

Traveller's Guide To: Western Australia

Rugged red earth, great wines and a stunning coastline set against deep blue skies... head west to explore a classic Australian state

By David Orkin

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AFP/Getty Images

Wide open spaces: walkers in King's Park, Perth

"Our land abounds in nature's gifts of beauty rich and rare," goes Australia's national anthem. Perhaps the two million citizens of the largest state, Western Australia (WA), believe this is where the truth of that line comes true.

WA grew rich on its mineral wealth (especially gold, diamonds, opals and – around Broome – pearls), but is now a priceless destination for travellers. It is also a ridiculous size. Were it a country in its own right, WA would be one of the 10 biggest in the world (it is about 11 times the size of Britain). It extends from the Timor Sea and Indian Ocean in the north to the Southern Ocean in the south.

Much of the state is arid, though the south-west has several forests and dozens of vineyards. There is also a long, often stunning coastline.

Even in the outback, much of which is arid scrubland used for little more than cattle farming and mining (with the Nullarbor Plain in the south, the Great Sandy Desert in the north and the Gibson Desert and Great Victoria Desert in between) there are impressive waterfalls and beautiful water holes.

The wild side?

Large tracts of land are protected as national parks; details can be found at tiny.cc/Mym9R. WA claims more than 12,000 species of wild flowers; the south-west of the state contains more biodiversity than the UK.

In the north of the state, flowers can appear as soon as July, with early rains hastening their arrival. In November a blaze of colour will take over the south of the state when the warmer weather settles in.

There are many places to view the full-colour natural carpets, such as the Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park (00 61 8 9752 1677), or King's Park in Perth. Its 400-hectare botanic garden – one of the largest inner-city parks in the world – boasts more than 1,700 native species.

An urban adventure?

Western Australia's vibrant capital, Perth, is the most isolated big city on earth: if you're flying, it takes longer to reach Sydney than to reach South-east Asia. The city claims to be the sunniest state capital in Australia, and life is lived outdoors.

Perth is bursting with interesting places to stay. Governor Robinson's (00 61 08 9328 3200; govrobinsons.com.au) is where you can shake off your pre-conceptions about hostels. It is a "Boutique Backpackers" where you won't find you're sharing a dorm with the Australian snoring team, nor some interesting local wildlife. A double room costs A\$75 (£42), with breakfast.

Celebrities favour the boutique-style The Richardson Hotel and Spa (00 61 8 9217 8888; therichardson.com.au) in leafy West Perth: prices from A\$415 (£231), not including breakfast.

Start your exploration of the city at the Perth Cultural Centre, which includes the fascinating Western Australia Museum (00 61 8 9212 3700; museum.wa.gov.au), which opens 9.30am-5pm daily (admission free). This is where you learn that the state tried to attract settlers a century ago with the promise that it was "The land of Golden Opportunity". Next door is the equally impressive Art Gallery of Western Australia (00 61 8 9492 6600; artgallery.wa.gov.au), open 10am-5pm daily.

The generous and gentle Swan River passes through the centre of Perth and there are many opportunities to take a cruise or hire a boat. It flows into the ocean at Fremantle, Perth's lively seaport.

See the museums, markets, convict buildings (Fremantle prison is the most popular) and historic streets, and rest at an outdoor table on South Terrace, the so-called "cappuccino strip".

Perth has the best beaches and surf of any Australian city. Of its 19 urban bays, Cottesloe is the most popular, followed by Scarborough and City Beach.

Cape Le Grand National Park has superb beaches such as Lucky Bay – earlier this year named Australia's whitest beach (by the National Committee on Soil and Terrain): do not be surprised to see kangaroos relaxing under the trees nearby.

Next weekend (17-18 October) the city hosts a big new music event: 80 Australian and international artists will be performing on the banks of the Swan River as part of the One Movement festival (onemovementmusic.com).

One peculiarity of the weather in Perth is the "Fremantle Doctor", a wind that blows in from the sea every day in the late afternoon. This cooling breeze is one of the most consistent winds in the world, making sailing, kiteboarding and windsurfing very popular with the locals. Perth is an excellent place to learn.

