FRESH ON THE BOAT

This half-day cruise gives new meaning to ocean-to-plate dining

CAROLYN BEASLEY

IN THE KNOW

Ferries from Fremantle to Rottnest Island with Sealink or Rottnest Express start from $59 a person one way.
sealink.com.au
rottnestexpress.com.au
Swan River Seaplanes operates between Rottnest Island and South Perth foreshore from $100 a person one way.
swanriverseaplanes.com.au
The Luxe Island Seafood Cruise with Rottnest Cruises is $299 a person, or $379 a person including ferry from Fremantle. Includes four-hour cruise, seven-course seafood lunch and all drinks.
rottnestcruises.com

Luxe Island Seafood Cruise; lobsters are hauled on board and grilled on the barbecue, below

Hand over gloved hand, an excited woman from Singapore hauls up the dripping, wooden trap from 17m down. She's not alone in this endeavour, being assisted by a mechanical pulley and loud calls of encouragement from us, her fellow passengers on the Luxe Island Seafood Cruise with Rottnest Cruises.

The trap is wrangled on to the boat by deckhand (and waitress) Takiya Rapana while orange legs and antennae wiggle through the wooden slats. The four indignant crustaceans flapping around inside are western rock lobsters, locally known as crayfish, or "crays", the darling of Western Australia's seafood industry.

The commercial western rock lobster fishery is the most valuable single-species wild fishery in Australia, worth about $400m. It has long been managed by specialist lobster researchers, and fishing quotas for the 230 vessels that ply its waters are informed by science. Back in 2000, this was the first fishery worldwide to be certified sustainable by the international non-profit Marine Stewardship Council. With plenty of crays around, local recreational fishers regularly catch a feed, making them part of WA culture.

The sustainability of the seafood served on this four-hour lunch outing is of paramount importance to the cruise company's owner, Myrianthe Riddy. Before joining the tour, I meet her and executive chef Tony Howell on Rottnest Island. As a fluffy baby quokka inspects my shoes, Riddy explains that in 2018 she expanded her Mandurah-based business to Rottnest Island, seeking to showcase WA's premium seafood, with lobsters front and centre.

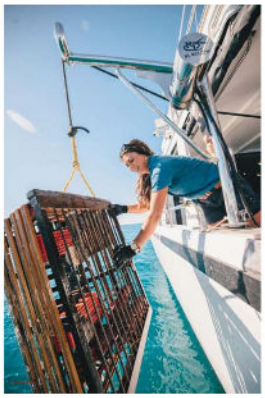
"It's a really healthy, truly sustainable resource that we're lucky to have here," she says. "We want to tell that story in a fun way, without being pompous or posh. I want people to feel like it's a party at my house, and you get that same level of hospitality, but with much better food."

Orchestrating that better food falls to Howell, who makes clear that beyond crayfish, most of the seafood their guests will be enjoying today is certified sustainable, including Abrolhos Islands scallops, Shark Bay tiger prawns and Fremantle octopus.

The fun starts on boarding, when I'm handed a pink gin cocktail with submerged blueberries, closely followed by fresh oysters with Asian dressing. Next, Howell proffers a tray of seared fat scallops and parsnip cream, topped with speck crumble.

The seven wines included are all from Howard Park Wines, produced in Margaret River and the Great Southern regions. A cooler box is filled with local craft beers plus a few imports and, within the bounds of responsible alcohol consumption, we're encouraged to help ourselves.

Pulling away from the jetty, Captain Col starts up his playlist of 1980s Aussie rock and, accompanied by Ganggajang's This is Australia, we steam out past Bathurst Lighthouse near Pinky Beach to deeper waters.



Pausing at the floats that mark the traps, Captain Col informs us we'll be pulling up six cray pots and, supported by Rapana, guests young and old can try their hand at crayfishing. Wielding a cray in each hand, she demonstrates the minimum length required of each catch; many females are in breeding mode during my springtime visit and need to be released. Flipping one over, Rapana shows us her "tar spot", a sticky sperm mass deposited by the males that she'll use later to fertilise her eggs. Other females already have thousands of eggs clinging to their underside, and Rapana cradles these mums-to-be before gently returning them to the sea. We all cheer for the few males in the traps; they're keepers. Although our haul today is modest, Captain Col assures us that beneath the deck is a tank holding spare live lobsters. We won't go hungry.

Turning into a sheltered bay, the boat anchors and we are offered a dip. Soon, most guests are laughing and splashing in the vibrant turquoise water, floating on foam mats while the crew pass out glasses of sparkling wine. When we climb back on board, the boat has been transformed into a restaurant with tables draped in white cloths. My salty hair still dripping, I dig into barramundi with pineapple salsa.

While we eat, halved lobsters are sizzling in their shell across two barbecues on the deck as Captain Col bastes them with garlic butter. They're plated up with a Vietnamese slaw, and we each indulge in half a fresh cray.

One unexpected joy of this cruise is the instant camaraderie. With only about 18 guests on board today, the free-flowing wine leads to free-flowing conversations between guests from Britain, South Africa, Singapore and The Netherlands, and locals from Perth. One of us discovers it's Captain Col's birthday, and we're soon serenading him with a vigorous Happy Birthday.

Disembarking at the jetty, guests farewell the crew with hugs, before strolling down the jetty, still chatting. Some are catching the ferry back to Perth, while others are heading to island accommodation, but for me the journey home is yet another highlight. At the tiny Rottnest Island airport, I'm buckling up for an airborne departure in a Cessna Caravan seaplane that will touch down, just minutes from now, on the Swan River in the heart of Perth's CBD.

Bouncing down the runway, we rise up over pink-tinged salt lakes dotted with wading birds and reflecting the sparse clouds. Below, cyclists meander back to the island settlement and as we bank over the coast, white sandy coves give way to swirling turquoise pools rimmed by dark, rocky reefs. I picture the crayfish hiding in there. Perhaps a female is releasing her million babies, sustaining the vibrant ecosystem that's so cherished in these waters.

Carolyn Beasley was a guest of Rottnest Cruises and Tourism Western Australia.

westernaustralia.com

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