



THE LIFE AQUATIC

Soaring over water, ducking under it,
dining on top of it or camped right by it –
Ningaloo Reef on WA's Coral Coast is an
unforgettable way to experience Australia.

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The sky is wide, the Indian Ocean ink-blue and the anticipation palpable. The boat's engines have been cut and the only sound is a barrage of waves hitting the swim platform I'm sitting on, my flippers dangling in the water. "Now!" declares guide Katie. Five of us adjust masks and snorkels, jump into the freezing water, tilt our heads downwards and wait.

We're just outside the reefs of Ningaloo (Nyinggulu), which means "deep water" to the Baiyungu, Thalanyji and Yinigurdira peoples, the Traditional Custodians of this marine-desert region in north Western Australia, about 1200 kilometres and a two-hour flight from Perth.

Author Tim Winton, who's lived here for more than 25 years and is a passionate environmental advocate for the area, has described it as "a place that attracts the curious and retains the hardy. The people that call it home are a peculiar mix from all over the world... and to some degree they all become a little bent out of shape. By the heat, the isolation and its singular beauty."

Its remoteness means there's no dropping by. If you're here, you're here for a purpose. Mine moves right by me in the water: a 10-metre-long whale shark of dinosaur-like proportions, its back spotted with fluorescent white polka dots. The gentle giant appears out of nowhere, flat head, wide mouth and tiny eyes that I lock onto for a second before easing in by its side; I kick to keep pace as the fish barrels along, tail fanning rhythmically one way and then the next.

