



Western Australia / **DESTINATION.**

Reef & range

Stephanie Williams HEADS TO AUSTRALIA'S REMOTE NORTHWEST TO SWIM WITH SHARKS ON THE NINGALOO REEF.



YOU

OU WANT ME TO SNORKEL AT DUSK

in Western Australia, the feeding time for sharks. Isn't that exactly what you aren't meant to do?" I asked the skipper of our luxury catamaran, Shore Thing, as he measured up my feet for fins. "No, you'll be fine, the only sharks are reef sharks and if we're lucky, we'll see a few out there." Gulp. I wasn't feeling lucky, but I had to go with it. I could hear the Indian Ocean roaring heavily on the edge of the reef, but as soon as my head dropped beneath the water line, everything went quiet and my fears were abated. The clear waters were so full of life and beauty that in that moment I didn't want to be anywhere but there.

Stretching 260 kilometres along the Western Australian coastline, 1,200 kilometres above Perth, Ningaloo Reef is Australia's largest fringing coral reef, and the ultimate remote getaway. At most points along the coast, the reef is accessible by a short swim, sometimes almost directly on the beach. The reef is crawling with life – over 500 species of fish, manta rays, loggerhead turtles, reef sharks and colourful coral formations. And from April to July it becomes one of the only places to see the mighty whale shark, a once in a lifetime experience that allows you to swim alongside the gentle giant of the sea.

You could hire a car and drive the length of the Cape Range National Park, where the desert meets the sea, but we decided there were only two ways to see it – stay on top of it and sleep beside it. So we booked a live-aboard catamaran with Sail Ningaloo followed by a couple of nights of wild bush luxury at eco resort Sal Salis.

»

WE MET LANNIE RILEY FROM Sail Ningaloo in the sleepy coastal town of Coral Bay, an hour's dusty drive south from Exmouth, to board Shore Thing. Once on deck, her husband Luke took us through a quick security briefing and showed us to our very comfortable quarters. Rather quickly we were in our bathers and had shrugged off city life like the discarded cork from the champagne bottle popped on our arrival.

After successful careers in banking and finance, this ocean loving couple threw it all in to follow their passion for marine life and purchased luxury catamaran Shore Thing. Luke and Lannie have spent many hours underwater, mapping the best snorkel sites the day-trip boats just can't get to.

Each snorkel stop proved more exciting than the last. From seeing my first shark in the flesh, we progressed through endangered loggerhead turtles,



PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHANIE WILLIAMS



STEPHANIE WILLIAMS

Above from left:
The brightly coloured coral teems with life; Snorkelling above plate coral. Main image: A local resident hops between the tents at Sal Salis.

a guitar-nosed shark, nurse sharks, more manta rays, sting rays, nudibranchs, lionfish, parrot fish and schools of trevally and sweet lips. The amount of marine life on the reef was astounding, and big bommies and plate coral made for an undulating landscape underwater.

But the true value of the getaway was revealed at meal times! Lannie was not a trained chef, but the meals served

from the small galley kitchen were restaurant quality. From line caught local fish and prawns to fillet steak and decadent desserts, Lannie showcased the best of local produce. She even baked her own bread! Each night was spent on deck chatting, enjoying a glass or two of wine under the watchful eye of the moon, before retiring downstairs to be gently rocked to sleep. Bliss. >>

Before retiring to bed we sat on the sand dunes to take in the best view of the Milky Way I have ever experienced...listening to the gentle waves crashing on Ningaloo Reef, I realised how remote I actually was.





THE NEXT DAY WE WERE UP early to drive from Coral Bay to Sal Salis, in the Cape Range National Park. Driving along the red, dusty road flanked by bracken grass and anthills, the blue water of Ningaloo Reef looked spectacularly inviting. We stopped twice to don our snorkel gear and take a quick swim out to the shore-hugging reef and were rewarded with more graceful turtles and fish.

The camp is invisible from the road to minimise its environmental impact. Only a small car park indicated we were in the right place. Staff were friendly, knowledgeable and appropriately attentive, welcoming us

with a cooling cocktail and refreshing towels.

