

Shore Thing excels at casual luxury. The catamaran has five cabins accommodating a maximum of 10 guests.

OPPOSITE The clear waters of the Ningaloo Reef are ideal for snorkelling.



THE SCHOOL OF FISH

At 260km long, Western Australia's Ningaloo Reef is home to a dazzling array of marine life. To get amongst it, all you need to do is step aboard and strap on a snorkel, writes Daniel Scott.

On the second night of our luxury sailing trip on Ningaloo Reef, a baitball forms off the back of our catamaran. Illuminated by spotlights, the swarm of silver fish swirls like an undersea spectre. Then, on the fringes of the pack, a squid appears, darting into its midst to gorge itself.

On Ningaloo Reef, which stretches for 260km along Australia's north-western coast, scenes like this are common. Over three days, our skipper, Luke, guides *Shore Thing* no more than 10 nautical miles from its Coral Bay base. But he need go no further, because whether we are snorkelling above a coral garden, diving to its depths or relaxing onboard, Ningaloo's marine life comes to us.

We begin one Saturday afternoon by sailing between a rainbow skewering coastal dunes and clouds underlit in red by an ocean sunset. Some passengers dip fishing rods while others chat on deck over wine and canapés. Everyone, from a Texan oil executive to two free-spirited Canadians, quickly establishes the yacht as their floating home.

Our swift assimilation is due to the welcoming tone set by Luke, his wife and chef, Lannie, and divemaster Travis. From the moment they greet us it feels like they are sharing a secret with us, taking us to parts of this World Heritage listed reef system that few others reach, while spoiling us with gourmet food and Margaret River wine.

What Lannie conjures in the galley is impressive. On day two, we breakfast on baked eggs with bacon and mushrooms, have spicy chicken falafels with beetroot and carrot salads for lunch, and a Thai-style pumpkin soup and goldband snapper with lemon salsa for dinner. A baker's daughter, Lannie even produces freshly made bread. Accommodation, in cabins or staterooms with ensuites, is comfortable and well organised. But when not being lulled to sleep by the gentle swell I am upstairs on deck, scanning the sea for marine life.

For me, the most thrilling encounters on Ningaloo begin on day two, with a dive on the outer reef. Finning along the coral wall in deep blue water we pass green turtles, tawny sharks and a manta ray, its wingspan nearly thrice my 1.86m height.

If the diving is good, the snorkelling is superb. At a site known as The Football Field, we look down upon large coral outcrops that, growing a centimetre a year, are more than a millennia old. Schools of fish – pink damselfish, blue-green chromis and banded angelfish – shelter among the staghorn coral. There are giant clams, octopuses skipping over the reef and porcupine and cow-tail rays skimming across sand patches.

On our final morning we snorkel above a manta ray as it tries to rid itself of parasites. It's a dance, but an unequal one. I feel like a dolt with two left fins trying to follow an aquatic Rudolf Nureyev.

My three days on *Shore Thing* fly by, encompassing four dives, several snorkelling sessions and kayaking. I've observed thousands of fish and forests of coral, the health and abundance of which I've not seen anywhere else on earth, and been fed easily as well as the squid we witnessed on the second night at sea. ➤



HOW TO GET THERE

- ❖ Return transfers from Learmonth airport, linked to Perth by Qantas flights, start at \$160. www.qantas.com.au.
- ❖ Sail Ningaloo offers three-, five- and nine-day tours, from March to December. Three-day trips start from \$1700pp. www.sailningaloo.com.au.

MORE SAILING SHORT BREAKS

- ❖ Sailing Whitsundays offers a three-night Whitsunday Getaway trip aboard its catamaran, from \$845pp (low season, August-September), with a maximum of eight people.
- ❖ Cumberland Charter Yachts hires out boats for bareboat (self-skipped) sailing around the Whitsunday Islands from \$700 per night. Guided cruising also available. www.ccy.com.au.
- ❖ The luxury 38-passenger ship *True North* plies Australian waters offering both short and longer sailing adventures, including Perth to Dampier, Adelaide to Ceduna/Adelaide and the ever-popular Broome to Wyndham. www.northstarcruises.com.au.