

An aerial photograph of a coastal town at sunset. The ocean is a deep blue, and the sky is a warm orange. A long pier extends from the shore into the water. The town is visible in the background, with houses and trees. The text 'BEST OF THE WEST' is overlaid on the image in large white letters.

# BEST OF THE WEST

Trace the fertile corner between Perth and Albany and you'll get to see how the other half of Australia lives

WORDS DORIAN MODE PHOTOS LYDIA THORPE





**"THIS LAND IS** a barren, arid plain, where no fruit trees grow, nor is there any growth fit for the use of man." So Dutch explorer Jan Carstensz reportedly remarked when he bumped into Western Australia in the 17th century. If only he had lived to enjoy the bounty of some 'fruit trees' at one of Margaret River's premier wineries, Vasse Felix, he might have reconsidered his opinion.

After collecting our rental car from Perth Airport, we drive to the Novotel Perth Murray Street, the city's newest hotel. My wife and I love a post-flight swim and we float like upturned beetles in the rooftop pool, framed by curling frangipani trees, and anticipate our road trip from Perth to Albany.

Dried off, we point our Mitsubishi ASX at Cottesloe Beach - think Bondi, but with a sunset over the ocean and free parking. They also share a Sculpture by the Sea exhibition and it's the final day here, so the beach is as busy as Manhattan. Post-art, we dine at Indigo Oscar. What makes this slice of calorific Latin America special is its water's edge location. Imagine picking up Rockpool Bar & Grill and dropping it in a rockpool. From the end of a cocktail, we watch swimmers bobbing in the warm Indian Ocean under a Tequila Sunrise sky. If your wallet says 'pale blue' rather than 'Indigo', however, you could simply enjoy sunset fish 'n' chips on the beach.

The following morning, we steer south for Halls Head to see one of the Giants of Mandurah. The sculpture is conveniently located on a trail from a seaside carpark. It's an easy, undulating stroll through white sagebrush that blurs the coastal landscape. Overlooking the sea, and made entirely from pallets, this timber behemoth sits like an Aussie version of Rapanui Moai (the giant carved stone heads in Polynesia).

## I've always been suspicious of glamping, but these luxurious safari-style bungalows are impressive

We then proceed to Busselton to lunch at Shelter Brewing Co. This boutique brewery/restaurant is like a giant man-cave and buzzes with atmosphere. You can sample its range of pale ales, sours and lagers before hitting the flanking jetty.

The construction of the longest jetty in Australia was instigated in 1865 and various additions were made due to the shifting sands and shallowness of Geographe Bay. An electric train schleps you along its length to the Underwater Observatory, one of only six underwater observatories in the world. Dappled sunlight flashes off the sub-tropical fish like Christmas lights, as the Leeuwin Current brings its narrow band of warm water down the coastline. Later, we regret not having our togs with us for the inviting turquoise waters at Busselton Beach, which could pass for the Mediterranean Sea.

Our digs for two nights are glamping bungalows at Olio Bello in Margaret River. I've always been suspicious of glamping, but these luxurious safari-style bungalows are impressive and nestled around a pretty lake on a 320-acre olive farm. With rockstar bathrooms and king-sized beds, the only thing that differentiates them from a five-star hotel room is the gentle ripple of the canvas roof in the night wind.

Dinner that evening is at Lamont's Smiths Beach, perched on the beautiful Yallingup coastline. Here we meet Frenchman, Anthony, who moved to Margaret River for the wineries. He now





One of Thomas Dambo's magical Giants of Mandurah sculptures.



From far left to right: glamping heaven at Olio Bello; Sculpture by the Sea on Cottesloe Beach; Freo's iconic and affectionately nicknamed 'Containbow' sculpture; our fit and knowledgeable Walk into Luxury tour guide, Anne; a penny-farthing is right at home outside Freo's 19th century buildings.



imports French wines into the region, which seems rather like bringing coal to Newcastle. The swordfish at Lamont's is sublime and underscores the relationship local chefs have with the cornucopia of seafood here.

