

THE KIMBERLEY

UNSPOILT FOR CHOICE

A cruise from Broome on Australia's west coast north to Darwin offers travellers the chance to experience the ancient land of the Kimberley and forge a unique connection to country.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY
BY JULIETTA JAMESON

The famous 20th century Australian landscape impressionist, Arthur Boyd, once said he was moved to stress the “metaphysical and mythic” qualities of the Australian outback in his work. He wasn't alone in finding something in the land other than what the eye could see. Dreaming stories were told by the Indigenous people for tens of thousands of years before Europeans turned up fewer than 300 years ago.

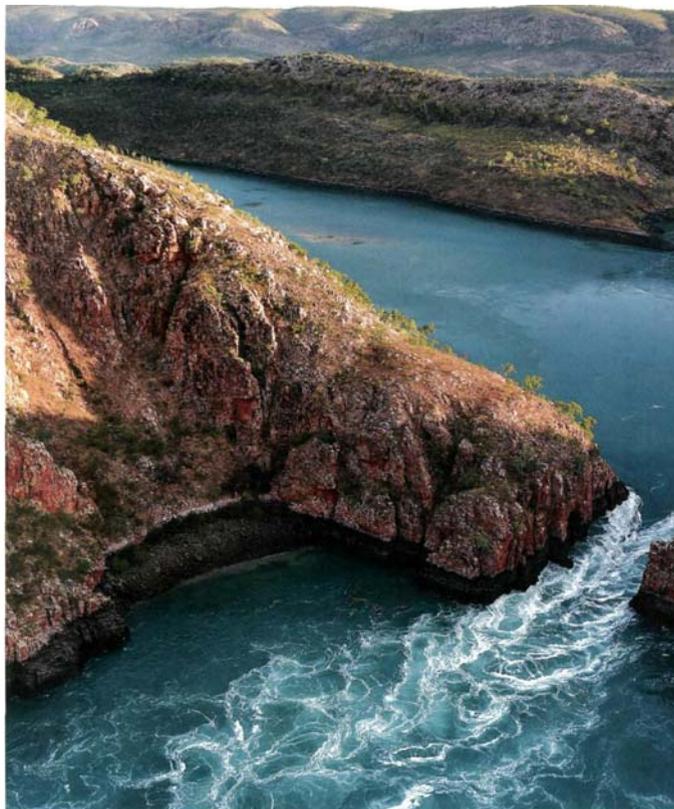
And now, sitting on a rock in the heart of the vast Western Australian wilderness known as the Kimberley, I too, sense something intensely spiritual in the landscape – and like a magnetic force, it draws me in.

I am cruising the Kimberley coast with Abercrombie & Kent and here I sit, gazing at the majestic tiered pools of Punamii-unpuu, or Mitchell Falls. The orange-hued rock here is 1.8 billion years old and it changes so slowly, it looks today like it would have to the people who may have sat on the same ledge as I, perhaps 40,000 years ago. I am imbued with the timelessness.

This Mitchell Falls visit has been one of the most precisely executed excursions of our trip, as it involves a relay of guests being shunted off our ship via Zodiacs and dropped off on a remote beach, where helicopters pick us up for a scenic ride before taking us to the falls. There's an equally tight schedule to get us back to the ship.

I have lost all sense of that, until the assistant cruise director, Sally Escanilla, comes and finds me, alone and meditative on my rock. My chopper is all ready to go, she politely lets me know. It, and my fellow guests, are waiting a good five minutes' walk away. Apologetic and embarrassed, I rise from my reverie and follow Sally, who leads at a pace she knows I can handle across the uneven rocky ground. All the same, she regularly turns around to check on me. And with each check, she calls out: “Don't lose your zen!” Many assistant cruise directors might not give a flying toss about my zen in such circumstances. Such is the Abercrombie & Kent way. It's a high-end, world-renowned outfit, which creates luxurious small-group experiences going above and beyond the norm.

