

CRUISING THE KIMBERLEY COAST

On 1 February 2006, Kevin Coate treated the Kimberley Society to an excellent overview of the development of cruising on the Kimberley coast. The following notes, which he kindly provided, summarise his illustrated talk.

In the mid 1970s when I first began taking tours to the Kimberley, I recall an old fellow in Derby peering up at me over a schooner of beer in the Spinni pub and saying "You're wasting your time trying to get city people up here – they won't like it". Tonight I'm sharing some of the attractions of the Kimberley Coast and talking about the progression of tourism to the present time, to show you how wrong he was. Some of this will be from a personal perspective.

Although tourism along the Kimberley Coast is of a fairly recent origin, it is attracting more and more visitors every year. The coast's rugged beauty, numerous inlets, rivers, and awesome tidal surges become a talking point for all who venture there.

Those with the most knowledge of the area were of course the Aborigines, as evidenced by numerous art and occupation sites along the coast dating back for thousands of years. There are many opportunities for more Aboriginal involvement in tourism along the coast, especially in interpretation of their culture.

From the latter part of the 17th century to the start of the 20th century, trepangers from Macassar regularly visited. Remains of their processing camps are still visible, especially in areas around Vansittart Bay. During the 19th century, American and English whalers, guano miners and pearlbers worked the coast. Others who knew the coast very well during the 20th century were missionaries, wartime army personnel, beachcombers, crocodile shooters and those servicing navigation aids.

Workers from the Kuri Bay cultured pearl operation and Cockatoo and Koolan Island iron ore mines spent many recreational hours exploring creeks and inlets around the Buccaneer Archipelago, and up to the Prince Regent River, from the 1950s and 1960s. The latter group established very comfortable camps with iron-framed beds, crockery and cutlery 'courtesy of BHP', at places such as Gibbings Island, Crocodile Creek, Red Cone Creek, Sale River, Camp Creek in the Prince Regent River and St Patrick Island.

Tourism along the Kimberley coast began in a commercial sense in 1980, when Peter Sartori (a commercial fisherman with his 55-foot boat *Piscean*) began taking groups of 6–8 passengers, mainly fishermen. In 1968, he saw potential in the area

after an unsuccessful attempt at prawn fishing and involvement in a prawn survey of the coast with Fisheries the following year.

In the early 1980s, the Kimberley coast was about as remote as you could get and few people had any understanding of its potential, let alone its beauty. Tourism was very much in the pioneering stage. When I first began taking expeditions along the Kimberley coast, as an extension to my land-based tours, there were no surveyed (licensed) passenger boats available.

In 1983, when planning trips for the following year to the Prince Regent and Hunter River areas (with 20 passengers), the only boat available was at Koolan Island, owned by the tug master, Boof Price. It was unsuitable in that it was small, unsurveyed, and only carried 4–6 passengers. However, Boof and his mate Ivan Brown gave me an insight into many interesting locations along the coast.

Eventually, I persuaded a Jurien Bay cray-fisherman, whose 60-foot cray-boat *Barbara Anne* was surveyed to carry passengers, to go north to Derby on a proviso I guaranteed two trips to make relocating worthwhile. As he was not prepared to be involved in catering, I was required to provide food and provisions and employ a cook. I also supplied camping equipment as passengers had to sleep ashore. As four dinghies were required for transportation from boat to shore, I had to be sure there were those in our group who were prepared to operate them. These were exploratory expeditions in the true sense. Through a friend I found a person who had recently retired as a cook at the Graylands Psychiatric Hospital. Although not altogether suited to campfire cooking, he nevertheless turned out some excellent meals under very unusual situations. The overall cost of these 14-day trips was \$1200 per person. This included airfares from Perth to Derby, accommodation with meals for one night at the Spinifex Hotel, and a half-day bus trip to Windjana Gorge or the 17-Mile Dam at Camballin.

The success of these expeditions inspired me to run more trips to the area. I chartered the same boat for the following year to take two trips with 20 passengers per trip. However, six weeks before departure, I was advised that the boat had been sold, and the new owners were taking it to Queensland. This left me in a real pickle. I had to refund passenger's fares for the first trip, but luckily, I managed to salvage the second, having heard the ketch *Opal Shell* was available for charter. As with the *Barbara Ann*, the *Opal Shell* was only surveyed to carry 6–8 passengers with over-night accommodation. Fortunately, it could carry my required number during daylight hours, provided everyone slept ashore at night.

During the mid to late 1980s other vessels such as *Wave Spirit*, *Jodi Anne*, *That's Life*, *D McD* and *North Star* (fore-runner of *True North*) began operating out of Broome, taking fishing and scenic adventure trips. I concentrated on more hands-on nature-based tourism (or eco tourism as it is now known) ensuring my passengers had ample opportunity for exploring ashore and upstream of creeks. Sometimes we made base-camps over several days, for a more in-depth study of flora and fauna in the area.

After the America's Cup in 1987, tourism along the coast entered a new dimension.

A consortium that included Brian Coppin, Motive Travel, Lindblad Expedition (an American tour company), Warren Anderson, and Peter Sartori decided to modify the *Motive Explorer* (a large catamaran used as a viewing platform for the America's Cup races), to take up-market tours along the North Kimberley Coast. They re-named the vessel the *Kimberley Explorer*. Although this venture proved unsuccessful, the publicity generated awareness and more interest in the area, altering world tourist perceptions of the Kimberley.

