

Cruising The Kimberley by Bill Altaffer, San Diego

In June 2010, a group of 81 Australians and 2 Americans arrived in Broome, Western Australia, eager to embark on a 10-day expedition cruise on the MV Orion along the Kimberley Coast to Darwin. The Orion is a purpose-built ship, capable of exploring the bays and inlets of this dramatically beautiful, unspoiled coastline, home of salt-water crocodiles, pearl farms and Aboriginal rock art.

Included in the cruise package was one night in Broome's only 5-star resort hotel, the Pinctada at Cable Beach. This luxurious, very comfortable hotel is located near Broome's historical China Town with its many cafes, pearl stores and colorful gift shops. Broome, with a population of about 15,000, is the largest town in The Kimberley, the 164,000 square mile area that comprises the upper part of Western Australia. The entire population of The Kimberley, about the size of California, is estimated to be 38,000. There are only two paved roads that traverse this very sparsely populated, largely undeveloped area.

After a restful night at the Pinctada, our luggage was whisked off to be loaded onto the Orion while we spent time exploring China Town before being bused to the dock to board the ship. We all know people who seem to travel to complain. If a person had complaints about the Orion, he would surely be someone impossible to please and his complaints would fall on deaf ears. Perhaps there are less than a dozen expedition cruise lines worldwide, providing all levels of service. Orion is at the top of the spectrum in every way. As a veteran of approximately 20 expedition cruises with most of the different cruise lines, I feel qualified to say that no one does a better job than Orion did for us. The entire ship is exquisite and opulent, beautifully designed with class and function to provide a 5-star experience. All staterooms, even the lower-priced ones, are large and roomy, with queen size beds, elegant furnishings, flat screen TVs and DVD players. We were able to keep up with world news (BBC and CNN) and could borrow DVDs from the well-stocked library. The bathrooms, elegantly appointed, have home-sized glass-enclosed showers. They are stocked with all the amenities, including superior quality three-ply toilet paper. The dining room, lounge and library are just as beautiful as the staterooms. All public areas are decorated with very good quality art, including paintings, sculptures and carvings. Another classy feature is the glass elevator, surrounded by a circular staircase. Every detail and furnishing of the ship speaks of quality, reminiscent of a luxurious, 5-star hotel. I tried to find a fingerprint on the glass, bronze, chrome and mirrored surfaces, but the Orion staff kept these immaculately free of smudges.

The ship has a spa with masseuse, a gym, a sauna, a beauty salon, an outdoor café and two lounges. Its library, besides multitudes of books and DVDs, is stocked with a large assortment of board games. The boutique carries all the necessities as well as a very nice assortment of clothing items and jewelry, including Paspaley pearls. Its upper sundeck has a large jacuzzi. Its lecture hall is the nicest, most comfortable and most efficient I have seen on any ship. All decks have handicapped access. The ship also boasts an embarkation platform for zodiac operations. In short, the ship itself was lacking in nothing.

Food on board was exceptional in quality and variety. The menu, always exquisitely prepared, was created by the chef of one of Australia's finest restaurants (Serge Dansereau of Bathers Pavillion, Balmoral Beach, Sydney). Any and all diets were taken into account. For the passengers with food allergies or issues, substitutions and special foods were provided without any fuss. The staff was always aware of who needed a special item, for example gluten-free toast, and that item would appear without the passenger even asking for it. That was very impressive, considering the number of passengers and the logistics involved. Details are Orion. Nothing was overlooked or forgotten. Perhaps the best way to illustrate the individual attention to detail in the culinary area is in Orion's coffee. Even for breakfast, there were no coffee pots full of mass-produced coffee waiting to be poured. When requested, each cup of coffee was brewed individually using high-end Italian espresso machines. Each cup was always perfectly delicious.

All expedition cruises include lecturers. Orion is no different. We had great lectures on history, Aboriginal culture/rock art and geology. In my experience, no expedition cruises include entertainment. In this, Orion is different. We had a singing piano player who performed during Happy Hour and after dinner. He

was excellent. Other amenities: towels placed on the sides of zodiacs for us to sit on, sun block and insect repellent on the embarkation platform, and even sanitizing hand cleaner in all the rooms and strategic spots around the ship, including the dining room. The Filipino crew could not do enough for us. Since Australians do not customarily tip, tipping was not expected on the Orion. Therefore, the crew's friendliness and attention to our comfort was genuine and not based on the expectation of monetary reward. Our cruise of 83 people was served by 76 staff and crew, a ratio that insured excellent care.

