

One day in wonderland

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Beauty, solitude, excellent cake... Bruce Elder takes the ultimate tour.

"We don't offer mum's homemade fruitcake like the previous owner," says tour guide Dave Mongan with a smile as he offers us all a cup of tea and a piece of cake in the cool morning air above Charles Knife Gorge.

We are about to set off on a day-long excursion from the Cape Range National Park in Exmouth, Western Australia, to Ningaloo Reef.

The fruitcake he is referring to achieved a legendary status with everyone who took the excursion with the previous guide, Neil McLeod.

That cake had a well deserved reputation - McLeod's mother, a long-time resident of Exmouth who is now in her 90s, made it indulgently rich. Still, to stand on the ridge gazing down into Charles Knife Gorge with the sun just touching the inhospitable and rocky edges of the gorge, with the Indian Ocean in the distance, is the real treat and, quite frankly, the new fruitcake, while not "legendary", is just what you need before the safari heads deep into the desert wilderness of the Cape Range.

The Ningaloo Safari Tour, known also as "Top of the Range Safari" and "A Day of Wonder", must surely be one of the most extraordinary day trips anywhere in Australia.

It is an adventure through the rugged country south of Exmouth that starts at 7.30am, finishes about 6pm, traverses rugged but wild and beautiful country in a huge four-wheel-drive known as an Oka (an Australian-designed vehicle which seems to be a cross between a dune buggy and a juggernaut) and is led by the knowledgeable and enthusiastic Dave.

This is one of those tours that you can't do on your own unless, of course, you have topographical maps, know the area like your backyard, carry a boat and snorkelling gear, have plenty of food aboard (including, of course, some fruitcake) and have a four-wheel-drive that is prepared to bounce its way around some of this country's toughest roads - sorry, tracks - and you have a guide who has an enduring love for this country that means all local flora and fauna can be accurately identified.

It is a tour of remarkable diversity encompassing rugged canyon country, the sandy flat plateau of the Cape Range, a breathtakingly rich array of flora and fauna, a flat-bottomed boat trip up Yardie Creek Gorge and a guided snorkelling trip through the coral wonderland that is Ningaloo Reef.

Toss in a visit to Vlamingh Lighthouse and the opportunity to gaze in amazement at the huge, delicate towers of the US Naval Communication Station, Harold E. Holt, glowing in the late afternoon sun and, by the time you return to Exmouth, you will feel as though you have experienced a rare and beautiful part of Australia with a depth that only a well-guided and carefully thought-out tour can provide.

No one from the eastern states can pretend that getting to Cape Range is easy. This superb safari may be called "A Day of Wonder" but it can only be had by those prepared to make the long trip west. First you've got to get to Perth (from the east coast about five hours by plane and several days by train or car) and then you've got to find your way 1270 kilometres north from Perth to Exmouth. To get the trip into perspective, Exmouth sits at about the same latitude as Mackay on the north Queensland coast.

Still, the effort is worthwhile because the distance and isolation have ensured that there are few tourists in this area. Consequently it is a rare opportunity to see some of Australia's most beautiful scenery without having to deal with excessive tourism and overdevelopment.

Go in September and October and the combination of wildflowers (often carpeting the land to the horizon in



WATER WONDERLAND: Snorkelling with whale sharks at Coral Bay, Ningaloo Reef IN Western Australia.

dramatic displays), warm waters and glorious desert landscapes will become indelibly etched in your memory and be recalled for decades after. This really is a unique place of magical beauty.

Exmouth's origins date from May 1963 when the Australian and United States governments agreed to establish the \$66-million Harold E. Holt US Naval Communication Station at North West Cape.

This single event created the town.

The area's strategic importance had been recognised during World War II when Exmouth Gulf became an important submarine base for Australian and US submarines.

The base, nicknamed "Potshot" by the Americans, operated from 1942-45. In 1945 most of the facilities were destroyed by a cyclone. It was during the war that the Learmonth airstrip, named after Wing Commander Charles C. Learmonth, was opened.

Consequently, today Exmouth is a modern town stuck in the middle of nowhere and, for reasons known only to the US military, the Exmouth airport, which is so long it can handle any super-sized jet you want to land on it, is located about 35 kilometres out of town.

The town has a few shops, a couple of motels, some buildings providing basic services and the feeling that it is at the end of the world.

