

THE MANY DELIGHTS OF MARGARET RIVER

After a visit to Western Australia's Margaret River region, a beach holiday may never be quite the same again. *Toni Krasicki* explains.

Bookended by Cape Naturaliste in the north and Cape Leeuwin in the south, and hemmed in by giant karri forests to the east, the Margaret River region just three-hours drive from Perth, lives up to its fine reputation. Best known for its boutique wineries and craft beer, gorgeous and sometimes-deserted beaches, and of course the internationally renowned surf breaks, 'Margs' certainly is hip and happening.

The Byron Bay of the west coast minus the year-round crowds, this compact and diverse region attracts foodies, wine buffs, nature lovers and water babes to its pristine shores. Although East Coasters are more likely to get a beach fix in Queensland, Fiji, Bali or Thailand, a trip across the red centre to the far side of the continent will definitely change your thinking. Here are some of the things that blew me away and might do it to you too.

Cape to Cape

Hikers can tackle the 135km Cape-to-Cape Track that hugs the extraordinary coastline, connecting Cape Naturaliste in the north to Cape Leeuwin in the south. The terrain alternates between rugged granite headlands, sheer limestone cliffs, and wild and often isolated sandy beaches. In several places the track loops inland over the ridge and passes through woodland and forests. There are currently four wild walk-in only campsites on the track, access to three National Park and Wildlife campsites, as well as caravan parks. Alternatively, ditch the sleeping bag and choose the five-star option and slip in between clean sheets every night. Go it alone, or join a tour operator such as

Cape-to-Cape Explorer Tours who offer fully guided or self-guided assisted tours, and if you're short on time, they also run day trips on the northern part of the track, featuring some highlights.

Shine a Light

Under the watchful eye of the Cape Leeuwin lighthouse, the mighty Southern and Indian Oceans meet in nothing more than a messy ripple. This is the most south westerly point on the Australian mainland, and when I visit in March, the view from the 39m tall lighthouse is mostly obscured by a shroud of fog (apparently, most uncommon).

Luckily for me, the fog does eventually clear so I manage to see the expanse of the ocean and the windswept grounds where countless lighthouse-keepers and their families lived. Take the audio tour, which is rich with tales of shipwrecks, life at the Cape and the marine life. In contrast, the Cape Naturaliste lighthouse on the north cape is less impressive at only 20m. Situated on a hill, it's given a natural lift and so still manages to offer sweeping views down the west coast and along the Geographe Bay coast.

What Lies Beneath

The Leeuwin Naturaliste Ridge lies beneath the coastal link road, Caves Road, which is riddled with hundreds of caves. However, only a few are open for exploration. Start off with an easy MP3 self-guided audio tour of Mammoth Cave, and work your way up to the more adventurous Moondyne and Ngilg Cave adventure tours that take cavers off the beaten boardwalk and by torchlight in to

the darkest caverns (seasonal). Join a guided tour of Lake Cave to ooh and ahh at the pretty permanent water feature that reflects the usual stalactites and stalagmites, but also the unique 'Suspended Table' that hovers just inches above the waterline. Jewel Cave is the largest show cave in Western Australia, and with three cathedral-like caverns, there are plenty of flowstones, shawls, stalactites, stalagmites, and mega fauna fossils to keep even the jaded caver enthralled.

Take the Plunge

The beaches – wow! All that powdery and blindingly white sand, sapphire seas and gin coloured water will have you thinking you've landed in the Maldives. From cape to cape, seasoned surfers will find a surf break that's pumping, if not at any of the world-renowned surf spots, than in any of the nooks and crannies in between.

For newbies, surf schools are plentiful, as are Stand Up Paddleboarding lessons. Divers can explore the 113m Swan Wreck that was scuttled off Dunsborough in 1997. In its former life, the HMAS Swan was a Royal Australian Navy River Class Destroyer Escort, these days its covered in coral and supports an abundance of marine life, perfect for all levels of diver experience.

Other ways to explore the waters include kayaking, snorkelling, sailing and kite surfing – whatever way, just be sure to explore.





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Raise a Glass

Well-known for its wines, the region boasts well over 200 wineries and 95 cellar doors, nine craft breweries, cideries and even a distillery. Wine tours are beneficial if you want to leave the driving to someone else so you can taste the tittle to your hearts content. Depending on the tour, some may get you behind-the-scenes, or even give you the opportunity to blend your own wine. Many cellar doors and breweries are superb long lunch destinations. Sample their drops along with local fare that can be had in casual cafes to outstanding restaurants.

Even the popular Berry Farm has a cellar door! The calendar is choc-a-bloc full of foodie events such as the South West Craft Beer Festival and Oktoberfest. The Margaret River Gourmet Escape attracts world-class celebrity chefs and food

connoisseurs that specifically highlight the region's food and wine.

Forests of the Giants

Head further east away from the coast and explore vast forests of giant karri, marri and tingle trees. The Warren National Park features some of the tallest trees in the world, with some reaching up to 90m tall.

Take a drive through the towering giants or thrillseekers can climb one of, or all three of the karri trees close to Pemberton that were originally set up as bushfire lookouts. The tallest, The Dave Evans Bicentennial Tree, reaches 65m high and like the others, has metal rungs (130 in this case) set up as steps spiralling up the trunk for those wanting to climb. It's not for the fainthearted – there are no safety rails or harnesses, just a few warnings.

What you need to know

To get the best out of a stay in the Margaret River, you'll need your own wheels.

For this trip, we hired a basic campervan, and apart from a few administration issues that annoyingly added to the cost of the rental, it was a good way to sightsee and stay at different parts of the cape.

Although it's worth taking note that caravan parks and camping areas, including those run by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, are not directly on the beach – so there are no ocean views. But, in some cases they're only a few minutes walk away; just don't expect to step out of your tent or campervan and onto the sand like I thought I was going to do!

For more information visit www.margaretriver.com **OH!**



Wilyabrup Cliffs



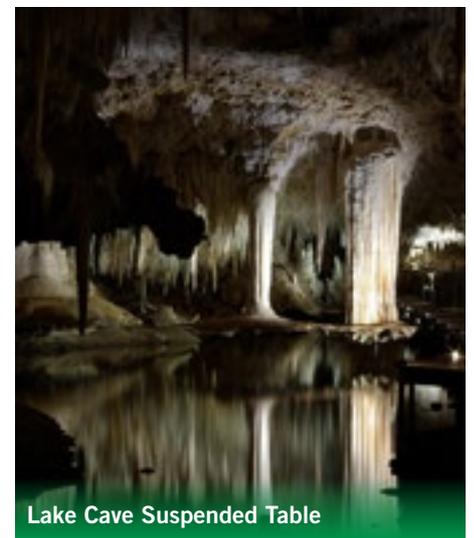
Margaret River Coast



Karri Forests



Surfing at Margaret River



Lake Cave Suspended Table