

## Lobster boats: did I look the wrong way?

I jump off the bus, stride fifty metres, then turn back to get my gear. The bus is locked. My fellow travellers have disappeared. The world sways a little. No phone, no camera, no book and nothing to write in.

And worst of all, slowly I realise that everyone else must already be on a boat chugging to the mouth of the Murchison River and into the Indian Ocean without me. A trip to inspect rock lobster pots had been one of the attractions when I chose this six-day road trip from Perth to Exmouth.

Now I must languish on shore with two hours to wallow in disappointment and ponder futility. My mind throws up thoughts more irrational than sane, the tranquil deck in early morning light begins to appear drear, isolated, dangerous; each tattooed driver of the SUVs roaring into the carpark could be a threat. Anger and confusion take over, energy ebbs away. I drag myself to sit on the planks of the wharf.

A man walks up to the jetty and passes the time of day. Normal conversation overrides my crisis mentality. *Are you having a good one?* he asks. It's easy to answer sincerely, sitting with feet dangling over picture perfect marina on Western Australia's amazing coast. *Except I've missed my boat.* We laugh together and chat. He tells me the coffee shop should be open by now, then realises it's Tuesday and they take the day off. *Bugger* Expletive replaces chuckle, and bonhomie recedes as he ambles off to his boat as if the world of the sea is where he belongs, a man happy in his own skin calling out to other boaties hosing their crafts and pottering on deck. Weathered but standing straight, he probably has big stories to tell.

Several more people walk with purposeful steps down the pier to moored boats. They have plans for their day. So did I but now have to rethink. Perhaps I can commit this boating scene to memory or write a short story in my head though blustering negative thoughts might well destroy any story line.

Then back along the gang way saunters the fisherman, Terry I now learn. *Why don't you come out with us, a quick trip to check six pots. We'll be back before the charter boat your so-called-friends are on.*

*Yes please.* Soon I am seaward bound, although on *Captain Fathom* rather than the tourist boat. With newfound purpose, I focus on every move of the crewman and female deckhand pulling up anchor, while Terry is up front guiding us towards the mouth.

My legs roll easily with the rise and fall of the waves, I am given an explanation here or there, but I try to keep out of action's way. We bump through the churn of the infamous narrow channel and into the open sea to search, GPS guided, for the buoys with Terry's identifying markings.

The anchor is dropped, the crewman snags the buoy with a gaffe hook and grasps the attached pot lines. He pulls them onto the boat and connects them to a hydraulic hauler. This automated pulley-like system reels the pots up to the side of the boat and spits out the ropes in a neat coil. The crewman tilts the pot over and with gnarled and practised hands pulls out lobsters that have found their way into the baited traps over the last few days. From the haul, I receive a wee lost crab but soon drop it back in the water. The crewman examines and measures each lobster in accord with strict rules. Those OK are thrown into a refrigerated container, those too small, or male, or pregnant, are returned to the sea. I get a lesson in recognising lobsters' sex organs, *lucky blighters have two dicks*, says Terry, *and notice the pregnant females have a slight furring on their bellies.*

The team has a practiced routine, a synchronised performance repeated at several locations and then the pots, restocked with chopped snapper as bait, are taken to new locations and dropped, again below Terry's licensed buoys. By the time we reach harbour, the boat has been sluiced and everything is in its place. All's right with this world of kindness and welcome.