



# CRUISING THE KIMBERLEY COAST

BY PENNY BROWNE



True North gets close to nature

There she was lying alongside the Wyndham wharf, our adventure cruise ship *True North* looking like a super yacht, her helicopter poised on the deck aft of the bridge.

*True North* is the third vessel operated by the North Star Company owned by Craig Howson and Mark Stothard and based in Broome, Western Australia. This hardworking ship cruises between Broome and Wyndham in the dry season, but also to New Guinea and the Rowley Shoals off the Western Australian coast, to name a few. She is the only vessel of her type to carry her own helicopter, a Bell Ranger 407 that can transport six passengers plus pilot.

*True North* accommodates 36 passengers and on our trip, a crew of 18. Her cabins all have ensembles and range from luxury suites on the upper decks to modest but very comfortable cabins on the lower deck.

The ship has a shoal draft of 2.2 metres for coastal and river exploration and is kept to a very high standard. No shoes were allowed to be worn on board unless going ashore. Shoes were stowed in bins and shelves by the stern where a self help coffee/tea/biscuit area was available for people coming in from trips during the day that often entailed our rising at 6am.

The average age of her highly professional crew is 20-30 and of the passengers 60-70. Captain Chad Avenell who skippered our cruise in June, 2008, emphasized that safety was his prime aim. In an area where sharks and salt water crocodiles lurk, his concern was very understandable.

After an overnight run our cruise began in the morning with a trip up the King George River to its magnificent twin 80 metre high falls. Hemmed on either side by red cliffs of sandstone, the ship edged her way under the careful eye of the skipper till her bow was right into the falls themselves. From the helicopter the

Helicopter landing ashore



At days end

ship below was dwarfed by the cliffs surrounding her and the Kimberley Plateau stretched to the horizon. The Kimberley is an ancient area and rivers have worn down through the sandstone to expose the classic red colours so typical of this dramatic region.

Crocodiles or "salties" as they are known locally are a fact of life in this part of the world. A large cull of these reptiles occurred in the 1970s and 1980s but their numbers are building again. They have been seen as far down as Cairns in the east and Broome in the west.

My travelling companion Judy Bendall told me of an incident with one when she was in one of the six metre aluminium tenders going up the Drysdale River. As the boats rounded a corner a large crocodile made an aggressive lunge at the boat and the crew member had to gun the motor to avoid it. It then turned its attention to the second boat which took avoiding action too. This is fairly unusual we were told but it appears it was probably a male protecting his patch. We were always warned never to put our arms or hands over the side of the tenders as crocs are opportunists.

Another brush with crocs occurred when Judy went mud crabbing. Crocs love mud crabs and finding their favourite prey in the set pots in the river was too much to resist. There were times when retrieving a pot a croc would surface with it still trying to get the crab inside. However, enough mud crabs and later oysters were collected that day for a wonderful feast on the bow of the ship whilst watching a glorious sunset that evening.

Later, I read of a crocodile tragedy that took place at the Cascade Falls further down the coast. In 1987, an American girl called Ginger Meadows who was working on board a tourist vessel visiting this area. She joined some of the crew and skipper in the vessel's tender on a trip to the falls. Ginger and one of the crew foolishly dived off the tender and swam to a rock ledge ▶

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