Can I get out of town?

Perth makes a great base for several excellent excursions. One of the most popular day trips is the short boat ride to tiny Rottnest Island (rotnestisland.com), which is just 11km long and 5km wide. A variety of boats leave for "Rotto" from Perth and Fremantle: the trip takes less than half an hour and costs from £32 return from "Freo" or £42 return from Perth with Rottnest Express (00 61 8 1300 467688; rotnestexpress.com.au).

The island offers good swimming and diving: is virtually car free, so explore by bike – these can be rented from the island's Rottnest Bike Hire (00 61 8 9292 5105) from £5 per hour or barely twice as much for a full day.

And on dry land?

Explore the south-west – the prettiest part of WA, much greener than the rest of the state and with large tracts of forest intersected by rivers. The region has a Mediterranean climate with hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters. Rainfall is lightest from November to March and heaviest from May to August.

WA's coastline is varied: in some parts wave-smashed and rocky, in others calm and sandy. Inland you'll find forests of huge karri, jarrah and tingle trees, rolling vineyards (many with fine winery restaurants) and some charming towns.

You can also dig beneath the surface. The coast between Yallingup and Augusta is noted for its caves. Five are open to the public; start with the CaveWorks Interpretive Centre (00 61 8 9757 7411; margaretriver.com), which opens 9am-5pm daily, admission free. The town of Margaret River (margaretriverwa.com) is another popular holiday spot – and not just with surfers. It is well positioned for exploration of the nearby coast, capes, caves and wineries.

Stay at the 22-room Cape Lodge (00 61 8 9755 6311; capelodge.com.au) which has its own vineyard, and an excellent restaurant with a 14,000 bottle wine cellar. Doubles cost A\$475 (£264) including breakfast.

The forests of the south-west are prolific and awe-inspiring. Wander the Beedelup National Park (00 61 8 9776 1207). Nearby, the brave can climb metal pegs to the top of the 70-metre Dave Evans Bicentennial Tree in Warren National Park. Slightly less courage (but still something of a head for heights) is needed to walk the Valley of the Giants, a boardwalk leading to a 420m steel causeway suspended between tree-tops up to 38m above the forest floor in the Walpole-Nornalup National Park (00 61 8 9840 1027).

On the south coast, three of the best parks are Rocky Torndirrup National Park (00 61 8 9842 4500), with its blowholes and natural bridge; Fitzgerald River National Park (00 61 8 9835 5043), declared a Unesco biosphere for its botanical and scenic diversity; and, east of Esperance, Cape Le Grand National Park (00 61 8 9071 3733) with its long, lovely beaches interspersed with rocky headlands.

A road trip?

Start travelling clockwise along Australia's Highway One, the road that runs all the way around the coast. The first stop, 170km north of Perth, is Nambung National Park. Here you can see the Pinnacles, an expanse of needle-like limestone formations between one and two metres high. When passing them at sea, 17th-century sailors mistook them for the ruins of an ancient city.

Geraldton, just over 400km north of Perth, offers good scuba diving, windsurfing and fishing and is the centre of Australia's crayfish industry. The Kalbarri area, 170km beyond Geraldton, has a magnificent coastline. The highlights of Kalbarri National Park (00 61 8 9937 1140) are the red and white banded gorges cut by the Murchison River, while Monkey Mia, on Shark Bay 833km north of Perth, is renowned for its wild dolphins.

Coastal highlights?

Head to Coral Bay, 1,200km north of Perth. This is the southern gateway to the Ningaloo Marine Park (00 61 8 9483 1111; australiascoralcoast.com). WA's largest coral reef fringes the coast for 260km, and all you need to do to see the coral and tropical fish is don a mask and snorkel and walk off the lovely beach into the clear, warm water.

Both here and at Exmouth (the largest town in the Northwest Cape and the base for visiting the impressive gorges of the Cape Range National Park), there are numerous possibilities that allow you to see the amazing marine life. Many consider the Ningaloo snorkelling and diving experiences superior to those on the Great Barrier Reef.