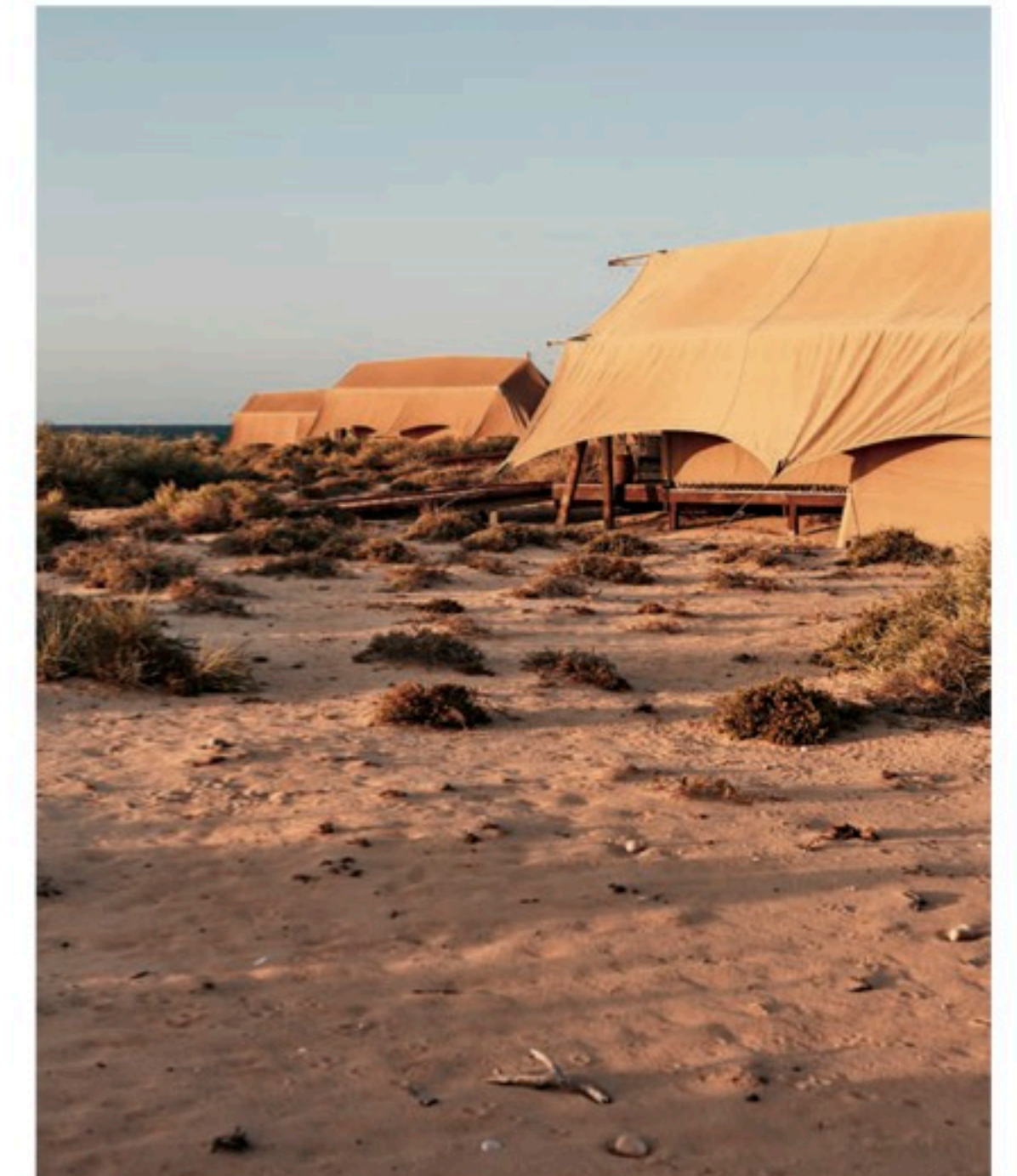
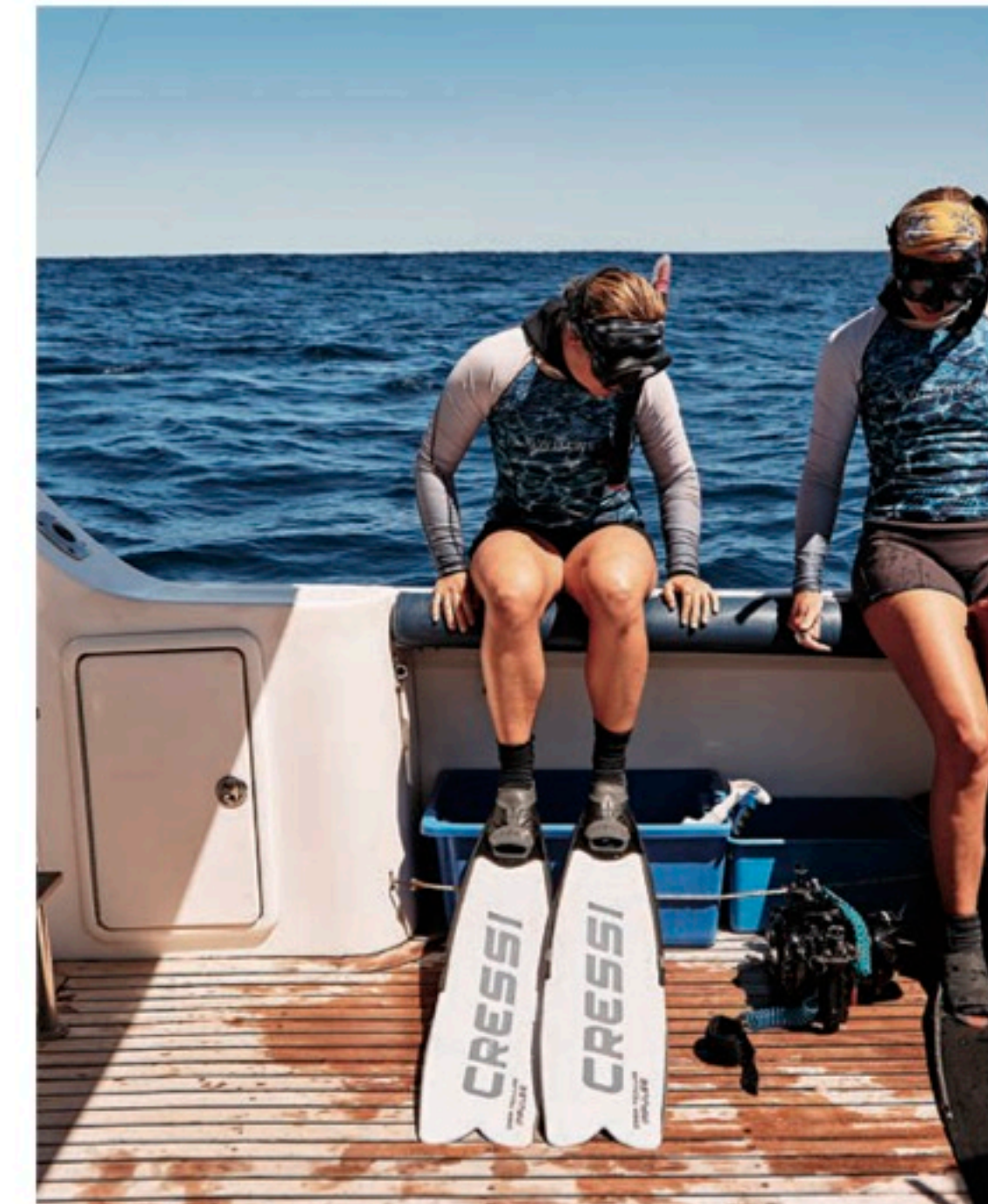
As quickly as it appeared, it's gone. On board 30 minutes later, my wetsuit peeled off and the burning sun starting to fade, the buzz lingers.