The next morning, I wake to the long vowel of a crow. I like how glamping is a compact with nature à la camping, yet you don't need to carry a spade and toilet roll to use the loo. However, if 'glamping' is a portmanteau of 'glamour' and 'camping', Olio's luxury brekkie hamper can only be described as 'glamfast'.

Post-brekkie, we drive to Wilyabrup Sea Cliffs to meet Anne for our Walk into Luxury tour. Tramping through the bush, we pant like Labradors keeping up with this sprightly 68-year-old. Anne is the best guide for the Cape Trail, as she grew up here. Any misapprehension she might have had that all travel writers are hardy explorers is quickly dispelled - I'm mostly at the computer with a bag of Kettle potato chips.

Further along, Anne unshoulders her backpack to make morning tea. Nothing luxurious: teabags and instant coffee. When we remark on Anne's extraordinary fitness, she laughs, saying that on family walks her grandkids now ask, "How far is the walk *really*, Nanna?"

Single-lane roads in WA often have 110km/h speed limits, which can be interesting when the car ahead suddenly wipes off speed to turn into a winery. Vasse Felix is Margaret River's oldest and best winery, founded by cardiologist Dr Tom Cullity and sold some time ago to the Holmes à Court clan. Fruit from the original vines still contributes to the world-class wine produced today. We meet Sarina Kamini, an ex-food writer for Fairfax. Amid the corkscrew of vineyards, she asks me to define the piquancy of a purple shiraz bud. I contemplate it,





rolling it in my mouth and making sucking noises. In 20 years of writing about wineries, I have nothing. I'm the Homer Simpson of wine tasting.

At the tasting proper, Sarina hands me a sapid red and asks, "Can you taste 'struck match' and 'kerosene'?"

"Not since Cracker Night," I reply. My wife, who has a palate, rolls her eyes behind oversized sunglasses. Post-tasting, we enjoy a superlative degustation meal and matching plonk on the pretty balcony overlooking the vineyard. It's a magical experience and reason enough to visit Margaret River, but we're also here to explore an ancient cave system that rivals Jenolan in the Blue Mountains.

The Indigenous people of Margaret River (and as far away as Esperance) are known as Noongar. Josh Whiteland at Koomal Dreaming is a terrific bloke and he introduces visitors to the world's oldest living culture in his laconic style. We enjoy his tour deep in Ngilgi Cave's cathedral of stalactites and stalagmites, which culminates in Josh's didgeridoo performance (the best I've heard in yonks) in the stillness. He's not the only one to have performed in this cave: Dame Nellie Melba sang here in 1911 with a grand piano to accompany her.

That evening, we dine at Yarri Restaurant and Bar for another mind-blowing WA meal before retiring for our final glamp. I wake to a bird call that sounds exactly like a text alert on my iPhone. We leave the luxury of Olio Bello to **breakfast at the stunning White Elephant Cafe, overlooking the distant scribble of surf on the reef off Gnarabup Beach**. We then make for Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse, the tallest lighthouse on mainland Australia, situated where the Indian and Southern oceans shake hands. It feels like the last lighthouse on earth and we enjoy a

## The transcendent landscape of Yeagarup Dunes is like stepping into *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)

guided tour of this remote and eerie location, but breathlessly ascending the scrolling stairs reminds us that wine isn't an energy drink and step-classes are a cruel punishment.

Our next accommodation is at Ampersand Estates in a charming 1870s settler's cottage perched on the slope of Pemberton's oldest winery. We're invited to the cellar door to taste gin and wine, but my wife politely drags me away by the ankles to meet Graeme for our Beach & Forest Eco Adventure with Pemberton Discovery Tours. Rather than risking our own SUV off-road, we sit in the back of Graeme's Toyota LandCruiser for a tour around the wilds of Pembo. With its old-growth Karri Forest, D'Entrecasteaux National Park is majestic, but the transcendent landscape of Yeagarup Dunes - the largest landlocked dunes in the southern hemisphere - is like stepping into *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). As we hop out of the LandCruiser, octogenarian and fellow tourist, Pat, slides down a talc-soft dune that looks as tall as a skyscraper, before climbing back up again like a spider. My wife and I exchange wide-eyed glances of disbelief. Our tour concludes with cheese and bickies on the solitude of Yeagarup Beach and I'm mesmerised by the moonbeam-white sand as it blurs into the distance.

