

The Sun-Herald Great holidays

Traveller

ON
SUNDAY

MARCH 30, 2014 SMH.COM.AU/TRAVEL



Treasures of the deep

Swimming with whale sharks
on Australia's other great reef

P10



A whale of a time

Ningaloo Reef is one of the most reliable places on the planet to see whale sharks and the 2014 season starts now, continuing until July. **Daniel Scott** snorkels, sails and swims on Australia's most accessible reef, with luxury digs at days end.

ABOUT THE WRITER

After five visits Daniel Scott loves Ningaloo because no other natural phenomenon around Australia is so bountiful and colourful yet so unscathed by mass tourism.



On my first evening at Ningaloo reef I go for a walk along the beach that fronts Sal Salis, the safari-style retreat where I am staying.

After several previous visits to Ningaloo, it is like reacquainting myself with an old friend.

Fresh from the east coast winter, I splash along the edge of the Indian ocean, letting warm waves wash over my shins. Ghost crabs spider across the beach, casting outsized eight-legged shadows on the sand, and in the dunes kangaroos nibble on tussocks of coastal grass.

The sun is dipping below the cloud and, behind Sal Salis, the moon is already bright. As they see-saw in the sky, the cloud cover grows ever more pink and floss-like. Once the sun sets, I join a few other guests on the deck of Sal Salis' central dining tent for drinks and canapes.

They are a well-beeled bunch,

former chief executives, barristers and doctors, and, with the exception of one German woman, Australians.

All seem happy to be paying \$750 a person a night for their reef-front tents, the luxury of no mobile phone coverage and gourmet food and wine.

"This is one of those places," Sal Salis' assistant manager Tash Parks says as we sit down to a communal dinner, "where you can think. Many guests with incredibly busy lives come here to connect with the environment."

The key to Sal Salis lies in "exposing guests to the sights and sounds of the surrounding bush and ocean, underpinned by key comforts - sleep, food and wine".

Tonight the wine is flowing and Chilean chef Pedro Torres' food is exceptional, with a pumpkin potage followed by lamb with blue-cheese flavoured polenta.

At night, tucked up in one of nine wilderness tents amid the dunes, it

is the sound of the ocean that is most noticeable. Leaving the screened front flaps open I settle into a blancmange of pillows on my king-sized bed and let the rhythmic thunder of waves crashing on to the outer reef usher me to sleep.

In the morning, it is the

I want to broadcast its treasures.

awakening of the coastal bush and the sense of being part of it all at Sal Salis that strikes me.

That and the feeling of having a World Heritage site, listed in 2011 for its natural beauty and biological diversity, about 15 metres away and virtually to myself.

For two days, as other guests go off to swim with whale sharks, one of the planet's great wildlife

encounters which I did on my last visit, those remaining are taken on guided snorkelling trips to reef locales like Turquoise Bay and the Oyster Stacks, where the marine life and coral is varied and colourful.

What is most impressive about Sal Salis is how it delivers indulgence - guest tents have wooden floorboards, beds with 500-thread cotton sheets and an en suite bathroom - while adhering to environmental principles. In its isolated setting in Cape Range National Park, water usage is limited to 20 litres per tent per day, solar panels provide energy and there are composting toilets.

After two nights, I leave Sal Salis on a scenic flight from nearby Yardie Creek airport, pilot Karen wiggling the wings to wave goodbye as we overfly the retreat.

The flight is an opportunity to take in the 260-kilometre fringing reef system. It is also a chance to



Giant friends: (Clockwise from main), whale shark visit; the Shore Thing; just floating; Sal Salis; feeding snapper. Photos: Tony Blaskeyfield, Anson Smartmarch, Tourism Australia, Tourism Western Australia, Coral Coastmarch.

see some big marine life in the deeper, darker sea off the reef.

We circle above three whale sharks, their markings clearly visible from 300 metres above, check out two equally-big tiger sharks and find conglomerations of 20 or more turtles. As we descend towards the dirt airstrip at Coral Bay, we fly over Sail Ningaloo's Shore Thing, my catamaran home for the next three days.

Two hours later, I'm lounging with a glass of sparkling wine as the yacht's sails catch the light of another sublime west coast sunset.

Sailing a short distance inside the reef, all five passengers, including two fellow divers from Texas and two Canadian women, are settling in quickly.

"We're lucky," says Sail Ningaloo skipper and owner Luke Riley, welcoming us, "the reef is so unexplored that we don't have to go far to show you amazing coral gardens and dive sites that we've named ourselves."

"I've dived and snorkelled around the world," he says, "and Ningaloo is the healthiest reef, with the most abundant wildlife, I've seen."

"We love the size of Shore Thing," says Luke's wife Lannie as she prepares dinner, "for the quality of the experience we can offer people. With 10 guests maximum it's as personalised and eco-friendly as we can make it."



On board Shore Thing, each cabin has a big, snug bed (or twin singles) and en suite shower and toilet facilities, and communal areas such as the lounge are spacious and inviting. At night, anchored within the reef, there is minimal swell and, tuning into the gentle rocking motion, I sleep soundly.

