

Close encounters



Exploring Ningaloo Reef above and below the water's surface, **Stephanie Williams** discovers it's teeming with all manner of friendly life forms.

"Quick, get in now!"

yells Luke Riley, the skipper of *Shore Thing*, while I fumble with my snorkel. "We've got a manta ray!"

Having never snorkelled with anything larger than a small turtle, I'm nervous, but adrenaline kicks in and I'm suddenly swimming for my life, barely keeping up with Prue, our dive instructor, as she expertly leads the way.

For a good 10 minutes I swim with the majestic manta ray on Western Australia's famed Ningaloo Reef, a World Heritage-listed site.

Seeing such a graceful creature in the flesh is truly incredible. If that's the entree to the weekend, I can't wait for the main course and dessert.

After successful careers in banking and finance, Luke and Lannie Riley, owners of Sail Ningaloo, threw it all in to follow their passion for marine life and the outdoors when they purchased luxury catamaran *Shore Thing*. Lannie says the decision to leave the city for this remote part of Australia was worth it.

"We left our city jobs to experience more of what life has to offer. At times life

expects something in return, so starting up the business was a challenge, but very rewarding. You just can't experience what we do every day in the city!"

Flying into Exmouth on the remote North West Cape, I'm in awe of the surreal red-earth-and-blue-reef landscape. We drive for a couple of hours down the coast, past termite stacks, emus and goats, to Coral Bay, where Sail Ningaloo is based.

After changing into our swimmers, we duck underwater for a sunset snorkel. It doubles as a test to see how the group



Images courtesy of Sail Ningaloo



members handle their gear and fear. As if on cue, we spot a small whitetip reef shark.

Life aboard *Shore Thing* is relaxing and exciting at the same time. Each day revolves around a timetable of snorkelling and diving (or fishing, if that's your thing), with lots of time to read and sun ourselves while sailing from site to site.

Luke and Lannie have spent many hours underwater, mapping the best snorkel sites, and because they operate one of the only live-aboard diving boats in the region, they travel to sites the daytrippers can't. "We hardly ever see ☺



This image courtesy Sail Ningaloo



other boats where we go," Lannie says, "and most of the places where we dive and snorkel have never been experienced by other divers before.

"Finding and exploring new dive and snorkel sites is our favourite thing to do. Our guests' smiles when they return to the boat are always the best answer to the question, 'Have we found a winner?' But, then again, sitting atop a remote

sand dune, sipping wine while reflecting on a day of adventure as the sun sets over the Indian Ocean, is pretty special too!"

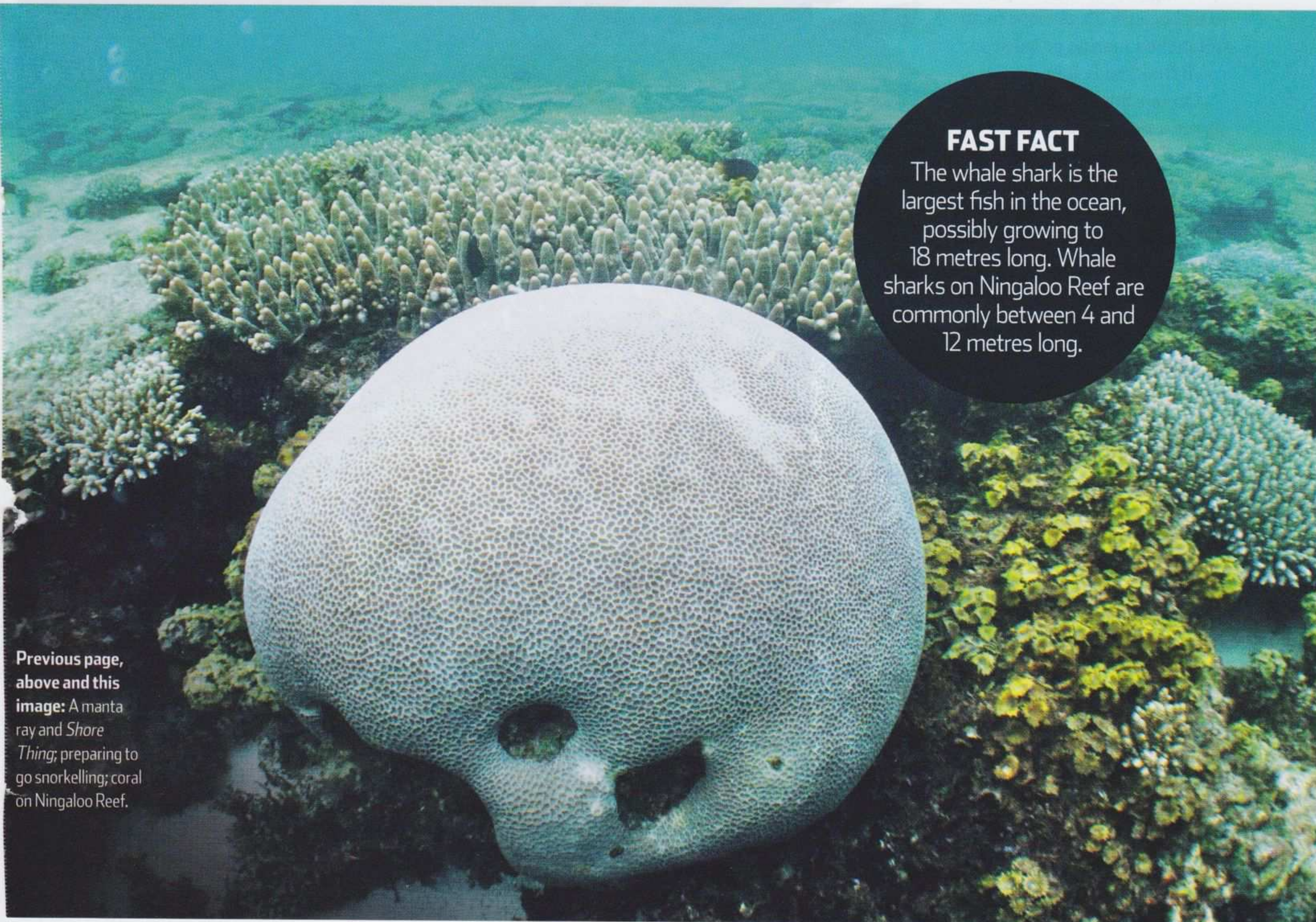
With the sails hoisted, the boat moves at speed along the jagged coastline of red soil and sandstone rocks, which spill out into the clear blue waters of the reef. In the distance I hear the constant roar of the Indian Ocean, with waves rolling in from Africa breaking on the reef.