Mike Taylor, the ship's Scottish captain now living in Miami, was a very colorful and friendly addition to the experience. He would join us frequently, in particular at the buffet breakfasts and lunches on the back deck. He commented that most cruise ships in today's world are focused inwardly. The ship itself has become the experience, providing ice skating, rock climbing, surfing on board, Broadway shows and shopping, just for starters. The cruise destination hardly matters. But Orion is different. Orion passengers are pampered and couldn't be more comfortable on board, but the focus of the cruise is on outward experiences. The Kimberley coast is a perfect itinerary for such a ship.

Every day along the coast, we had disembarkations or zodiac cruises that were included in the itinerary. In addition, at most of the locations, there were optional excursions that could be enjoyed for costs ranging from \$60 to \$475 (Australian). In most of these cases, every effort was made to insure that a person could participate in the included activity as well as the optional one. This was possible with very few exceptions, in spite of logistical difficulties. One of the interesting optional activities was fishing. A professional fishing guide, along with his fishing boat, was on board. Each day, his boat was unloaded from the Orion for a morning and an afternoon fishing excursion for 2-4 participants each time. Another feature unique to Orion, in my experience, was a tender in addition to the multitude of zodiacs for the daily excursions. For those individuals who were physically challenged by getting in and out of a zodiac, or who preferred to be under shade rather than in the tropical sun, or for whatever reason, the tender was available. It could not go quite everywhere the zodiacs went, but allowed people to experience nearly as much instead of remaining on board as they would have done otherwise. As for the zodiacs, uniquely in my experience, they were outfitted with seats when the excursion involved long zodiac cruising. Yes! Seats! Very comfortable bench seats with backrests! These were securely tied into the zodiacs, three to a zodiac. While each seat could have held 3 people, Orion's policy is to load no more than 6 people in a seated zodiac for maximum enjoyment of the experience. This enhanced the cruising more than I can express, providing comfort that was very easy to get used to.

After departing Broome in the afternoon of June 10, we sailed toward Cape Leveque for our first zodiac landing the next day. This would be our only chance to enjoy a beach during the cruise due to the presence of salt-water crocodiles (salties) everywhere else. Cape Leveque is a stunningly pristine, miles-long expanse of sparkling white sand with a backdrop of dunes and the red-orange sandstone features of the Cape. It is Aboriginal land, so we were not allowed to wander back into the dunes. There was plenty of beachfront to explore, for a very pleasant and relaxing experience. The water was crystal clear and refreshing, perfect for swimming. It was an idyllic afternoon in a true tropical paradise. Of course, the Orion staff was on hand under a big blue umbrella with water, juice and sunblock for the duration.

The next day, Saturday June 12, we were in Talbot Bay, home of the Horizontal Waterfalls. The entire Kimberley Coast is a geologist's dream. The red sandstone cliffs keep a dramatic record of forces and processes that occurred over millions of years, including sedimentary layering, up-thrusting, folding and buckling. Every cliff has visible layers of rock, some tilted vertically and folded back over, creating a very beautiful, unique landscape. At Talbot Bay, there are two rows of sandstone cliffs with narrow gaps in them, allowing water to flow between the rows of cliffs and behind onto the shore. The tidal bore of this area is the third largest in the world, with daily tides of 30 feet. When these huge quantities of water surge through these narrow gaps, the result is the dramatic Horizontal Falls. The water cannot flow through the gaps as rapidly as the tidal forces move it, which creates cascades through the gaps, with water levels differing by several yards on either side. Another highlight of this perfectly enjoyable cruise in our seated zodiacs was spinning in whirlpools and vortices when we cruised between the two cliffs. Due to the specific geology of the area between the cliffs, the tidal forces created these whirlpools in one area. They formed and then died out, over and over. We cruised between them and on their edges and occasionally right into them for an experience unlike any I had ever had before. In addition to its

geological uniqueness, Talbot Bay also has significant bird life and gave us our first sighting of a salty. Before heading back to the ship, we managed to puncture one of the chambers of our zodiac. Orion staff cleverly created a temporary patch using bandages from the first aid kit.

