

# The Outback's Outback

## An Expedition to the Kimberly Area of Australia

I embarked on a 10 day expedition-style cruise on L'Austral, the ship I was on a few years ago in Siberia and the Aleutian Islands. It is small by cruise standards - less than 250 people, new (only 6 years old), with beautiful cabins. Since Ponant is a French company, French culture is part of the experience.



*The gorgeous L'Austral flanked by two zodiacs from its fleet.*

*Photo by Natalie*

There are 12 naturalists aboard - each with their own specialty. Mick Fogg, our expedition leader is a marine biologist as well as a rock art specialist. The focus of our trip is nature, Nature, NATURE with a lot of rock art thrown in.

Its like being in college again! I have to keep a close watch on time so as not to miss a lecture or a zodiac departure. I never make it to tea-time, or a show, or the fun and games the cruise director offers. It is read, read, read the material I brought (I keep files on places I want to visit and bring them with me), suit up for zodiac excursions (we wear special life vests) or rush to the theater for lectures or the daily briefing to recap what we have seen and done that day, as well as receive a information about the next days adventures.



*I'm as happy as a clam siting in a zodiac by the Lacepede Islands, a group of four sandy islands on a coral reef. Birdlife International has named it one of the most important bird habitats in the world.*

*Photo by David*



And, of course there is the food. It is French, it is beautifully served, it is delicious, it is plentiful. The ship has two restaurants. The main and more formal one is like eating at a Michelin-star property every night. The second is buffet style and by the second cruise is my favorite as it is easier to control what I am eating though I become especially taken with the French butter -- yum -- especially spread on a toasted croissant. Even though I never make it to tea-time, Pascal, my butler, brings tea-time to me every afternoon with a plate full of treats left in my cabin. Between all this and the serve-yourself ice cream bar, I definitely feel my clothes have shrunk.



*Every day is an eating extravaganza. We are treated to a whole roast pig on the buffet one evening. And of course there is my downfall - French butter - irresistible!*



*And do we drink regular water? No Way! There are pallets of Evian as well as La Phocéenne - French sparkling water - stored on the top level of the ship just waiting for us to get thirsty.*



Each day is a good experience! We are in and out of zodiacs to land on a remote shore and do a walk-around, maybe a scramble over boulders to see rock art, sometimes a zodiac “cruise” (no landings) or am on the ship listening to lectures or watching documentaries.

Any down time is spent scanning the sea for whales and dolphins. At this time of the year, there are several thousand whales and dolphins frolicking in the area just before they migrate back to Antarctica. I’ve learned to keep my drapes open at night so that in the grogginess of waking up, I can stare out and maybe catch them jumping or breaching. One morning the captain wakes everyone up at 5:30 to enjoy a big pod of whales very close to our ship.



*Photos by Natalie*

*Thank goodness for Natalie, the ships photographer. She takes fabulous photos and even uses drones to capture interesting views.*

I have to admit this trip, even with all its activities, is a bit of “expedition-lite.” There are really two tracks (kinds of activities) and I have to choose, as it is impossible to do everything:

Track 1 (very mainstream): wine tasting, drink demos, tea-time, games, shows (there is a small troupe of dancers on board), lounge music and an occasional fashion show with goods from the ships’ boutique

Track 2: zodiac excursions, lectures, documentaries, briefings

I stay with Track 2 and add “sundown yoga” - a beautiful experience!

*Each day I receive a program guide listing ship excursions, lectures and events as well as US News and International News.*



## MY WONDERFUL SHIPMATES

The atmosphere is SO much different from the Siberia/Aleutian islands trip. Instead of just 12 English speaking passengers, there are 193 (a combo of Australian and New Zealanders) a smattering of Europeans and four Americans. It is day 6 before I run in to any of my countrymen.

And these Australasians love to talk! Joe says that if you can talk sports, you can talk to anyone in the world. Well, they can carry a conversation about anything and everything and keep you totally entertained for hours. I’ve had the privilege of sitting with and learning from a sheep farmer, a Disney imagineer and his wonderful girlfriend, resort owners in Tahiti, physicians, pharmacists, winery owners, a couple who do long-distance motorbike riding all over the world and even a Nobel Prize winner and his lovely wife who loves pearls as much as I do!

I especially like to hear about their adventures in America - they love our national parks! Then the conversation often turns to what else there is to see and do in Australia. They usually mention Tasmania, Broome and the west coast, a ride on the Ghan, the luxury train from Adelaide to Darwin and a ride on the Indian Pacific train from Sydney across the country to Perth. They are the nicest, most congenial, most interesting and friendliest people on earth -- I loved every minute of listening and being with them!



