



INTO THE DEEP

ALL ABOARD!

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MARINE BIOLOGIST **CAROLYN BEASLEY** JOINS A LUXURY EXPEDITION TO THE ATOLLS OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S ROWLEY SHOALS AND DISCOVERS MARINE LIFE LIKE NO OTHER.



“Three, two, one, dive!” comes the countdown from Jacko, my dive instructor, and I roll backwards into the blue. Immediately I see the vibrancy of the reef. Large tabletop corals are overrun with iridescent turquoise baby fish, while boulder corals shelter trout half my size. Four white-tip reef sharks rest on the seafloor and garden eels pop up their heads through the sand like hundreds of fingers with eyes.

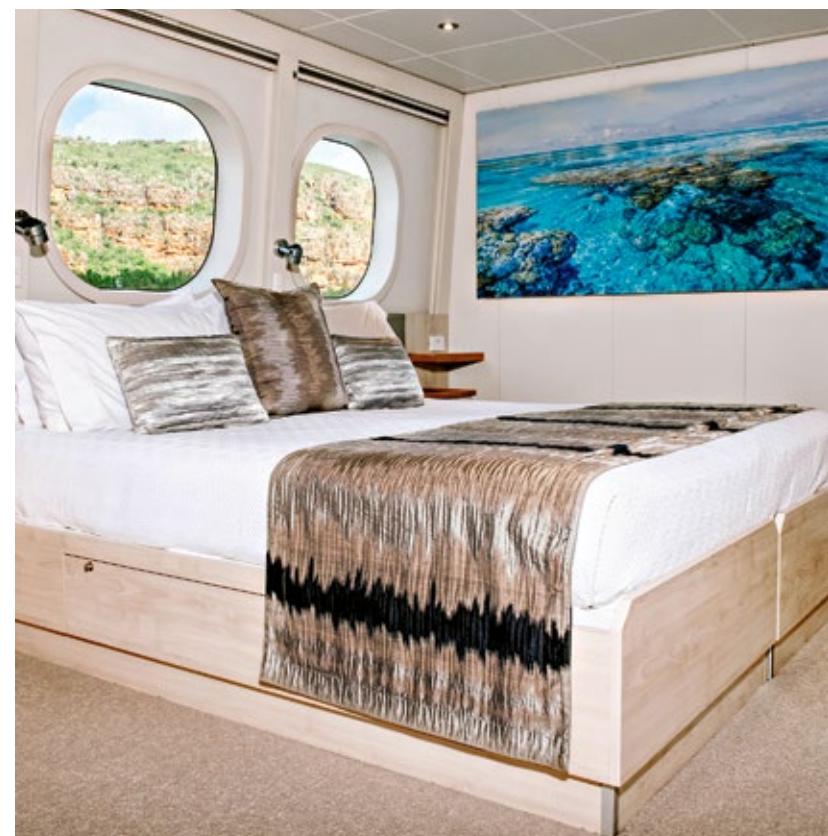
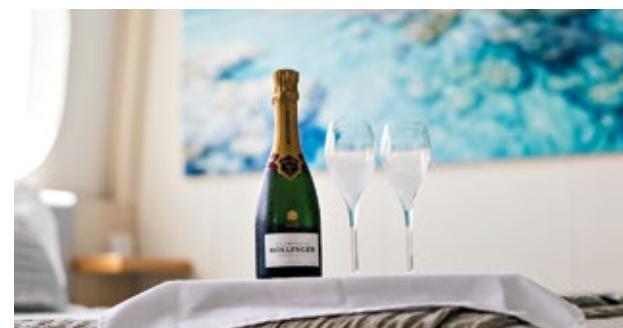
In deeper waters by the reef wall we’re inspected by menacing barracuda, dogtooth tuna and an inquisitive manta ray. My heart pounds when I behold the fastest fish in the sea, a mighty sailfish with its spear-like bill, scrutinising us as it cruises past. Back on the surface, whales breach in

monumental splashes, and I realise this reef is intensely alive at every level. It’s possibly the healthiest I’ve ever seen.

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This is life at the Rowley Shoals – known as the Rowleys – a group of three atoll reefs 300 kilometres west of Broome in Western Australia. And this wonderland is visited by fewer than 300 people each year. I’ve joined the five-night Coral Atoll Cruise with pioneer of luxury Kimberley expeditions, True North Adventure Cruises.

Left and below: The stunning Rowleys, a group of three atoll reefs 300 kilometres west of Broome. Below: The sizeable staterooms on board True North.



