

TRACKS

# NORTHERN WONDERS

*A voyage from Cairns to Darwin on board Coral Discoverer unveils  
a myriad of environmental and cultural experiences.*

STORY + PHOTOS MARK MULLER



*The Coral Discoverer at  
anchor off the Tiwi Islands, NT.*



Bar manager Holly Robins with her colleagues Charmaine Heffernan, Mat Wadham and Ashley Davey see to sunset drinks.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Guest David Allen photographs seabirds; Lizard Island Research Station director Lyle Vail discusses life on a coral reef; senior traditional owner Danny Gordon shares stories of country on Flinders Island, Qld; comfortable cabins and good food are hallmarks of the voyage.

**A**nimated conversation lifted by an occasional ripple of laughter flows across the top deck of the *Coral Discoverer* while the sun settles into the Arafura Sea. Guests and crew mingle freely, and there is a relaxed happiness evident as the day's adventures are discussed and dissected.

The morning was spent following animal tracks in the dunes of Raragala Island, before a visit to the Gawa community of Elcho Island saw people wading onto a rocky beach to be warmly greeted and shown around one of the most remote little communities in Australia. The *Coral Discoverer* is half way through a 12-day expedition from Cairns to Darwin. Any reserve there may have been when this cohort of strangers first boarded has well and truly morphed into the buoyant sense of companionship that shared experiences can bring.

Looking over the gathering, Captain Nathan Clark smiles. "You can see how people are gelling – it's always good watching relationships build," he says. By now the group has explored reefs and islands along the eastern coast of Cape York, visited its tip, wandered the streets of Thursday Island, steamed across the Gulf of Carpentaria and been immersed in the wonder of the art centre at

Yirrkala. It's been a busy few days, a good few days. Still ahead lie the communities of Maningrida and Bathurst Island, bookending the environs of Cobourg Peninsula.

The *Coral Discoverer* was commissioned in Cairns in 2005, and refitted in 2016. The 63-metre long, 1779-tonne vessel has a relatively slight three-metre draught, enabling it to slip into shallower waters than larger ships. With 36 cabins able to carry a total of 72 guests, and staffed by a crew of 24 Aussies and Kiwis, it is a reasonably intimate way of experiencing life at sea.

The Cape York and Arnhem Land cruise takes in a variety of environmental and cultural highlights designed to give insight into the rich flora, fauna, marine life and communities that are to be found in this remote and remarkable stretch of the Australian coast. Central to these adventures is the dedicated tender, *Xplorer*. This versatile aluminium-hulled boat is lowered >



ABOVE, LEFT: Mika, Lachlan, Moliny, Blackie and Ramone Bukulatjpi study at the Garwa Christian School on Elcho Island; expedition leader Alistair Kent looks happy to get his charges ashore on the tip of Cape York.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Anna Fisher, Robyn Purcell and lecturer Michael Hermes wait to be picked up from the wharf on Thursday Island; Lenny Maymuru and Yirrkala Arts Centre manager Will Stubbs listen as Hudson Mununggurr plays yidaki for guests; close bonds often blossom between staff and guests.

into the water via a hydraulic lift, thus allowing guests to walk straight aboard from the mother ship – a blessing if clambering on and off moving surfaces is not your bag. It is big enough to take all the guests at once, and small enough to land on remote beaches and venture down narrow rivers in search of wildlife.

This is ably demonstrated two days earlier, when the pre-dawn hush is enlivened by excitement among the guests. The *Xplorer* is loading for a tilt at the northernmost point of mainland Australia. Tides and conditions are looking good. “It can be touch and go,” expedition leader Alistair Kent explains. “We always try to ensure we can do it, but safety is the most important thing.” This morning it is doable. As crewman Aiden Singh skilfully holds *Xplorer*’s bow onto the land with steady engine power, beach towels are quickly placed over the slippery rocks to create a blue and white carpet for guests to walk along from the drop off point to dry ground. Those who need a helping hand are given it, and soon everybody who wants to go ashore is ashore. A few have elected to remain aboard the *Xplorer* in order to curl around the tip from the sea. “It’s one of the things that people are keen to do,” Alistair says. “And it’s a good feeling to be able to help make it happen!”

Throughout the voyage, adventure is mixed with information, as highlighted at Lizard Island, where

guests snorkel the reef and visit the marine research station. Established by the Australian Museum in 1973, the station attracts scientists from around the world. Dr Lyle Vail and his wife Dr Anne Hoggett have been co-directors since 1990. The opportunity to be personally shown around the station by them is rare and valuable.

“Eighty-three percent of the coral in the area died in the 2016 bleaching, and in 2017 bleaching occurred again,” Lyle says. This compounded the damage caused by Cyclone Ita in 2014, and Cyclone Nathan in 2015. While this is disturbing, Lyle explains that the reef is resilient, and there are clear signs that the coral is recovering, albeit in a different form. He emphasises that the work conducted at the station is a positive thing in the face of what can appear to be overwhelmingly bleak.

A sense of sharing information is central to the philosophy underpinning the ship’s operation. To this end, guest lecturers biologist Damon Ramsey, archaeologist Michael Hermes and traditional owner Danny Gordon are part of the crew complement.