*Our route is Darwin to Darwin. Map on left shows the location of the Kimberly; while on the right, our ships route.*

## THE HEART OF THE ADVENTURE

The area we visit is called the Kimberly and is located in the northwest corner of the country. It is 164,000 square miles - about the size of California (which has 42 million people); but the Kimberly has a



population of just under 40,000. There are only three towns and is considered remote even by Australian standards.



*The Kimberly's stunning scenery.  
Photos by Natalie*

It is pristine, it is vast and the best way to describe it is a cross between Alaska for remoteness; the Grand Canyon for beauty; and our southwest for its native culture - a gorgeous trifecta.

This is where where Aboriginal people have existed for 50,000 years and where they continue to be custodians of the land. This culture is thought to be the oldest living culture on Earth.

Unfortunately, their history parallels that our our own native Americans:

- Colonization
- Land taken away
- Not regarded as citizens for a long time
- After lengthy legal battles, large tracts of ancestral lands are regained - including the Kimberly
- the country tries to make amends for how they have been treated - even having an "I'm Sorry Day" where the entire country apologized

The Aboriginal way of life and concept of society is so different from what we know. Their social structure is based on a reverence for the land and a sharing of all possessions. They do not have the concept of exclusive ownership of anything and even their land traditionally held in common. Their ideal way of life is to live in nature and hold hold on to values that are 40,000 years old.

It is easy to see why there is a constant clash with mainstream Australia's modern day western, high-tech and entrepreneurial culture.

I am sorry to mention that the Aboriginal people I saw in Darwin seemed poor and aimless. Some are begging, some are drunk. The few Aboriginal people I have contact with in the Kimberly seem much happier and at peace with themselves. And why not -- they are living on the same land and in the same way as their ancestors.

And those ancestors have left them pictorial messages, stories, maps and signs on sandstone rocks that the rest of us do not understand, but are privileged to visit.



## THE ROCK ART

Australia is blessed with large concentrations of rock art which is considered the world's first art. The most prolific locations are:

- \* The Kimberly - known for human figures - mostly of creation ancestors (see photo to the right)
- \* Cape York - known for animal figures
- \* Arnhem Land - known for dot art
- \* Central and Western Deserts - known for maps



*The Kimberly's Wandjina art is what led Erik Van Daniken (in his book Chariots of the Gods) to believe we were visited by extraterrestrials in ancient times. But archaeologists believe it is Aboriginal drawings of their ancestors.*  
Photo by David



*Sometimes its a stretch to figure out the rock art. The figures can be mythical or easy to identify like the line of birds as seen on the left.*

There are 200,000 rock art sites in the Kimberly alone! It is the oldest known depictions of human form in the world. If you ask an Aboriginal person where the art comes from, his answer is “the spirits put it there”. It is found in places where long-ago people camped or worshipped. Every pictograph, every splotch of color, every worn-away fuzzy smear is considered sacred.

Like I learned on the trip in Kakadu National Park - the art we visit falls into five categories:

1. Symbols which show “I am linked to this land” (often seen as a handprint)
2. Images of Dreamtime (creation) -- the story of how the world came to be is always the same, but the depiction of the characters change (probably due to artistic styles)
3. Dreaming -- the individuals personal beliefs. Often sign and symbols that we don't understand and the Aboriginals aren't telling as it is personal and sacred. (as seen below)



4. Directionals - like road signs: good hunting here, water nearby, danger, etc.

5. And “contact” art which started appearing in the 18th century, showing ships and figures based on traders who came from Indonesia and later, the west



Much of what we are exposed to in the Kimberly is the Gwion (or Bradshaw) style. The name “Bradshaw” comes from the owner of the land where the art was first discovered. The style consists of tall, thin, elegant figures, just like the Aboriginal people of today. I wonder if this is where Alberto Giacometti came up with his concept.

*Here, expedition leader Mick Fogg, points out the Gwion style of rock art.*

It is near impossible to date the mineral pigments, and not all the art is old and “original”. Part of the culture is to “restore” the images to keep the stories alive. It is the responsibility of a clan’s highest status man to “refresh” this art and this duty is passed from father to son.

Getting to the art often involves a hike over uneven terrain, walking around termite mounds taller than me, a scramble over rocks, and sometimes crouching down and scooting crab-like to get under outcrops. It is not easy.

These ten days in The Kimberly are spectacular. All too soon we return to Darwin. Twenty-seven of us continue on the next twelve day cruise to the eastern Islands of Indonesia. In order to keep us entertained as well as out of the way so the ship is readied for the next group, we are offered a complimentary sightseeing trip of Darwin. I had been to many of the places already, but take advantage of the offer as I want to take photographs at the Northern Territory Museum as well as do a last walkabout in town.



Soon it is embarkation time once again.

New expedition team, new fellow travelers and for sure, new adventures.



Aboriginal art is popular and can be found on everything from t-shirts to place mats. This dot-art style is from my tote bag

September, 2017