STEAMING AHEAD

The True North leaves from Broome overnight to avoid wasting days, and I wake to a view of Clerke Reef. The middle of the three atolls, it’s a 15-kilometre-long reef encircling a turquoise lagoon. The 50-metre vessel has a shallow 2.2-metre draft to access areas other boats cannot, and on the first morning we see this design element in action.

Entry to the calm lagoon is through a natural but narrow channel, and Captain Gav Graham uses his 15 years’ experience to ease the boat through without so much as brushing a coral. True North has 18 stylish staterooms with king or twin single beds and a maximum of 36 guests, tended to by 22 staff members who ensure everyone is pampered. A lounge and library area, alfresco bar and several sun decks provide relaxation areas.



The atmosphere on board is casual and fun, with staff joining in activities as their workload permits. Passenger Ed Freriks, a Sydneysider on his sixth True North cruise with his wife Sharon, receives the nightly fishing award – the coveted ‘fish hat’ – and, amid the cheering, makes a speech commanding the staff, who he says always manage to get him out fishing.

The cruise is also renowned for its fine dining prepared by two chefs, and we are treated to daily delights like lamb on kohlrabi puree with Japanese spices, Moroccan goat cutlets and freshly caught tuna sashimi. The real luxury here, however, is the access to wilderness.

REVELLING IN THE REEF

After attaching to a mooring, the *True North* is stationary for three nights and the crew deploys six adventure boats (high-speed, comfortable dinghies, really) with a cool box of drinks. Each day guests head out several times for their choice of diving, snorkelling or fishing on the protected reefs. The Imperieuse and Clerke reefs fall within Western Australia’s Rowley Shoals marine park, while the third atoll, Mermaid Reef, is a Commonwealth Marine Reserve.

The Rowleys are in unpolluted waters and feature sheer reef walls rising from hundreds of metres in depth. Cool, nutrient-rich currents from the deep keep the reef well fed and help to cool rising temperatures. The latitude of the atolls, meanwhile, has meant the reefs have so far avoided the worst of El Niño’s heat. Coral cover at the Rowleys is at the highest level since recordings began in 1997, and as I join a group of snorkellers in the ocean aquarium you can see its effects. We encounter a leopard shark, angelfish and clownfish, leading to squeals of excitement through snorkels.

As the *True North* sails forth, graceful spinner dolphins joyfully ride the bow wave. The anglers on board regale us with catch-and-release stories involving sailfish, wahoo and tuna – as a fishing novice, I’m assured this is the ultimate place to learn. My guide, Raff, has experience that belies his 21 years, and when the Spanish

mackerel hits my lure he’s right there to help me land it. After obligatory photos, Raff kindly unhooks the fish and sets it free.

For a change of scenery, we visit the sandy speck called Bedwell Island. When we arrive, the staff members have already assembled chairs, beach umbrellas and a cocktail bar. Guide Dave leads a tour to view nesting red-tailed tropicbirds and their chicks, and we toast new friends as the sun slides below a blue horizon.

With low passenger numbers, activities are flexible. Snorkelling tours are deferred for whale watching and scuba diving is delayed by opportunistic snorkelling with a manta ray. Plans for a drift snorkel through the narrow ‘dinghy channel’ from the lagoon are postponed as conditions are too rough. Instead we snorkel inside the reef until the wind subsides. Finally, with staff escorting us, 19 guests shoot through the coral passageway, flying over fish, sharks and giant clams before being spat out into the ocean in exhilarated delight.

Bobbing in the sea, I wait to be scooped up by my dinghy. “Being at the Rowleys is unique – it’s a pinch-me moment,” I recall the captain telling us. “The reef here really says something to you.” And it’s exactly how I feel. On my last evening during a night dive, the reef actually says something to me. Twenty metres down in the dark, my dive buddy turns to me with wide eyes and, by torchlight, points to her ear indicating for me to listen. Then I hear it: a high-pitched haunting melody interspersed with a series of clicks. Goosebumps rise on my skin. It’s the male humpback whales, singing a love song for the females, and perhaps all of nature, to hear.

Above: Snorkelling Rowley Shoals, with its coral and marine life, including manta rays.

GET ON BOARD

The five-night Coral Atoll Cruise starts and finishes in Broome, with departures on 5 and 10 September 2020. Rates start at A\$6,695, inclusive of all meals and excursions, but excluding alcohol. A new 13-night Coast and Coral cruise embarks in Kununurra, visits the Kimberley coastline and Rowley Shoals, and finishes in Broome. It departs 22 August 2020, with prices from A\$22,995.

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