The swim is just one of several encounters with nature that make up Journey Beyond's new seven-day Sail & Snorkel expedition (journeybeyond.com). It begins with a three-night stay at renowned off-grid safari-style retreat Sal Salis (salsalis.com.au), followed by a venture south to Coral Bay for Sail Ningaloo's (sailningaloo.com.au) three-night cruise aboard *Shore Thing*, a 51-foot catamaran that explores the turquoise lagoons of Ningaloo Reef (the itinerary can also be reversed). Whether on red soil or at sea, the one constant is unspoilt landscapes that are home to vulnerable and endangered species, making every moment feel precious – and precarious.

There's a clumsy attempt at romance happening and it's not even 10am. It's day two and Renee, one of the nature guides from Sal Salis, has led me and a group of my fellow guests to the top of a sand dune that overlooks the shallows of a lagoon. Clusters of black blobs below are, in fact, hundreds of loggerhead, green and hawksbill turtles having the time of their lives (at least the males are).

"What makes Ningaloo incredibly special is that every day here is different," says Renee. "You never know what you're going to get. In about four weeks, the turtles will make their way onto the beach and lay their collection of eggs. Around February onwards the babies hatch, emerge from the nests and make their way to the water but only one in 10,000 will make it to adulthood." The turtles, picked off by predators, must endure a brutal start to life but guests are advised not to meddle with Mother Nature. "Interfering messes with the natural compass these babies need to return to this spot in 20 years and lay their eggs."

Ningaloo Reef, which runs down the western side of the Cape Range Peninsular and is considered to be Australia's largest fringing reef, is known as the "Ningaloo nursery" for good reason. If it's not the turtles, it's the fish, the crabs, the prawns and even the coral spawning, when the water itself billows with colourful clouds after the full moon in March and April. On our ocean outing with Live Ningaloo (liveningaloo.com.au; the specialists in whale shark and humpback whale excursions when it comes to small swim-participant numbers), owner Murray Pattison reveals "magic May" is the ideal time to visit. "When the reef spawns it's like an oil slick and we can have 400 whale sharks in this 300 kilometres of reef. Then from August to October it's teeming with humpbacks and their calves. But we still need to do more to protect Exmouth Gulf."





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The current baby boom is taking place on terra firma, too. A 5.30am alarm jostles me awake to find fairy-floss skies outside my tent, along with a native mouse scurrying past. Today we’ll walk to Mandu Mandu Gorge to count how many endangered black-flanked rock-wallabies we can see sheltering in the crevices of the caves, then climb a steep path up to the rim, where the sun is starting to rise. I follow the spinifex-lined pearly sand path to Sal Salis’ main lodge area, in search of coffee.