Each snorkel stop proves more exciting than the last. From seeing my first shark in the flesh, I progress through a list of sightings that includes endangered loggerhead turtles, nurse sharks, more manta rays, stingrays, delightful little nudibranchs, lionfish, parrot fish and schools of trevally and sweetlips. The amount of marine life on the reef is astounding. Big coral bommies and

FAST FACT

The whale shark is the largest fish in the ocean, possibly growing to 18 metres long. Whale sharks on Ningaloo Reef are commonly between 4 and 12 metres long.

Previous page, above and this image: A manta ray and *Shore Thing*; preparing to go snorkelling; coral on Ningaloo Reef.



**Luke
says:**

"We never know exactly what we'll see, but it continues to exceed our expectations nearly every time we're out on the water."

plate coral make for an undulating underwater 'landscape'.

"We never know exactly what we'll see, but it continues to exceed our expectations nearly every time we're out on the water, not to mention the expectations of our guests," says Luke.

"Ningaloo Reef is so special to us because it's as close to an untouched marine paradise as you'll find," adds Lannie.

On our final night, Lannie serves a restaurant-quality meal of stuffed chicken breast with almonds, sun-dried tomatoes and bacon, followed by sticky date pudding. Her menu is based on locally sourced produce and it amazes me that she even manages to bake bread on board.

SURE DIVE

After disembarking *Shore Thing* and saying goodbye to Luke and Lannie, we head back to Exmouth to experience the reef from a different angle. The Exmouth Navy Pier dive is consistently ranked among the top 10 dives in the world. With a maximum depth of 14 metres, it's an easy dive. I join a group dive with Ningaloo Whaleshark-n-Dive, led by the effervescent Wes, to tackle the pier.

"That was one of most exciting dives I've done anywhere in the world!" exclaims my dive partner, James. "Everywhere I looked, something was moving. When I went down to have a closer look at a camouflaged ➡

**Below and
next page:**

Spectacular marine
life abounds;
picture-perfect WA
coastal sunset.



wobbegong, I put my hand down on a rock ledge and a little octopus started wrapping its tentacle around my finger. Then I had a tiny crab come out and nibble on my finger. The pier was teeming with such a variety of large marine life and microscopic creatures."

When it comes to large marine life, whale shark season in Exmouth is from April to June, when hundreds of these massive fish migrate along the coast. For this once-in-a-lifetime experience I travel two kilometres offshore on a daytrip to spend about an hour in the water with four seven-metre sharks. It's truly humbling to swim with such large and beautiful creatures in their own habitat. Hopefully, with the reef now protected by its World Heritage status, it will remain pristine and welcoming to such majestic creatures for years to come. [O]

"It's truly humbling to swim with such large and beautiful creatures in their own habitat."

Round-up

GET THERE

Skywest flies from Perth to Exmouth (Learmonth) daily. To book, call 1300 66 00 88 or visit www.skywest.com.au.

STAY

Exmouth Escape Resort

Cnr Murat Road and Welch Street, Exmouth
08 9949 4800, www.exmouthescaperesort.com.au

Bayview Coral Bay

Robinson Street, Coral Bay
08 9385 6655, www.coralbaywa.com

EAT & DRINK

Blue Lips Fish & Chips

The best fish and chips in Australia is a big call, but well deserved. 392 Thew Street, Exmouth
08 9949 1130

Whalers Restaurant

Great selection of local seafood and homemade desserts. 5 Kennedy Street, Exmouth
08 9949 2416, www.whalersrestaurant.com.au

EXPLORE

Sail Ningaloo

Reef cruise aboard luxury catamaran *Shore Thing*. 1 Robinson Street, Coral Bay
1800 197 194, www.sailningaloo.com.au

Ningaloo Whaleshark-n-Dive

Exmouth Navy Pier dive. 1800 224 060, www.ningaloo whalesharkndive.com.au

Ocean Eco Adventures

Whale shark day tour complete with spotter aircraft. 08 9949 1208, www.oceaneco adventures.com.au