Potentially uncomfortable matters are not avoided, whether it be coral bleaching, climate change, the often confronting and disturbing history of colonisation or the ongoing challenges of life in the Top End. “It’s not about preaching,” Damon says. “We just want to be able to share what we know, and give people the facts – they can make



Trevor Tipungwuti, pictured inside the old Ngiuu Catholic Church on Bathurst Island, has been working as a Tiwi Tours guide for 16 years.

up their own minds about things. But it's better to do that from an informed position than an uninformed one."  
 "It's good to be able to share our story," Danny Gordon agrees. "If people take a bit of time to listen to what happened, and be shown how country is important to us, then that can help them see things a bit different. It can help them to maybe change the way they think a bit – and that's good, I reckon."

Similar sentiments are evident at the famous art centre in

Yirrkala, where the group is met by centre manager Will Stubbs. He talks people through something of Yolngu cosmology, and says that a large part of the centre's reason for being is to share the ideas and understanding engendered by 60,000 years of continuous culture.

"There's a complex and beautiful interrelation between family, community and art and a non-linear sense of time," he says. "And all of this is part of how Yolngu view the world." Later, artists Hudson Mununggurr and Lenny Maymuru join the party. Hudson plays yidaki, and then talks a little about his work. "The centre's a good place," Hudson says. "We work and paint and tell stories; let people know what we do."

This strikes a chord with guest David Allen. He is a veterinarian and medico who has been working in remote health since 2007, after a career as an academic. David grew up at Mapoon in far north Queensland. "Northern Australia and the coastal Aboriginal communities really resonate with me," David says. He applauds the work of Coral Expeditions in that it gives people who mightn't otherwise get to experience and contextualise a sense of Aboriginal Australia the opportunity to do so.

"The ship has a good culture," he says. "We are all treated equally, and we're all treated well. It creates an environment where you can get out and experience a quite >



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Ranger Alan Withers on the shores of the Cobourg Peninsula's Victoria Settlement; artists Janet Marawarr, Freda Ali Wayartja and Doreen Jingarrbarra share weaving techniques at the Maningrida Arts Centre; guests on an engine room tour aboard Coral Discoverer; Second Mate Max Wood charts a course; Nancy Cole prepares to tuck into dinner.



*Coral Discoverer's master, Nathan Clark, says his biggest reward is helping to give guests the experience of a lifetime.*

remarkable variety of environments and cultures, while still being comfortably transported and guided through very remote and potentially difficult places.”

The Cobourg Peninsula is definitely such a place. “Every day’s a ripper up here,” grins Alan Withers, who, with his wife Emma, manages Garig Gunak Barlu National Park. Its combined land and sea area covers some 4500 square kilometres, including the entire peninsula. Alan has joined the *Coral Discoverer* to take guests on a guided tour of what remains of the Victoria Settlement near Port Essington. The settlement had a brief life from 1838 to 1845, when it existed as an outpost of a British government paranoid about Dutch and French incursion into Australia’s north. Heat, starvation and isolation ground the inhabitants down, and all that is left today are some interesting ruins and the inevitable graves. “It’s a beautiful place,” Alan says, “but I wouldn’t want to be marching up and down in a woollen suit saluting a flag!”

Far more lively is the community of Nguiu on Bathurst Island. Standing in the old Catholic Church, Trevor Tipungwuti smiles and contemplates the benefits of sharing his culture. He’s been working for Tiwi Tours for 16 years. “It’s good that people are interested,” he says. “It’s good for tourism and we get to share a lot of our culture and history. I hope it helps people understand about our lives here. It’s a strong community.” The art in the church itself is a fascinating mashup of Christian iconography merged with broader hallmarks from the natural world that underpin the islanders’ spiritual landscape.

Guest Nancy Cole pays close attention as Trevor talks. Nancy grew up on West Clover Hills in the Western Districts of Victoria before pursuing a career in nursing that eventually saw her working on a ship sailing between Australia and Japan, working for the Royal Flying Doctor Service out of Alice Springs, and also in the Kimberley with the Australian Inland Mission. An adventurous, widely travelled person with a deep and abiding sense of curiosity and humour, Nancy speaks highly of her experience aboard the *Coral Discoverer*. “I’ve really enjoyed it,” she says. “They’ve been extremely good. For example on the first morning I asked ‘May I please have some lemon with my tea?’ and every morning since it’s just arrived, and I never had to ask again. It’s indicative of the care they take. I also enjoy just how much you learn from the lectures, because you could come knowing absolutely nothing and really learn a tremendous amount if you want to. It’s much more satisfying!”

At captain’s drinks on the last night of the voyage there is a real sense of camaraderie. Nathan Clark gives a charming speech, thanking his crew and all the guests. It’s a heartfelt message, and one that resonates with an earlier, less public conversation in which he described the best part of his job. “For me it’s when you talk with people and their life story comes out, and they’ve saved for what for many is the trip of a lifetime. Seeing them having these remarkable experiences and really enjoying themselves and then smiling at the end of the trip – that’s absolutely priceless.”