

Australia: David Gower follows the Ashes with Ningaloo reef

David Gower took time out from commentating on the Test series to explore Ningaloo, a little-visited rival to the Great Barrier Reef.

By David Gower **3:11PM GMT 06 Jan 2011**

There are many places where the savvy traveller can go to escape and get away from it all, however I have just discovered one that is new to me and that fits the bill perfectly. And now that the Ashes Tests are over and I have time to reflect on things other than cricket, I can reveal my discovery to *Telegraph Travel* readers.

The ingredients are simple enough: an unspoilt and very long stretch of beach, a pristine and flourishing coral reef just 30 feet from shore and a small, but of course perfectly formed, camp sited 100 feet inland – with nobody else for miles around.

Found on the North West Cape of Western Australia, with the nearest town, Exmouth, some 45 minutes drive away, Sal Salis minimises any impact on the environment by using solar power, composting lavatories and limiting guests to 20 litres of water per day for washing.

It all started when I was looking for somewhere to go for a few days between the Adelaide and Perth Tests. My role as presenter and commentator for Sky Sports means that on an Ashes tour I am in Australia for the whole 10 weeks and the time in between matches is largely mine to spend as I like.

Many of my colleagues head for golf courses; golf, or flog as I prefer to call it, is just not my thing; I prefer to go and explore.

In South Africa that means the game parks are a must, and in India I invariably head for the tiger reserves or to a city such as Jaipur or Udaipur to discover more about the history of an extraordinary culture and country. In Australia there is also much to see and enjoy, and over the years I have been to the Great Barrier Reef, where I first learnt to dive 28 years ago; to Uluru, when you were still allowed to climb what was still known as Ayers Rock; to Alice Springs and to countless wineries, especially those in South Australia, where Geoff Merrill, one of Oz's finest winemakers and a real cricket lover, has been entertaining us for years.

This time my wife thought we should take our daughters to the Barrier Reef to do some diving, but that would have involved them flying out from the UK all the way to the east coast of Australia and then back to Perth for the Test with me before going back to

Melbourne for Christmas. Some people forget that Australia is vast and flying four hours back and forth across the country is both tiring and costly.

Chris Kilbee, a great friend, with whom I played cricket at school at King's Canterbury, and who is now based in Perth, came to our rescue.

"Have you ever heard of Ningaloo Reef?" he asked.

"No."

"Well it's up the west coast, it's bloody brilliant, as good as the Barrier and much closer."

"Right. How do we get there?"

The answer to that is a two-hour flight to Learmonth, the airport on the Cape, and an hour and a half's drive to the camp. As the kestrel flies it would be a short hop over the Cape Range, the hills that stretch down the peninsula, but there are no roads to make that journey feasible. You have to go via the only town, Exmouth, named not because there is a river Exe anywhere near it, but after a British Naval Officer. Although he was beaten to that part of the world by the Dutch by a century or two (a Captain Jacobz on the Mauritius made the first recorded landing in 1618), Exmouth still had the gulf named after him.

But, by heaven, it is worth the journey. In December the landscape is dry and barren. With a touch of rain now and again it can be transformed very quickly into something more colourful. As we walked the last couple of hundred yards to camp, Greg, our guide who had picked us up from the airport and driven us there, stopped to point out a euro under a bush.

Now, I know some people who might have shot over on the off-chance of picking up a stray coin – Nasser Hussain, stay where you are – but it would have been to no avail.

Unfortunately, in this case, the euro is just another name for a type of wallaroo, an animal neatly sized between a kangaroo and a wallaby. Be careful of those, we were warned, not because they are likely to do you damage, but because they like coming into camp and if you leave any sort of paper on show it is seen as a delicious supplement to the usual bush tucker. Apparently they eat pretty much anything – but draw the line at Dan Brown.

Naturally, it is the reef that grabs your attention. On that first afternoon I snorkelled for an hour and saw myriad fish of all sizes. They say there are around 250 species of coral and 500 species of fish on show at Ningaloo.

At one point I glanced to my right, saw what initially looked like a large rock, but which turned out to be a huge stingray, albeit with a shortened tail and, it seemed, lacking his sting.