It's also the way of the Kimberley, which invites feeling over thinking with a vastness that is almost incomprehensible, and plenty of intimate, exquisite moments that are mind-blowing. It's like a big abstract painting, the whole a sum of intricate and glorious details. Cruising is a fantastic way to experience that duality, as it pans out to sea to reveal scale, and zooms in with shore and



Zodiac excursions to bring aspects into focus. Abercrombie & Kent is new to the Kimberley, but it is far from new to expedition cruising and taking travellers into challenging wilderness. Coming to the northwest of Australia, it brings the principles upon which its success in this type of travel is founded: a highly qualified and exceptionally personable and enthusiastic naturalist team, combined with the very best hospitality – in this case, partnering with luxurious French small ship company, Ponant, via a full exclusive charter of its state-of-the-art *Le Lapérouse* expedition ship, with fewer than 150 passengers onboard.

STAIRCASE TO THE MOON

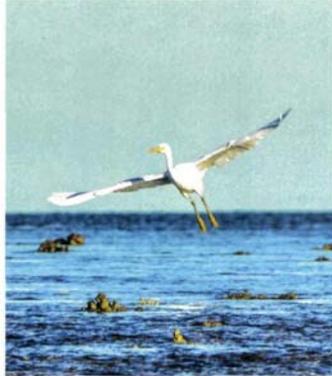
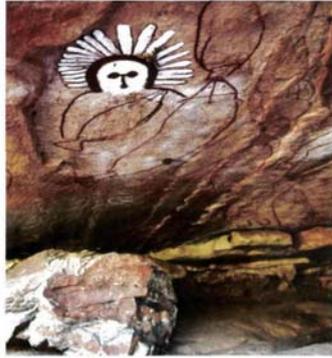
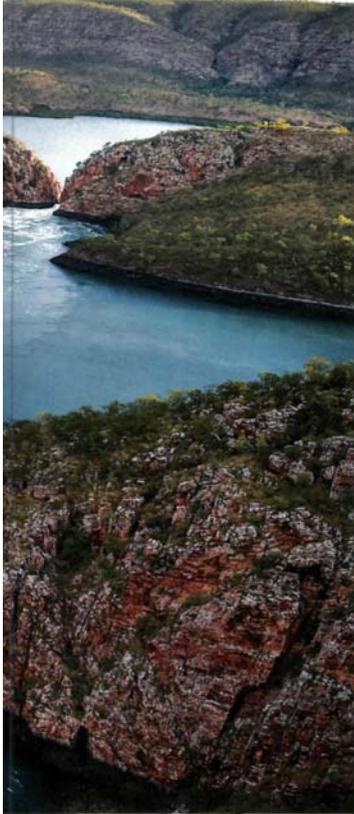
Sally is one of a number of A&K crew members with whom I and several other guests have travelled to Antarctica in years prior, and that familiarity only enhances what will already turn out to be a soul-expanding journey.

Our Kimberley exploration begins in Broome in serendipitous fashion. The famous Staircase to the Moon phenomenon – the gorgeous visual effect of a full moon rising over the mudflats of Roebuck Bay – coincides with our first night in the Western Australian top-end pearling town. It's not part of the sold itinerary, but A&K organises a viewing party at the Mangrove Hotel.

The following night is our official send-off cocktail function on the lawn at the Cable Beach Club Resort, overlooking the iconic sands and a particularly vibrant sunset. Our entertainment is The Pigram Brothers – Broome's most revered Indigenous band. Just as the band's music tells the story of the local Yawuru people, founding member Steve Pigram's son Bart tells it through local tours. The charismatic young leader has his own, much loved and lauded tourism business in Broome, called Narlítja

Clockwise from above: The Kimberley region is awe-inspiring to behold; Aboriginal rock art; One of Australia's most elegant birds, the egret, takes flight.

**THIS IS
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FRONTIER**



Experiences. But he has blocked out the next two weeks to come on our cruise as our cultural guide and lecturer. For guests, it will prove to be a very special privilege.

With an area of 423,517km² and a population of around 36,000 (12,000 of those in Broome), the Kimberley is bordered by saltwater and desert: the Indian Ocean and Timor Sea to the west and north, and the Great Sandy and Tanami deserts inland. This is a largely untamed frontier that's beaten even the most determined of mining companies who have relented to its remoteness and impenetrability.