Just when we think the dining can't possibly get any better, we experience Jaspers Pemberton. I choose the steak and it's so tender I want to cry.





From far left to right: it's a long way up Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse, which opened in 1895; the Underwater Observatory at Busselton Jetty; outside our cottage accommodation at Ampersand Estates; hitting the dunes with Graeme from Pemberton Discovery Tours.



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From left to right: the port city of Albany was founded in 1826 as a military outpost; walking amongst the treetops in Walpole-Nornalup National Park; the Naval Store at Fremantle is now an art space; sampling a cocktail at Jaspers Pemberton.



## It's easy to imagine them sitting in ships at anchor, awaiting a fate in which one-third would never return

We make for the Valley of the Giants the next morning. Set in the Walpole-Nornalup National Park, this internationally recognised tourist attraction has a fun treetop walk set among the red tingle trees. Despite a spider-web of steel supports, there's a lot of lateral movement that may get you woozy, so a newly renovated ground walk is perfect for the less adventurous to get up close to these giant eucalypts.

We drive to The Dam at Raintree in Denmark, a luxury cattle and hemp farm with an upmarket restaurant. Here we meet the colourful Steve Birkbeck who brushes our modest entrées aside and insists we try his farm-fresh Wagyu beef. We enjoy an entertaining afternoon as Steve unpacks his life story of that other WA phenomenon: the outback entrepreneur.

We then head to Albany to visit the impressive National Anzac Centre. Upon entry, we're handed an audio-card to follow a soldier on his journey through WWI. My wife's is a war-photographer, so she's particularly moved by his story. The museum punches above its weight by dint of its location overlooking the harbour from which more than 40,000 men and women joined two convoys for the Great War. It's easy to imagine them sitting in ships at anchor, awaiting a fate in which one third would never return.

Dinner is at Liberte in the London Hotel. This hip fusion of boho Paris and Vietnam is an unexpected delight in remote

Albany. Our digs at the Garden Inn Hilton have sweeping views of the harbour and are only a 10-minute can-can from Liberte.

Following a five-hour return drive, we arrive in Fremantle (or Freo as the locals call it). This vibrant city has amazingly preserved examples of 19th-century port streetscapes that play host to bustling markets and lively bars. After the journey, I'm busting for the loo, yet curiously our hotel's urinal is lit only by candelabra. Romantic, I think, but it turns out there's a blackout in Freo. The staff at the Trade Winds, a charming hotel on the banks of the Swan River, are delightfully chilled in that WA-meets-Hawaii way. They press drink vouchers in our hands and point us to the bar. Post-cocktail and a swim in the pool, I'm ready to be plunged back into the Dark Ages, but alas the power comes back on.

Our last dinner is at Emily Taylor in the Warders Hotel. Set within tall limestone walls with Mao-esque murals, its hip Asian-fusion cuisine is outstanding and sums up the funky bohemian feel of Freo.

The Mitsubishi ASX has good fuel economy and it looks like we will complete the road trip on two tanks of juice. While the older ASX was a little underpowered, the new model has the grunt to overtake road-trains on WA's mostly single-lane highways. Interestingly, we don't see any speed cameras between Albany and Perth, but WA drivers seldom speed in our experience.

On the final leg, we pull over to change drivers and a motorist kindly stops behind us to see if we need any help. Gosh, sandgropers are good eggs. And with nary a pothole in sight, perhaps due to the region's low rainfall, it all combines to make WA an ideal place for a road trip. 