact that I don't have to lift a finger. Or it could be the invigorating swim in cool, clear water under a light shower. Whatever the reason, the stomach is rumbling despite having downed a hearty breakfast only a few hours earlier. Luckily, I'm in the right place, even if the middle of nowhere is a most unlikely place for a five-star picnic.

We've flown into Melaleuca Falls, in the spectacular Kimberley, from the luxury boat True North, which has pulled up in the Prince Regent River. As we arrive five at a time via the onboard helicopter, the stage has already been set — deckchairs perched on rock ledges under tarpaulin in case the rain sets in — and the barman is waiting with offers of wine, beer or something soft. It's tempting but the lure of a promised dip is just too strong. We've been surrounded by water for days and yet not been able to so much as dip our toes. It's a bit like torture but the reasons are compelling — and everywhere. This is crocodile country.

We leave chef Andy Tonge slaving over a makeshift barbie and follow one of the sure-footed guides up over rocks and ledges to a croc-free billabong. Off to the right, water is thundering down Melaleuca thanks to a big wet season, but this is a calm little oasis. The water isn't very deep — we can easily stand on the rock shelf — but it's divine. Cliffs rich with ochre hues tower above us, wildflowers peeking through the cracks. The sun struggles to shine through scattered grey clouds but it doesn't dampen our spirits. Private swimming pools don't come any better than this.

We could loll about all day, except for the intoxicating smell wafting from below. We follow our stomachs back over the rocks and can barely believe our eyes. A feast fit for kings and queens: lamb, fish, crab ... all cooked to perfection. House-made — or should that be, ship-made — bread and salads round out the menu.

As we sip our wine and beers, my fellow travellers — from as far afield as the UK and Victoria — are clearly as gobsmacked about the heli-picnic as I am. With the overcast weather some of the 30-odd passengers had decided to stay onboard True North, but they have missed something special. The work the mostly young Australian crew puts into this day — coming up ahead to get everything ready, guiding us over slippery rocks, preparing and serving sensational food, and cleaning up every last scrap of mess to leave our picnic spot as pristine as we found it — is impressive; military campaigns should run so smoothly. Yes, the 50m, 36-passenger True North is a luxury vessel; yes, guests pay a premium for the experience, but it's an experience that will never be forgotten.

It's just one of many unforgettable moments on this Kimberley tour, starting with our flight to the vast Mitchell Plateau, where pilot Rob Colbert whisks us away in the helicopter over more stunning scapes to the Hunter River, where our home away from home awaits.

Living up to True North's motto "go wild in style", each day is packed with as much adventure as you could possibly want. Hardy fisherfolk head out at the crack of dawn in pursuit of barra or crabs to land that night's



Up close True North edges closer to Kings Cascade as the helicopter hovers for the money shot; Raft Point (above) is home to ancient art and glorious vistas.

boasting rights — and the Nemo hat. The rest of us take to the other tenders (six in all) after breakfast to explore the area captain Gavin Graham has pulled into overnight, or head for the skies in the helicopter to get a bird's eye view of the Kimberley, every vista humbling in its enormity.

We wander around tributaries and creeks with onboard naturalist Andy Lewis, from mangroves to waterfalls, keeping an eye out for crocs; marvel at the captain's skill as he noses True North ever closer to the mighty Kings Cascade, giving us a natural 50m shower; take a hike up to ancient rock art at the imposing Raft Point, admiring wildflowers enroute; watch in awe as the tides change on Montgomery Reef and 140sqkm of coral reef rises out of the ocean, turtles bobbing above the water; and enjoy a thrill-ride through the legendary Horizontal Falls.

Each time, wet, dirty, fished out or exhausted from a day's walking, we come back to utter luxury. Cocktails in the lounge followed by fresh and flavoursome cuisine leading chefs would be proud to dish up. Indeed Andy's food is as much a topic of conversation over the marri dining tables as the incredible sights we see each day — perhaps you truly appreciate fine cooking when you're miles from nowhere.

On our last evening, we are taken to the pristine, coconut-ice-like sands of Silica Beach for cocktails and an ocean dip, a guide keeping lookout on the cliffs in case a croc ventures outside its territory. We laze in deckchairs as the setting sun casts a purply haze across the horizon. Everything is big in the Kimberley, but it's grand aboard True North. **WV**

The author was a guest of True North.

North Star Cruises northstarcruises.com.au

Yallingup Galleries yallingupgalleries.com.au