



On the Ningaloo kayak tour, main; Kuri Bay campsite and Yardie Creek Gorge, below; black-flanked rock wallaby, inset

PICTURES, ABOVE AND BELOW LEFT: LUKE TOREVILLAS

IN THE 'GLAM' ZONE

The pleasures of paddle power at Ningaloo

CAROLYN BEASLEY

We rate the conditions on the reef using the 'glam scale,' says lead kayak guide Neri Grieve. She gestures to the glassy ocean surface. "Today is definitely glam, and if the visibility underwater is also perfect, then it's called glam-glam."

I'm at Western Australia's Ningaloo Reef, 1300km north of Perth, in search of a slow travel experience. I've visited the reef previously, staying in the gateway town of Exmouth, driving up to an hour to snorkel from the beaches in Cape Range National Park. This visit, I'm seeking a more immersive experience. I want to enjoy the reef without time constraints, and perhaps even go home a little wiser.

A five-day kayak and camping tour with Exmouth Adventure Co starts with a minibus transfer to the national park, a trailer of kayaks trundling behind us. I'm joined by 13 other paddlers, aged from late 40s to an impressive 80, with kayaking skills ranging from beginner to experienced. Over the next five days, we'll paddle the length of the national park along the sheltered, shallow waters inside the fringing reef. It's 45km as the crow flies, but longer with wildlife-spotting and coast-hug-zigzags.

At Mangrove Bay in the northern end of the park, Neri and our second guide Elizabeth

(El) Leyen, give a quick course on technique. Most of our group are paddling double kayaks, but I'm trying a single. El steadies my vessel as I climb into the "cockpit" for the first time. There's fumbling and laughter but we all remain upright, and soon we're gliding along the surface with the breeze at our backs.

Less than five minutes from the launch, we're spotting incredible wildlife. Cowtail stingrays fly beneath us as we cruise around the mangrove-lined coast. Baby blacktip reef sharks flit by as Neri explains the importance of this fish nursery.

Morning tea is shared on a beach with no other humans in sight. While flocks of budgerigars wheel overhead, flasks of coffee and

we're bussed to our "base camp", an off-grid, private site nestled into the semi-arid landscape of the national park. It consists of two shipping containers for storage, a shaded dining table, a long-drop toilet, and two trailers of equipment. Our cosy tents, big enough to stand in, are already assembled with mattresses, sheets and doonas, and Neri rigs up solar hot water showers for quick rinses.

While our guides cook up a fresh, hearty dinner, the guests, BYO alcoholic beverages in hand, stroll across the dunes to watch the sunset. The underside of the clouds takes on a magenta glow all the way across the sky to the rocky ridgeline of Cape Range. Into this mesmerising scene swims the first turtle of our

A green turtle observes us from its perch on a soft coral. We hover as it surfaces beside us and exhales

tea, and banana cake materialise from kayak hulls.

Snorkelling equipment travels with us too, and Neri gives a safety briefing, explaining she and El carry flotation devices, and anyone is welcome to take a break if tired. Popping my head under the surface, I immediately see a harmless whitetip reef shark snoozing metres below, while colourful cities of fish buzz around giant boulder corals. The visibility is startling. Definitely glam-glam.

At Kuri Bay, we pull the kayaks up behind the dunes, chaining them together for the night. We'll resume here tomorrow, but now

trip, snatching a breath and delighting our small group of new acquaintances.

The next morning, we transfer the day's picnic and equipment into the kayaks before heading south again. The pace is always leisurely, with several stops for coffee, lunch and snorkelling. As we travel, I'm absorbing the vibrant colours; aquamarine lagoon waters, deep blue beyond the breakers, white sandy beaches, and the burnt orange range.

The reef has its own soundscape, too. Apart from our occasional chitchat, the place is free of human noises. A pair of pied oystercatchers call "peep-a-peep" as they alight on

rocks, and there's the faint slap of tiny waves hitting my chariot's hull. The process of kayaking is meditative. The steady rhythm of paddling while peering through the water to the corals beneath pushes normal life to the backs of our minds.

After being off the beaten track for several days, we feel slightly affronted by the presence of other tourists at popular Turquoise Bay. Nonetheless, we wedge our kayaks up on the sand and try drift snorkelling. A green turtle casually observes us from its perch on a soft coral. We hover quietly as it surfaces beside us and exhales. Back on the beach, we can't help but feel smug as the day-trippers depart, and we paddle back into exclusive solitude.

Each night around the dinner table, we discuss the day's magical moments, such as the nameless beach where the only prints in the sand belonged to recently hatched baby turtles. Or the time we saw drifting seaweed that turned out to be two juvenile batfish, their long fins billowing as they floated between our legs. And the massive school of convict surgeonfish, which seemed to flow like a river across the reef.

Neri's encyclopaedic knowledge adds depth to these stories, but that's not the only reason the guests nickname her "Extraordinary Neri". Her capabilities inspire our confidence, and if Neri says we can do something and we'll be fine, we know it's true. Importantly, our guides recognise this is a bucket-list adventure for many, and they work hard to make it the trip of everyone's dreams.

Beyond the reef, Cape Range is a drawcard in its own right. We explore the nearby Yardie Creek Gorge, hiking along the elevated nature trail that looks over the water and spotting rare black-flanked rock wallabies. Fish splash while screeching corellas and a pair of ospreys prepare to roost for the night. From our lookout, the sunset reflects gold and pink on the river and ocean below, and we're silenced by the scene.

On our final day of paddling, we rope up to a mooring in a no-fishing sanctuary. We've never been this far from land. Beneath us is a deep pool fringed with corals, and we can see the breakers smashing on to the reef's edge. Here, we're encouraged to jump overboard. We're all a bit aghast, wondering how we'll clamber back into the kayaks with nothing to stand on.

"El and I are trained to get you back into these kayaks, even if you're unconscious," Neri insists. "I'm certain that each one of you who wants to do this is absolutely capable."

And so, we don our gear and plunge in. Sure enough, the snorkelling is spellbinding. A huge black cod mingles with a school of barracuda. Countless turtles cruise by and reef sharks dart away shyly.

When the moment of kayak-remounting arrives, I'm coached through the manoeuvre dubbed the "sunbathing dugong". With fins still on, I kick upwards and belly-flop across the cockpit. It's then just an ungainly rotation of the backside into the seat, and there I am, feeling like a Lycra-clad Teletubby in flippers, laughing and triumphant.

Ningaloo Reef has certainly given me glam-glam conditions, but the tour has delivered slow travel at its finest.

Carolyn Beasley was a guest of Exmouth Adventure Co and Tourism Western Australia. westernaustralia.com

IN THE KNOW

Exmouth Adventure Co's Ultimate Safari Tour operates between April and October, departing from Exmouth. From \$2190 a person, twin-share, including tour, meals and all equipment (excludes alcohol; BYO permitted). exmouthadventureco.com.au

