

# A BEAUTIFUL WILDERNESS

*From surf-battered coastlines, unique flora and fauna to world-class vineyards; the freedom of travelling in a campervan proved the perfect way to explore Australia's south-west corner, as Ellie Seymour reveals*



Resident kangaroos on the beach at Lucky Bay in Cape Le Grand National Park near Esperance, Western Australia



This page, clockwise from above: Geographe Bay; the Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk; a campervan is the perfect way to get around; winetasting at Vasse Felix. Opposite page: The breathtaking Great Ocean Drive

The huge mass of land that is Australia has always fascinated me; its harsh, barren interior forcing the country's 22 million or so inhabitants to its edges like smatterings of ants; unlike in Britain, where more than 60 million of us jostle for space on a patch of land around 30 times smaller.

I was in Perth, Western Australia – the most geographically isolated city in the world, and the country's biggest and sunniest state – contemplating this notion of space, as I gazed out over the sweeping Swan River set beneath a permanent canopy of blue sky. This was my third time in this vast country but, until now, I'd never made it to Western Australia. My sister's recent departure for a new life Down Under had given me the perfect excuse for a visit.

Once a quiet part of the country focused on wheat, meat and wool, Perth's mineral wealth, driving its growth and making it the richest mining city in the world today, has changed the place beyond recognition. For a significant proportion of the Western Australian population, working in the mines constitutes normal day-to-day life.

But there's another dimension to this gleaming city. It's also a gateway to the state's south-west corner, a region brimming with natural beauty, surf-battered coastlines, flora and fauna found nowhere else in the world, wineries and superb local food. After a couple of days soaking up the frenetic, youthful energy of vibrant Perth – and baking in the hot sun – the thought of escaping to the cooler wilds was appealing.

There's a lot to pack into a trip to this region and, like most visitors, we planned a road trip by campervan. This allowed us to control our time, skip the bits we didn't want to see and relax at the places that appealed

the most. Our plan: to drive 2400km in three weeks. If this sounds slightly gruelling, you needn't worry. Australia is geared up for camping, with plenty of superb campsites to choose from. And did I mention that our home on wheels was equipped with just a few mod cons: toilet, shower, TV and DVD player, to name a few? We weren't going to be roughing it.

With our Maui campervan instantly feeling like an old friend, we took to life on the road with ease. What my travelling companions and I weren't geared up for was such a sudden introduction to some of the realities of life in this neck of the woods, namely: its deadly wildlife.

'Don't forget: make sure you stick to the path and watch out for snakes,' the chirpy lady behind the gift-shop counter had said. We must have looked startled. It was only the first stop on our journey, having driven almost 300km south of Perth to see the Cape Naturaliste Lighthouse in the Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park. This stunning stretch of land hugs the coastline for 120km, from Bunker Bay in the north of the south-west corner, to Augusta in the south.

Naturally, we were petrified. But we diligently followed one of the many walking trails to the lighthouse, obsessively sticking to the paths. Distracted by the view, our fears quickly diminished. For, there in front of us, the majestic lighthouse stood tall over the breathtaking Indian Ocean waters of Geographe Bay, named in 1801 by French explorer, Nicholas Baudin after his ship, *Le Géographe*.

A short drive from the lighthouse, we followed a trail to a popular whale-watching lookout point. This time we did see a snake, on the walk down. But it slithered away into the scrub so fast we only caught a glimpse. It clearly wasn't interested in us. The atmosphere at the platform ▶

Perth is the world's most isolated city, and Western Australia the country's biggest, sunniest state



Clockwise from left:  
Bunker Bay; vineyards  
near Margaret River; the  
stunning Lucky Bay; Cape  
Naturaliste Lighthouse;  
surfers – dedicated  
sportsmen or just mad?

## We all agreed that, snakes aside, we felt privileged to be exploring this amazing hidden corner of the world

was tranquil, the wind gently blowing. People waited patiently, taking in the dramatic view out to sea, cheering in delight when two humpback whales – a mother and baby – breached and blew water into the air. It was a sight to behold and one that we would not forget.

Amazed by what we'd just witnessed, we headed to the nearby Bunker Bay Beach Café – a blissful stop metres from a pristine white-sand beach – for lunch. As we sipped deliciously cool iced coffee and relived our experiences, we all agreed – snakes aside – that we couldn't see how it could get any better than this. We felt privileged to be exploring this amazing hidden corner of the world.

We were based just a little further south, in a town called Prevelly, in the Margaret River region, well known as the state's undisputed wine-producing area and wave-catching capital. We asked some fellow campers for a surf report, and the inevitable conversation ensued: sharks. It's common knowledge that great whites are notorious predators in Western Australia's waters, so it didn't come as a surprise. In fact, I was fascinated to hear what the locals had to say. 'Stay out of the water if you can, mate,' said our neighbour. 'Everyone in the surf community knows someone who has been lost to a shark,' he continued. 'My friend was circled by a great white pointer shark as long as your van! Luckily he survived.'

