



SPECIAL SPECTACLE: (Clockwise from above) A school of blue-stripe snapper; divemaster Adsy; the *Great Escape*; schooling trevally; a potato cod; and sea fans. Pictures: Cameron Wilson



Trippy to position us just right to make the channel entry. We hit the water and fin like mad to the bottom, at 22m, then get sucked into the trench by a 6-knot current. Coral and fish are zooming past and cameraman Andrew puts his body on the line for Channel 9, nearly losing an arm when he tries to grab a ledge to steady himself. I adopt a cross-legged position 1m off the bottom and take my first-ever armchair ride through a coral reef. As the current eases, we pass over coral clumps teeming with electric-blue tetras, black-and-white damsel fish and groups of stunning yellow-and-black moorish idols, their dorsal wands streaming in the underwater breeze.

Gearing up for our last dive on day two, I decide to ditch the wetsuit and go in a pair of shorts. It's a glorious feeling to be properly enveloped by the 28C Indian Ocean, and this

60m-deep reef wall is pure artistry, its gullies and plate coral overhangs perfectly illuminated in the soft afternoon light.

Early on day three I'm buddied up with Nick, the chef on *Great Escape*, and together we descend into Blue Lagoon, a photogenic patchwork of coral gardens and sandy lagoons. We've barely reached the bottom when I wave Nick over to an isolated bommie, where a green moray eel has obligingly poked its head out to take a look at us. We make our way up on to the reef flat at about 6m depth, then potter about and explore. There are hundreds of clams in a huge variety of colours and I spot my first nudibranch – a tiny miracle of design, mottled emerald and pale green.

Towards the end of the dive, Nick leads the way into a tight swim-through, only to find himself faced with a 2m grey reef shark coming the

other way. From my vantage point above, it looks like a hilarious Mexican stand-off, until the shark recognises it's outnumbered and withdraws, leaving Nick with his dignity intact.

An hour before sunset, the crew pile table and chairs and a couple of coolers into a dinghy and we set up for an evening on Bedwell Islet, the only place we'll make landfall before Broome.

Too small to be classed as an island, Bedwell is a skerrick of sand just above sea level that's used as a rest stop by sea eagles, shearwaters, tropicbirds, and ship-bound divers.

On our last morning, I skip the early dive and join a foursome of snorkellers being dropped by dinghy at a channel entrance. Cruising the current on the surface proves a surreal experience – like riding a see-through conveyor belt over the top of an aquarium.

The looks of alarm on the faces of

the fish trying to fin against the rushing tide are hysterically funny, and suggest they haven't retained much memory of the last time they battled the current at Clerke Reef.

Our final dive is, fittingly, on a steep wall scoured by a fast-moving tide. Plate corals the size of coffee tables, schooling blue-stripe snapper and anemones glowing translucent orange and purple come into view as we drift along at between 30 and 20m.

Between here and the mainland there's nothing but open sea, so Trippy sets course for Broome then joins us on the heli-pad for a post-trip celebration. For a while, a pair of spinner dolphins keeps pace alongside then, after dark, there are flying fish about, one or two landing on the deck.

It's 12 hours to port but, as we're rocked to sleep one last time in the vast, fathomless reaches of the Indian Ocean, I'm in no hurry to get home.

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