Back on the beach, I checked with Cameron, one of the guides. "Oh, that's just Stumpy. He's a regular."

On a kayaking expedition to the Blue Lagoon, a deeper segment of the reef a little farther away, we came across hundreds more species of aquatic wildlife, including white and black-tipped reef sharks. Not normally aggressive to man, they can still take what is known as an unhealthy interest in visitors, though all it seems to take is a flipper in the face from Cameron to put them off. Just make sure he is with you when you dive there.

Sadly, we would not see the massive whale sharks that are the major drawcards between April and June. These are officially the world's biggest fish, and they pass by on a northerly migration when the corals start spawning. As filter feeders they are not threatening, and Sal Salis and other operators can take you out to snorkel with them. Australia is a long way to go just to swim with a big fish, but I suspect it would be an experience you would never forget.

We did get to swim with a hawksbill turtle on one of our drift-snorkelling swims near to camp. They come to lay their eggs on that same stretch of beach year after year. You can try and catch them at it – burying the eggs that is – but only under the supervision of a guide, for the mothers are sensitive about the whole process, and any disturbance can lead to them abandoning their egg-laying.

To truly get in among the fish and the sharks you need to scuba dive. As a family we are Padi-qualified but not overly experienced so we put our trust in the guys at Ningaloo Reef Dreaming, the sole operators for diving under the Navy Pier, one of the best pier dives in the world. The pier is here thanks to the US Navy who built it to facilitate the construction of the communications base that lies just above the town of Exmouth. No longer required for its original purpose, it is now purely a dive site. As the maximum depth is only 14 metres this does not require any decompression calculations, just the ability to change cylinders quickly and head down again as swiftly as possible.

Again, the variety of fish species on view is just incredible; the reef sharks are there (happily, the more dangerous bronze whalers stay farther out to sea) as are trevally, snapper, barracuda, firefish, angelfish, Moorish idols and huge Queensland groupers – that's one hell of a journey from the other side of Australia.

It's also the first time I have encountered the tasselled wobbegong. It is a carpet shark whose amazing camouflage makes it hard to spot, and its modus operandi is to lie motionless on the seabed waiting for prey to come its way. As with the reef sharks, divers are not normally on the tasselled wobbegong's menu, but some have been bitten and there are tales that if one grabs you it tends not to let go, leaving you to surface with what looks like a vast collection of old lace handbags in tow.

Back at Sal Salis there was still much to do aside from snorkelling. Greg, our main guide, is a marine biologist by qualification but he is also fully informed on the geology of the region, the wildlife and the bird life. He suggested the trip to Yardie Creek Gorge, 25 minutes' drive from camp.

It meant an early-morning start for our daughters, both to avoid the heat of the day and because we had to catch the flight out in the early afternoon. Normally, 6.30am is not the traditional territory of the teenager, but by now they had bought into the whole ethos of camp life and were keen to explore.

Once again it was worth the effort. The creek is the only gorge in the area with permanent water, fed from the ocean but on an irregular basis. It's not a particularly demanding walk along the ridge, but one has to be careful as the area is strewn with sharp rocks. Near the entrance is a mangrove area and as you walk farther in it provides a lesson in the development of limestone.

The almost sheer limestone rocks that form the sides of the gorge are a haven for a small colony of rare black-footed rock wallabies, and you will need the binoculars provided to see them. We saw three on the opposite side, all perched like strangely misshapen birds in what you would think were completely inaccessible spots.

The whole trip was a revelation for me and my family. The initial impression might be "what on earth are we going to do here for the next few days?" but everyone was sad to leave this little piece of paradise. And I haven't yet mentioned the food. Suffice it to say that Anthony in the kitchen was one hot chef, and that has nothing to do with the lack of air conditioning.

His wife, Sally, looked after the cellar, recommending and explaining the wines that matched the meals, and all we had to do was drink them – the perfect way to relax after a hard day on the reef.

As my great friend, Beefy Botham, would say, "Why wouldn't you?"

- Further information: Tourism Australia (www.australia.com).

Online article can be found at:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/celebritytravel/8243678/Australia-David-Gower-follows-the-Ashes-with-Ningaloo-reef.html>