The drive from Coral Bay to Exmouth is a reminder that this is dangerous country.

It is desert-dry with an annual rainfall of either thousands of millimetres (if a cyclone happens to stray into the area) or less than 100 millimetres a year when the cyclones stay away. The landscape is classic low desert scrub - hardy, determined to survive in a most inhospitable landscape.

This is Australia at its rawest and its most honest. A harsh country where, particularly if you've spent all your life in a city or town on the eastern coast, you need someone like Dave to show you the beauty that lies beneath the apparent monotony and harshness.

So it is that we are picked up at around 7.30am at the Potshot Motel, introduced to everyone on the trip (a good mix of people but mostly those who are making their way around Australia and have decided, wisely, that their own vehicles simply cannot make this journey), and we head out of town towards the airport and then turn into the northern edge of Cape Range National Park.

The Oka winds its way up the road that Charles Knife and Jack King cut into the area while searching for oil in the 1950s.

On the top of a ridge the views across to the coastline, particularly with the early morning sun warming the landscape and bathing it in a soft golden light, are remarkable, and the views down into Charles Knife Gorge and the surrounding gorges are reminiscent of the Grand Canyon in miniature, with layered, brightly coloured rocks and jagged outcrops defying the area's relentless erosive forces.

Then it is up onto the plateau that constitutes most of the Cape Range National Park.

The sights are genuinely exceptional. In the space of a couple of hours we see emus, kangaroos, lizards, fields of Sturt's desert pea, vast areas of flowering banksias and such rare delights as the delicate bird plant and kangaroo paw.

The whole of Cape Range is limestone and the weathering has been variable. So the road, if you can call it that, will drop into the luxury of sandy soil and then bump its way across pot-holed and unforgiving sheets of limestone.

Once down on the coast we headed to Yardie Creek Gorge. Dave has his own flat-bottomed boat that allows us to pass through the coastal mangroves and head up the gorge. It is one of those marvellous outback gorges with red cliffs and clear, green waters.

As we progress we see a huge sea osprey nest on a ledge above and shy black-footed rock wallabies, perched precariously in the crevices, stare down as we make our way.

The day finishes with snorkelling at Turquoise Bay where the beauty of the coral is matched by the white purity

and peacefulness of the beaches.

The great attraction is the Ningaloo Coral Reef, which stretches south from Exmouth for 260 kilometres to Coral Bay. By any objective assessment, Ningaloo makes the Great Barrier Reef look overcrowded, overcommercialised and overhyped.

At Ningaloo, as Turquoise Bay perfectly demonstrates, you can literally walk in off the beach (and not be out of your depth) and be surrounded by a coral wonderland of soft and hard corals, huge and delicate formations, exotic and brightly coloured small fish, as well as turtles and reef sharks (of the harmless variety) and - you don't even have to swim.

All you've got to do is put your head down and let the current do the work. Between March and July it is possible to snorkel on Ningaloo Reef and watch whale sharks - which often measure more than 18 metres in length and weigh up to 40,000 kilograms - drift by below you.

We have afternoon tea - orange cake, which is the equal of the morning's fruitcake - and then make our way, on good-quality sealed road, up the coast to Vlamingh Lighthouse, which provides dramatic, panoramic views across the ocean as the sun drops below the horizon.

Remember: seeing the sun sinking over a watery western horizon is not something people on the east coast see very often.

That sunset is the end of a perfect day.

It is easy to get overexcited about day trips, but the Ningaloo Safari Trip is that genuine rarity: something you can't do yourself that offers a full day of endlessly variable activities and presents one of Australia's most beautiful desert and ocean regions with the assistance of a guide who knows and loves the landscape he lives and works in.

It doesn't get much better than that.

TRIP NOTES

Destination: Exmouth is located north of the Tropic of Capricorn on the West Australian coast, 1270 kilometres north of Perth.

When to go: Best time is from May to November. Beware of cyclones in the summer months. Wildflowers are in bloom from September onwards.

Things to do: Snorkelling and scuba diving on Ningaloo Reef, exploring Cape Range National Park, whale watching, fishing.

Getting there: Stage 1: Fly to Perth. Stage 2: Fly to Exmouth. See <http://www.skywest.com.au> for details. There is a Greyhound bus that goes to Exmouth.