And it is a place of rare beauty. Its tidal waters are an electric blue like no other. Its cliffs and craggy rises glow in uniquely deep oranges and crimsons. Boulders are stacked like a game of giant Jenga. Some hang and protrude in ways that defy gravity. Big night skies twinkle with an impossible number and density of stars. White sands sparkle under the clearest daytime skies that produce little rain in the six-month dry season.

And then there's the wet, when no tourists come as the rain is often torrential. But at this time, the landscape replenishes, cleanses and polishes its colours again.

For tens of thousands of years, rain, hail or shine, it has been home to Indigenous Australians, who, when they walked it freely, knew its ways – its dangers and its bounty – and who encountered troubling and bloody times when the Europeans arrived to fossick, farm and fence off their tribal heritage. Today, 50 per cent of people who live in the Kimberley are Indigenous, though not living in the way they once did. Bart Pigram is free to speak in his lectures and conversations with guests about the terrible time the Indigenous people had with the settlers in this region – a commendable aspect of A&K's approach. Others might find the subject matter too confronting for a largely white

and middle-class cruising audience. For A&K, the cultural context is an important pillar of their journeys. Pigram is a gentle yet charismatic man with a keen intelligence and humour who lectures factually about the ugly truths and takes his international audience along with him. Perhaps because his vision is ultimately forward-looking and positive.

During excursions to remote islands, where A&K has been given permission to visit sites featuring rock art estimated to be anywhere between 10,000 and 60,000 years old, his knowledge of and passion for the symbolism and storytelling therein is enthralling, bringing the spirits in the sites alive. Our Brisbane-based Australian expedition leader, Brad Climpson, also brings eye-opening insight. To say these excursions deepen my own reverence for the land I call home is to understate it, especially when I see people from South Africa, the US and other countries deeply touched by both the sights of the landscape and its ancient stories.

ANCIENT PHENOMENA

Mostly, the Kimberley just speaks for itself. Its dramatically changing tides caused by the particular form of the continental shelf here create unique phenomena, such as the Horizontal Falls – intense currents pushing through narrow coastal gorges to make the water movement seem like waterfalls. A ride on a small fast boat through it is as beautiful as it is exhilarating.

Then there's Montgomery Reef, at Yawajaba (Montgomery) Island. Our expedition crew organises our morning Zodiac excursion to arrive in the area, just in time to see Australia's largest inshore reef emerge from the water, looking for all the world like it is lifting, though the ocean is subsiding, revealing a vast U-shaped platform of lagoons, islets, mangroves and cascades. Wading birds, feeding turtles, small sharks and sea snakes abound, as we watch mesmerised.

At King George River in the final days of our cruise, we set off early into the lands of the Miwa people onboard our Zodiacs, gasping at the towering cliffs that shade us and the secretive mangroves at their feet, where we spot crocodiles basking in the morning warmth.

It's an hour's Zodiac ride to the King George Falls, with some zigzagging to enjoy wildlife sightings and to get up close to the river's vertical red rises. We have been advised about the falls: it's the dry season, after a particularly low-rainfall wet season. They are barely a trickle. But that means we can drift adjacent to the walls down which the falls will boom again, the water's edge a magical interface of milky aqua sea and candy-striped markings, weathered, worn and tarnished by often immense freshwater barrages.

And then we see her: our expedition director, Suzana Machado D'Oliveira, in a Zodiac with the ship's bar manager. They've been waiting in the falls' basin with a cooler full of French champagne and a glass for each of us.

Our Zodiac pulls up to theirs and right there, in the cavernous magnificence of a watery hall lined in two-billion-year-old stone, we toast to our remarkable adventure, to the awe-inspiring landscape through which we have travelled, to the people who have called it home for some 60,000 years, and to the metaphysics and myth that have so moved us. 🍷



SAIL AWAY

Abercrombie & Kent's Kimberley Cruise: Australia's Last Frontier (2020) runs between Broome, Western Australia and Darwin, Northern Territory. It's an all-inclusive luxury expedition cruise across 13 days, 25 June – 7 July, aboard *Le Lapérouse* and is limited to 148 guests. abercrombiekent.com

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