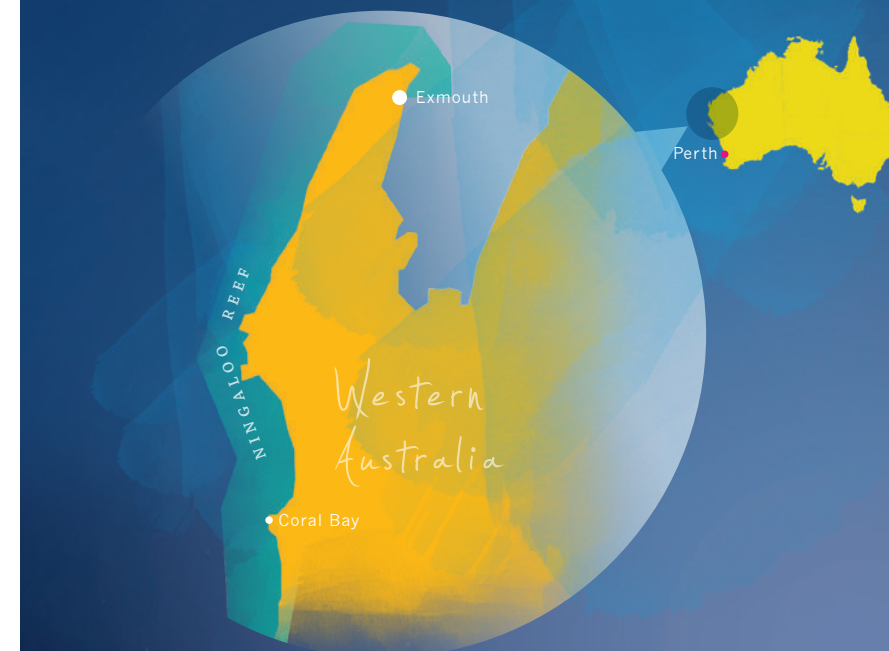
From our beautifully appointed breezy private tent with direct beach access to Ningaloo Reef to the complimentary bar and grazing snacks in the main pavilion, life at Sal Salis is wild bush luxury at it's best. We were encouraged to be as active or inactive, as we desired – from the eco walk and talk with a trained environmental scientist to the panoramic Mandu Mandu Gorge, to simply reading in the hammock on our private balcony.

Each evening we shared cocktail hour with our fellow guests, visitors from around the world, in preparation for a three-course dinner using local

This page: Whale sharks can be found on the Ningaloo Reef between late March and mid July. Opposite page: Eco tents at Sal Salis.

gourmet and bush-foraged ingredients. Dinner conversation inevitably turned to the activities of the day – some guests had been swimming with whale sharks, others to the freshwater Yardie Creek or sea kayaking on the reef spotting marine life from above. Everyone had a discovery to share and it was fascinating.

Before retiring to bed we sat on the sand dunes to take in the best view of the Milky Way I have ever experienced. Far from the traffic noise and city lights, listening to the gentle waves crashing on Ningaloo Reef, I realised how remote I actually was, and returned to bed for another beautiful night's sleep.



GETTING THERE

Ningaloo Reef is best accessed via Exmouth. Qantas flies from most major Australian cities to Exmouth via Perth daily. Return economy fares start from around A\$900 and business class fares (only available on some routes and not available on the Perth-Exmouth leg) from around A\$3,700. Total flight time starts from around eight hours depending on departure point. qantas.com.au

WHEN TO GO

The weather in the region is reliably good – there is no wet season, winter temperatures stay around 25 degrees Celsius and rise to the high 30s in summer. Whale sharks visit the region between late March and mid July, humpback whales pass by between June and November and January to February is turtle nesting and hatching season.

DETAILS

Sail Ningaloo offers a range of itineraries from three to nine days. Rates start from A\$1,550 per person in a deluxe room and A\$1,850 per person in a stateroom including all meals. sailningaloo.com.au



Sal Salis Ningaloo Reef rates start at A\$685 per person per night twin share with meals, drinks and some activities included. salsalis.com.au

Ocean Eco Adventures run whale shark swims daily between April and July for A\$395 per person including gourmet lunch, transfers and a DVD of your swim. oceanecoventures.com.au

TIPS

Only Telstra and Optus phone networks work in patches around Exmouth. Wi-Fi is available at some cafes and accommodation so check ahead.

Carry water in your car if you enter the National Park to snorkel. Allow an extra day in your itinerary in case you don't see a whale shark the first time. Some operators will offer an extra day for free in this case.