On the first morning I wake to a breakfast of baked eggs with bacon and mushrooms presented in ramekins with freshly made bread. Every day, working within the confines of the galley, chef Lannie creates three imaginative meals. It's not only main courses, such as goldband snapper with lemon salsa and potato bake, that impress, but the accompanying salads, incorporating beetroot, wild rice, lentils and capers.

Best of all when Canadian Kym catches a small tuna, it is briskly filleted by Luke and presented as the freshest sashimi canape.



As Luke promised, we don't need to travel far for excellent dive and snorkel sites, journeying just 10 nautical miles from Coral Bay in three days.

We begin with a dive, led by divemaster Travis Topping, at Sid's Harbour on the outer reef.

We don't meet resident groper Sid but we do encounter the first of many giant manta rays we will see on the trip, its 4½-metre wingspan dwarfing us as it sails overhead.

Later that day, we visit two snorkelling sites that outdo anything I've seen on the Great Barrier Reef, in the Red Sea or the South Pacific.

Both feature forests of staghorn coral, 1000-year-old outcrops and immeasurable numbers of tropical fish. Intermittent sand patches yield bigger marine life too.

I spot a grandfather loggerhead turtle loping along, several white and black-tipped reef sharks cruising beside the reef and

porcupine and cow rays hovering across the seabed.

More spectacular diving and snorkelling follows in several other sites until we passengers, sensing a need to preserve these special places, begin suggesting names like "So-So reef" to divert future visitors.

Then, on the final morning Luke steers Shore Thing to an area that he knows is a cleaning station, where manta rays gather to have tiny fish rid them of parasites. Within minutes we are snorkelling above a big, slow-moving manta.

Mirroring its pirouettes and duck-diving occasionally to within touching distance of its cape-like wings, the thrilling cha-cha lasts for more than an hour.

By the end of this, my fifth visit to Ningaloo reef, I feel deeply conflicted.

On the one hand I want to broadcast its treasures to the rooftops. On the other, I don't want it to go the way of that other Australian wonder off the north-east coast, reduced, in places, to a colourless skeleton by agricultural run-off and rising sea temperatures, its coral gardens trampled by boatloads of heavy-footed snorkellers.

Ultimately, though, I can't help wanting others to see it too and Sal Salis and Sail Ningaloo represent the most enlightened, low-impact way of doing so. **T**

The writer was a guest of Tourism WA, Sal Salis and Sail Ningaloo.

FIVE OTHER

NINGALOO MUST-DOS

SWIM WITH SHARKS

The plankton-rich waters off Ningaloo Reef are one of the planet's most reliable places to see whale sharks between mid-March to late July each year. The 2014 season is off to a flying start, up to 10 whale sharks spotted every day so far. Swimming with the largest fish in the sea is one of the great wildlife encounters. Several operators at Exmouth and Coral Bay use light aircraft to locate the creatures and drop passengers ahead of the whale shark. Operators offering whale shark tours include kingsningalooreeftours.com.au. Prices \$385 an adult, \$270 child and \$1099 for a family of two adults and two children (a saving of \$211). Sal Salis also offer three-night whale shark packages (April 1- July 31) for \$2660 a person (\$877 a night), working in conjunction with Ocean Eco Adventures. This includes a whale shark day tour and three nights all inclusive at Sal Salis.

GET HIGH ON NINGALOO

Take a micro-light flight over the reef, learning how to control the craft from pilot Gavin Penfold, one of only two people to have micro-lighted night across Australia, as you take in the view. Thirty-minute introductory flights from \$199. See ningaloomicrolights.com.

SEE THE WILDFLOWERS

Take a four-wheel-drive "Range to reef" safari tour in the July-October season for colours as vibrant on land as those on the reef. See Westtreksafaritours.com.au.

VIEW NESTING TURTLES

Between December and March, the beaches at Ningaloo are rookeries for three species of threatened marine turtle, the green, loggerhead and hawksbill. At night during the season, the Department of Environment and Conservation conducts guided turtle interaction tours from the Jurabi centre, an interpretive centre 13 kilometres from Exmouth. Depending on the timing of your visit you get to witness adult females, in a trance-like state, laying and burying their eggs on the beach, or later in the season watch hatchlings scurrying for the ocean after emerging from the sandy burrows. Adults \$20, Children \$10. See ningalooturtles.org.au/jurabi.html.

TAKE A BOAT TOUR

On the north-western cape a little way south of Sal Salis, cruise between multicoloured gorge walls that are home to a colony of rare black-footed wallabies. Phone 08 9949 2920.

Daniel Scott

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

Qantas flies ex Perth to Learmonth (Exmouth); transfers available to Sal Salis and Coral Bay. See Qantas.com.au.

GETTING AROUND

Scenic flights Yardie Creek to Coral Bay from \$750 return. See norwestairwork.com.au.

Sail Ningaloo's three-day Coral Garden cruises from \$1700 each in a cabin (twin share) including

diving (equipment hire \$100), snorkelling, all food and soft drink. Five-day cruises from \$2700. See Sailningaloo.com.au.

STAYING THERE

A six-night Sail and Snorkel Ningaloo package has air transfers between Yardie Creek and Coral Bay. From \$4808 each, April-November 30. See salsalis.com.au/journey-packages. Sal Salis costs \$750 per night (twin share).

MORE INFORMATION

westernaustralia.com, salsalis.com.au