Choices for places to stay at Coral Bay and Exmouth include backpackers' accommodation with prices from A\$30 (£16) in a dorm, while at the other end of the scale Sal Salis (00 61 2 9571 6399; salsalis.com.au) is an exclusive safari camp near Exmouth, made up of five super-comfortable tents each with an en suite bathroom. Rates are from around A\$680 (£380) including meals, sea kayaking and snorkelling.

On the west side of the Cape Range National Park, about an hour's drive from Exmouth, are several pristine beaches: my favourites are Sandy Bay and, for snorkelling, Turquoise Bay.

You mentioned minerals

East of Perth explore the historic towns of the lush, picturesque Avon River Valley; Northam, Toodyay and Beverley. With some fine 19th-century architecture, rowdy bars and something of a Wild West feel, Kalgoorlie (600km east of Perth) is the centre of Australia's gold-mining industry.

The main road is Hannan Street, named for the man who put Kalgoorlie on the map. V

CIn June 1893, Paddy Hannan struck gold, and soon the wheat-farming town of Kalgoorlie was packed with hopefuls in search of a slice of the richest square mile of gold-bearing earth in the world. Various gold-rush tours are offered. You can visit a lookout over the Super Pit, an immense working open-cut gold mine. Contact the tourist office (00 61 89021 1966; kalgoorlietourism.com).

Not far away, Coolgardie is also worth a visit, as are several ghost towns in the area. Fans of Antony Gormley can head to Lake Ballard, 132km north of Kalgoorlie, to see his "Inside Australia", 51 black steel sculptures scattered over 10 square kilometres of salt plain.

Any other jewels?

On the north-east coast, the old pearling town of Broome has tropical charm and cosmopolitan atmosphere. With its steamy climate and history as a pearling centre – and possibly because Perth is twice as far away as Indonesia – it has a distinctly Asian feel. The region doesn't seem to have heard of the credit crunch with several new accommodation openings this year. Stay far away in time at the Eco Beach Wilderness Retreat (00 61 8 9193 8015; ecobeach.com.au), one hour's drive south of Broome, with glamorous safari-style eco tents (from around A\$125 (£72) or villas (from A\$275/£150) – a two-night minimum stay applies. Also worth considering are the 71-room Pinctada Cable Beach (00 61 8 9193 8388; pinctada.com.au), and the indulgent and exclusive Amsara Luxury Retreat (00 61 8 9192 7761; amsara.com.au), also overlooking Cable Beach. Between late October and early April, the possibility of box jellyfish means visitors to Broome often swim in the hotel pool rather than the sea.

Further inland, two notable features of this area are Wolfe Creek Crater (00 61 8 9168 4200), left in the desert by a giant meteorite 300,000 years ago, and the dramatic Bungle Bungle Range of striped sandstone towers in Purnululu National Park. Here, the Bungle Bungle Wilderness Lodge (00 61 3 9277 8444; kimberleywilderness.com.au) offers tented accommodation (with private en-suites): from A\$225 (£125) including dinner and breakfast.

Raw beauty?

The rugged Kimberley region in the far north is particularly impressive, with great rivers and waterfalls, oases and dramatic scenery. Time and the elements have formed deep gorges and impressive mountains, dry red plains and coastal sandstone rich in fossils. It's the quintessential Australian landscape of red earth and rock, mighty rivers, abundant wildlife and white gum trees against deep blue skies. The most popular time to visit is between April and September; in the "wet" season from October to March, rain makes many of the few roads impassable. Driving the slightly bone-shaking Gibb River Road – an old cattle track passing some of the most picturesque waterfalls – is the best way to explore the area.

Good bases from which to enjoy and explore the outback are Voyages El Questro (00 61 8 9169 1777; elquestro.com.au) a million-acre working cattle ranch (open Apr-Oct), or the aptly named Mornington Wilderness Camp in the King Leopold Ranges (00 61 8 9191 7406; australianwildlife.org) (open early April – early October). **Another good choice is the Home Valley Station (00 61 8 9161 4322; homevalley.com.au), off the Gibb River Road in the east Kimberley, owned by the Indigenous Land Corporation (open January-November).**

Good timing?