The camp is made up of 16 tents dotted among the dunes, each one accommodating couples. On our way to the gorge, I meet nine of them – two from Perth, the remainder from Queensland, Melbourne and Sydney – all clambering across an ancient riverbed of white and pink pebbles and a lumpy limestone escarpment that towers over us glowing red, even at dawn. The vegetation is uncharacteristically lush (average rainfall is a paltry 250 millimetres), but it’s still the outback. We wander past human-height termite mounds, low-growing saltbushes, desert peas, mulla mullas and the last of the spring wattle. The place is alive with wildlife. Butcher birds, wedge-tailed eagles, flocks of pink galahs...

“Our day tours are constantly reimaged,” Sal Salis’ camp manager, Nick Day, tells me that evening over a three-course dinner (kingfish ceviche, confit duck leg, panna cotta with macadamia caramel ice-cream) whipped up by Italian chef Simonay. “Kayaking in the incredible Yardie Creek, Osprey Sanctuary or Mangrove Bay; walking tours; even just snorkelling out front. The Barrier Reef takes an hour to reach by boat – our reef sits on your doorstep. We must keep our footprint to a minimum.”

“I’m trying to manage my expectations of what we’ll see out there and remind myself we’re not in a zoo.” After taking a four-seat Cessna 172 to meet the *Shore Thing* at Coral Bay, 215 kilometres south – flying above sandy lagoons, rocky shores, deep-water sponge gardens and breaching whales along the way – I’m chatting to Lisa, a lawyer from Melbourne. She’s one of seven other guests, all Australian bar a Yorkshire couple, who’ll be spending the next three nights on the catamaran, with its compact air-conditioned cabins (plus ensuites). “I’ve been following Sail Ningaloo’s socials for months,” she says, “so I’ve built

this idea in my head that I’ll tick off turtles, manta rays and dolphins but I need to let that go.”

We’re joined by three crew members who do double duty on the trip. Charlotte, our snorkel guide, is also the chef and delivers a pitch-perfect menu: for breakfast, pancakes; lunch is salads, burgers, barbecued fish and chips; dinner might be a tender eye fillet and sweet-potato mash.

Everyone’s out of bed by 7am each day, fed and caffeine-fuelled by 8am, the first snorkel starting about 30 minutes later. The itinerary is loose, taking in swim spots such as The Fishbowl, Holy Moley, Asho’s Gap and Stanley Pool, and open to improvisation when currents or the wind don’t work in our favour. “If we see something from the top of the boat, I’ll tell you to grab your wetsuit, spray your mask and slide off the back step as gracefully and quietly as you can,” says dive instructor Hendrik, who wears a second hat as our wildlife photographer. “Hesitate and you’ll miss spotting something amazing.” After a snorkel on day two, Lisa reveals she got her social media-worthy moment, shrieking, “A shark got a fright and swam straight into my mask!”

I’m flying across an underwater forest, my arms and legs splayed out like a starfish. Released from gravity, I’m pulled by the currents of Five Fingers Reef as I drift-snorkel, enjoying the visual choir below. The colour combinations of the cabbage, brain, mushroom and lavender corals are breaking every fashion rule but it’s not like the fish are following a style guide either. Parrots, damsels, angels and comets dart and nibble, while a lone lionfish glares at me from under a ledge. It’s impressive but Hendrik later admits he prefers the adrenaline stuff. “I get excited sighting dense patches of smaller fish – energy-rich prey – surrounded by reef sharks and whale sharks lining up and taking aim.”

Everyone has an animal they’re aiming to see and for Charlotte “embarking on manta missions” is the ultimate. I understand why on our final swim. A spotter plane circling above radios to our skipper that manta rays are close. We grab our gear and jump in. The world pauses. There it is – a car-sized, kite-shaped, black-and-white ghost with a long tail and wings flapping in slow motion, impervious to my presence. I loll in the simple pleasure of observing.