I couldn't surf and was more than happy just to gaze at the view. But the risk of sharks didn't deter some. As we sat one morning at Prevelly's White Elephant Beach Café for breakfast – the perfect spot overlooking Ganarabup Beach – we watched as several hardcore surfers were towed

out on jet skis to take advantage of some huge 14ft waves. They were either dedicated to their sport, or completely mad.

Back on the road, and next on the agenda: a drive through 'Tall Timber' country, circling a town called Pemberton, 160km south-east of Prevelly. Towering forests abound in the south-west, hence its nickname, with plenty of options for walking, or even climbing the giant Karri trees which rise to over 60m. The well signposted Karri Forest Explorer Drive is a good way to see it all from the comfort of your vehicle, punctuated by options for glorious walks, magnificent trees and picnic areas, as it wends its way along 86km of scenic and partly unmade roads through three National Parks.

We stopped at the tallest of the climbing trees, the popular 68m Dave Evans Bicentennial tree in Warren National Park – also our home for the night. Not one with a head for heights, I stayed at the bottom while my companions attempted the climb, only one of them reaching the fire lookout at the top for a heady view across the entire treetop canopy.

For anyone who doesn't fancy the climb, another option is The Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk in Walpole, a short drive from Pemberton. Suspended 40 metres above ground amid a canopy of giant Red Tingle trees, its walkway spans 600 metres, giving you a unique perspective from which to admire the foliage, the abundant birdlife and of course, the view.

With a brief stop off at Albany, our next destination was Esperance along Highway One, a large town in the Esperance-Goldfields region. Although the town itself is nothing special, starting at the waterfront, we followed the aptly named Great Ocean Drive – a 40km loop – to discover a breathtaking ►



Whales are a frequent and spectacular sight off the coast

## It was hard to imagine leaving this heavenly region

stretch of coast that includes good surf breaks and picture-perfect swimming spots, including the pretty Twilight Cove, where we couldn't resist diving into the crystal clear, azure waters to escape the heat.

It was all coming to an end too soon, with Cape Le Grand National Park, 50km east of Esperance, our final stop on the way back to Perth. Made up of a series of deserted white-sand bays, linked by granite outcrops making up the Le Grand Coastal Trail, this was by far the highlight. It was also the setting for our second wedding anniversary, which we celebrated with a walk to Lucky Bay, home to a colony of friendly kangaroos often seen relaxing on the beach soaking up the sun. Rounding off the day with a well-deserved glass of a cool, crisp Margaret River white wine at sunset, we felt sad to leave this heavenly region. With its boundless opportunities for exploration, I think it's fair to say our journey had it all. Nevertheless, Australia will always capture my imagination and lure me back to its shores.

*CSMA Club's Ellie Seymour travelled in a Maui Ultima campervan (maui.com.au), staying in the odd Big 4 campsite en route (big4.com.au).*



### ESSENTIALS

#### WHEN TO VISIT

Perth boasts more sunny days per year than any other Australian capital city, with temperatures hitting 40°C, sometimes higher in the summer months. The southern coastal areas of the south-west region are far cooler than Perth or the northern tropical region of Western Australia, with on average a maximum temperature of around 32°C in summer and 14°C in the winter.

#### DRIVING

Western Australia's roads are good, rarely busy and signs are easy to read. Speed limits vary across the state, however; the maximum speed is 110kph. However, driving distances can be more than you're used to, so it's important to carry water and take regular breaks.

#### WHAT TO EAT AND DRINK

The Margaret River region is Western Australia's internationally renowned capital of wine. It's home to 150 wineries, and taking a tour is the best way to see some of

them and taste wines without worrying about driving home. With Bushtucker Tours, we visited five wineries: Woody Nook, Hayshed Hill, Willespie, Redgate Wines and The Leeuwin Estate. Although people don't necessarily travel to WA for the cuisine, you'll be pleasantly surprised by what's on offer, and most wineries have their own restaurants. The Vasse Felix winery is considered by many to have the finest restaurant in the region, while Knee Deep Wines serves a handful of mains in a delightful setting in an open-sided pavilion among its vines. For a delicious, affordable lunch, head to McHenry's Farm Shop, also in Margaret River.

If you're taking a road trip, it's a good idea to stock up with food so you can stop for lunch at any of the clearly signposted scenic picnic spots. Like the rest of Australia, you'll also find public barbecues for use at various picnic spots, as well as in campsites. Many campervans have a pull-out barbecue, so you'll be well equipped to dine, Aussie-style, at any opportunity.

#### EXCLUSIVE MEMBER OFFER

**Save £190pp\* on your Aussie dream!**

Wild natural landscapes and surf-battered coastlines make up Western Australia's south-west corner. Our new Approved Partner, Barrhead Travel, is offering members a saving of £190pp\* on a 10-day tour, including a four-day tour of Perth. You'll stay at the Crowne Plaza and take in sights including Kings Park and Fremantle's historic maritime port. The tour costs £1959pp for CSMA Club members.

\*For Ts&Cs, see page 127.



For more information or to book, call Approved Partner Barrhead Travel on **0844 264 1162** or visit [csmaclub.o.uk/australia](http://csmaclub.o.uk/australia)

Illustration: Patrick O'Leary, Corbis, 4corners Images, Getty