The following day, we disembarked at Raft Point for a steep climb up to view old Aboriginal rock art in a saddle of rock high above the sea. This outdoor art gallery depicted an account of the mythical Wandjinas on a Great Fish Chase and was well worth the climb. The opening ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics included a huge Wandjina spirit with its distinctive halo. We also saw our first boab trees at the landing site. These are related to the baobabs of Africa and Madagascar and appear alien in form, much as the Wandjinas do. Staff, set up under their blue umbrella, provided hiking sticks and sunblock at the beginning of the climb. At our return, they were ready for us with juice and water.

The afternoon zodiac cruise at Montgomery Reef was another unique experience. The reef is huge, covering 400 square kilometers, and is submerged during high tides. We boarded our seated zodiacs and began cruising away from the ship through what appeared to be completely open water. Before long, the tide began to go out. This was soon apparent as the top of the reef began to appear before our eyes. Soon, water was rushing off the reef, forming streams and cascades in a raging torrent. It became obvious that we were in a channel with reef on either side of us. As the water continued to flow off the reef, numerous birds (egrets, cormorants and sandpipers) landed on it, foraging for sea life trapped on the reef. As much as 15 feet of reef can be exposed at low tide. We cruised the channel, watching the amazing sight of the reef continuing to emerge until the sun was low in the sky, then headed back toward the ship. We took a small detour around a sandy island that had appeared with the lowering of the tide where, to our surprise, we found Orion staff esconced under their big blue umbrella, waiting to hand us more refreshments, a very nice ending to a fascinating and unique afternoon.

By the following morning, we had arrived at our next destination, Mitchell River National Park, one of the nation's newest and most inaccessible parks. The Mitchell Plateau is scenic as well as biologically important, including small patches of rainforest along its margins and open woodlands growing around valleys and by creeks. The park contains 50 species of mammals, 220 species of birds and 86 kinds of reptiles. The day's optional activity was a helicopter flight to Mitchell Falls. The included activity was an exploration of the mangrove environments of the Hunter River and Porosus Creek, seen comfortably from the bench seats of our zodiacs. Since each zodiac with seats is limited to 6 passengers and the cruise lasted almost 3 hours, we were split in half for morning and afternoon cruising. Due to the wild tidal fluctuations, the morning group zipped among and between mangrove trees, their upper portions emerging from the water, while the afternoon group cruised by the same trees, now completely exposed on mudflats. Both groups saw numerous salties and abundant bird life. Our zodiac came across a young Osprey perched on the twiggy top of a dead tree, about 6-8 feet above the water. He did not fly off, even though two more zodiacs joined us and we drifted to within a yard of him several times, giving us the best looks at an Osprey that any birder could hope for. The backdrop for this amazing experience was the ever-beautiful red sandstone cliff that lines the gorge created by the river.

After cruising along the coast overnight, we arrived at Vansittart Bay where we had two landings. In the morning, we took a short guided walk away from the beach to the site of a crashed C-53 bomber, a relic from World War II. In the afternoon, we cruised over to Jar Island where we visited two Aboriginal rock art galleries. These were in the Gwion Gwion style, also referred to as the Bradshaw style, completely different from the Wandjina art we had seen earlier.

By the following morning, we had arrived at the mouth of the King George River where helicopter rides to the Falls were an optional activity. Those who opted to enjoy only the included activity had two options. Both options started with a zodiac excursion to the river's double waterfalls, a trip that took a good hour each way, including side trips up canyons for the scenery, wildlife and birds. The more hardy group disembarked their zodiacs a distance below the falls to scramble up the nearly vertical wall in what was a difficult climb over tumbled boulders and through vegetation. At the top, a walk of about half a mile brought these intrepid people to the top of the first of the two falls. There was time for exploring and swimming in the pools there. Most people crossed the first river, then made their way across the broken landscape so they could also enjoy the view from the top of the second, much larger, waterfall. After