Another significant event that generated a huge amount of publicity overseas, after the America's Cup, was the death of the American woman Ginger Meadows, who was taken by a crocodile at King Cascades in the Prince Regent River. I had a trip scheduled to go to the Prince Regent a few weeks after this, and received a number of inquiries from overseas people who had never heard of the Kimberley to see if I could take them to where the tragedy occurred.

Up to this time many waters along the Kimberley Coast were uncharted or relied on mapping done by early hydrographers, such as Philip Parker King. There was no GPS to mark a track. With the massive rise and fall of tides twice a day, poking around by boat or dinghy could be quite hazardous. An illustration of the dangers is that the luxury ketch-rigged yacht *That's Life* had to be abandoned after striking an island one dark night, while travelling downstream on a falling tide from King Cascades (something few skippers in these waters are usually brave enough to do). In another incident, in 2003, the luxury cruiser *Seal*, with twenty passengers and crew, struck an object and had to be abandoned.

Another mile-stone for tourism was when Zegrahm Expeditions, an American company based in Seattle, picked up on previous advertising by Lindblad Expeditions for the *Kimberley Explorer* and investigated the potential for tourism in North Australia with the idea of extending their luxury eco-expedition tours.

Impressed with what they saw, in 1996 they chartered the *Coral Princess*, a catamaran capable of carrying 48 passengers and crew in comfort, to relocate from the east coast of Australia to the Kimberley coast. Zegrahm built a special tender to convey all 48 passengers from the *Coral Princess* in one operation, to the various points of interest. Although they only include two trips to the Kimberley per year or second year in their world programme (some in conjunction with institutions like the Smithsonian or World Wildlife Fund for Nature), the owner of the *Coral Princess*, Tony Briggs, found an ongoing demand for this type of boat in the Kimberley. In 2005 he launched an additional luxury cruise boat, *Oceanic Princess*, capable of taking 72 passengers.

Other new luxury cruise boats to begin operation were the *Orion* carrying 106 passengers, and North Star Cruises' new adventure cruise boat *True North*, which carries a helicopter and has a passenger limit of 36 with a crew of 18. Pearl Sea Coastal Cruises' *Kimberley Quest 2*, also provide a helicopter service. Due to begin operations in 2006 is the 24-metre catamaran, *Odyssey Expeditions*. Most boats carry between 8 and 20 passengers, while smaller, more exclusive vessels, such as *Red Sky at Night*, range between 4 and 8 passengers.

From the early 1980s, when there were virtually no charter boats working the coast, there are currently twenty-nine in operation. This number is increasing with many tours booked a year or more ahead. Cruise boats are becoming bigger and there is a wider choice of tour, from small personalized trips to larger groups on more set itineraries.

With the upsurge of cruise boat and private yacht numbers, there are associated problems with congestion at some of the more popular places such as King Cascades in the Prince Regent River Nature Reserve. While self-regulation works to a degree, it is not the full answer. Conservation and Land Management (CALM) have put in place rules and regulations for charter boat operators, as to where passengers may go ashore and where they may walk.

On the table at the talk were brochures and a list with contact numbers, for all boats currently operating during the tourist season (March to November) although some local operators work off-season if necessary. The list does not include transient charter boats. Prices range from about \$370 to \$1000–\$1500 per person per day, with most being in the \$500 to \$800 range. As a promotion, The Kimberley Cruise Centre in Broome, an agency handling bookings for 16 of the 29 charter boats, offered Kimberley Society members at the talk, a free night at the Mangrove Hotel in Broome worth \$205, should they take up their offer of a cruise.

Most cruises operate between Broome and Bigge Island; others travel from Broome to Wyndham. This used to be a long haul for boats with limited fuel capacity, but there are now places where fuel can be picked up - one being at Dog Leg Creek opposite Koolan Island. Some of the larger cruise boats also include Darwin, Bathurst Island, Timor and New Guinea on their agenda. At Bathurst Island in the Northern Territory, the Tiwi people make passengers welcome. They are given an opportunity to learn a little of their culture and buy artefacts and screen print materials. Overseas visitors love the interaction with Tiwi people and it is surprising that Aboriginal communities along the Kimberley coast have not come up with similar ventures. While most companies work from Broome, three work out of Derby, one from Wyndham, Darwin and Cairns, and one with no fixed port of call (where passengers fly in a float plane to a pre-arranged destination). The use of float planes or helicopters to transfer passengers to save costly fuel and travel time is becoming more frequent.

Before long, around-the-world luxury expedition type small ships, such as *Clipper Odyssey*, could include the Kimberley on their itinerary. However, this may cause problems if too many vessels, not flagged in Australia and using low paid foreign crew, compete in Australia for passengers. At present, *Orion* is the only cruise ship of this nature working the coast.

In conclusion, tourism along the Kimberley coast is alive and well despite what that old fellow said in the Derby pub. There is still plenty of scope for new operators, especially those prepared to specialize in nature based and cultural tourism involving Aboriginal people.