about an hour, the group clambered back down the steep climb to the waiting zodiacs where they were told not to put on their life jackets. Both the climbing and non-climbing zodiacs headed towards the falls. When we were near the falls, we rounded an outcropping of rock. There, hidden from our approach, we found Orion staff in a zodiac under their blue umbrella with a tray of champagne flutes half-filled with orange juice. At our arrival, they popped open a bottle of champagne with great ceremony, finished filling the flutes and handed them to us along with delicious ham and cheese croissants. This was completely unexpected, instantly changing the mood from mere pleasure to festive gaiety. As we ate and drank, we cruised around close to the falls, enjoying the sheer beauty and majesty of the location. We were then instructed to gather up our life jackets and all other items that needed to stay dry. Those were handed off to another zodiac so that we could zip under the smaller of the falls! The squeals and laughter from each zodiac under the blast of cold water only added to the festivity. Finally, we retrieved our dry items and returned down the river, again enthralled by the unspoiled, majestic beauty of the gorge.

The next morning found us at an actual dock at an actual town, Wyndham, the northernmost town in Western Australia and the first sign of human habitation we had seen for a week. With a population of only 1,300, Wyndham served as the gateway to our day's adventure. Shuttle buses operated hourly from the ship to tour the few points of interest in the town. Each person had to choose one of two available, included options: either a cruise down the Ord River to Lake Argyle or a scenic flight over the Bungle Bungles. Those who chose the river cruise spoke highly of their adventure. I opted for the flight. Our group was bused to the local airport where we boarded small airplanes, 4 passengers to each one, so that each person had a window. The windows were specially constructed with curved glass so that you could look straight down easily. The flight took about 2 ½ hours, with continuous commentary from the pilot. Some of the points of interest we saw were the Texas Downs Station, a huge cattle ranch shaped like Texas; the Argyle Diamond mine, the world's largest, producing 20-25% of the world's diamonds and 90% of the world's pink diamonds, and very impressive from the air with its Tonka-toy trucks and layer-cake levels; Lake Argyle, the largest man-made lake in Australia; and the Bungle Bungles, sandstone towers uniquely formed by erosion into layered beehive-shaped domes. The Bungle Bungles, covering 45,000 hectares, were only discovered in 1982 and became a World Heritage Listed site in 2003. We flew over them for about 20 minutes, amazed at the unique and beautiful landscape underneath us. Eventually, we landed at the small airport in Kununurra where our bus waited to return us to Wyndham, approximately an hour's drive. Our driver provided commentary on the history and points of interest of the area. Much of the movie "Australia," starring Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackson, had been filmed there. The approximately 400 people involved in the filming had lived in trailers for about 4 months, quite a diversion for the small population living in the area.

The next two days were spent at sea, in a curiously pointless cruise to East Timor and back. This was necessitated by recent changes in Australian law. If we would not have had an international destination under the new laws, the ship would not have been considered a "cruise" ship. This would have meant that all the Filipino staff would have been required to obtain Australian work permits, an unworkable requirement. So, to satisfy the new law, we spent two days in the rougher waters of the Timor Sea before arriving in Darwin for our disembarkation. For me, those two days were an enjoyable time of relaxing, reading, watching TV, attending lectures and slide shows and visiting with my fellow passengers. The dynamics of the people can make or break a cruise. I can not say enough in praise of the Australians that shared this cruise with me. They included the elite of Australian society and were some of the nicest, most congenial, most interesting and friendliest people I have ever traveled with. Sharing conversation with them was a highlight of the cruise. I'm afraid that all my future cruises will have a triple benchmark to live up to: first, the Orion itself, a perfect ship with a perfect staff who attended to every detail and pampered while providing a true expedition experience; second, the incredible, unspoiled and beautifully pristine Kimberley Coast, where each day brought a new, unique experience unlike anything elsewhere in the world; and third, the quality of my fellow passengers, who were, without exception, friendly, pleasant, approachable and easy to be with.

Orion's motto is "A Path Less Traveled." For those in search of unique, stunning scenery, pristine environments and out-of-the way places, Orion is for you. And if you would like to be pampered while on an expedition, if you enjoy delicious meals shared with interesting, fun companions, Orion will more than satisfy you. You can examine their website at www.orionexpeditions.com. They can be contacted at:

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