The tropical north has hot, sticky wet summers and warm, dry winters. From May to November the nights are cool and the days sunny. WA's desert and semi-desert areas have hot, dry summers and mild, dry winters; avoid the deserts between December and March unless you are comfortable in intense heat.

Watery wonders: Go wild

Between now and late May there are opportunities to swim with dolphins south of Perth at Rockingham, Mandurah and Bunbury. Try, for example, the Dolphin Discovery Centre (00 61 8 9791 3088; dolphins.mysouthwest.com.au) which not only runs trips but is also a centre for dolphin research and conservation.

Between March and June you might want to head for Coral Bay or Exmouth and try swimming with whale sharks. The world's biggest fish eat plankton – not humans – and can grow to up to 18m in length. Try Coral Bay Adventures (00 61 8 9942 5955; coralbayadventures.com.au). If you don't want to dive in at the deep end, visit the Aquarium of Western Australia (00 61 8 9447 7500; aqwa.com.au) 10am-5pm daily, A\$25 (£15), 20 minutes' drive north of Perth.

Fine wine: Liquid gold

Western Australia has a number of brew-pubs and microbreweries: Swan, in Perth, is a major brewery, producing Swan and Emu beers, while in Fremantle, the popular Little Creatures is famous for its pale ale. The state is renowned for some fine wines: major growing areas are the Swan Valley, the Great Southern region and Margaret River. Many wineries offer meals and cellar-door tastings. Next year's Margaret River Wine Festival (margaretriverfestival.com) is from 8-12 April.

Great outdoors Play a round?

The many excellent golf courses include that at the Joondalup Resort (00 61 8 9400 8888; joondalupresort.com.au), pictured, less than 30 minutes' drive from Perth, but if you'd like to try something new and different, the world's longest golf course opens later this month.

The 18-hole par 72 Nullarbor Links Golf Course (nullarborlinks.com) will stretch 1,365km from Kalgoorlie in Western Australia to Ceduna in South Australia with one hole in each participating town or roadhouse. Each hole has a green and tee: hazards on the outback natural terrain fairways may include kangaroos, bush turkeys and emus. It is not that the holes themselves are long, but the distance between them varies from 12km to 190km. A scorecard will cost you £28 and you can rent clubs at each hole for under £3.

Travel essentials Western Australia

Getting there

Perth is the nearest part of Australia to the UK, but no longer has direct flights. Instead, choose from airlines such as Emirates, Qantas, Singapore Airlines, Cathay Pacific, Thai Airways and Malaysia Airlines, with one-stop services. If you're prepared to buy a ticket to Kuala Lumpur and then on to Perth, you could fly on Air Asia (0845 605 3333; airasia.com) from Stansted. Expect to pay about £720 to fly in October or November, but look out for special fares.

UK agencies specialising in travel to Australia offer flights and a range of itineraries to and around Western Australia (WA). Austravel (0800 988 4676; austravel.com), for example, offers a nine-day Perth, Wildflowers and the Southwest trip, including return flights between Heathrow and Perth on Cathay Pacific, three nights at the Comfort Hotel Perth City, a WA Southwest Highlights self-drive tour including car hire, and a 4x4 Pinnacles, Koalas & Sand Dunes day-tour from Perth. Price from £1,249 per person for departures in November.

At the other end of the scale, Bridge & Wickers (020 7483 6555; bridgeandwickers.co.uk) can arrange itineraries featuring some of the best of the region's new luxury properties. Three nights room-only in Perth at the Duxton, followed by four nights full board at the Sal Salis safari camp near Exmouth, and then four nights B&B at Pinctada Cable Beach in Broome costs £3,261 per person, including international flights as well as flights between Perth, Exmouth and Broome.

Getting around

Rent a car or motor home (readily offered by all UK agencies that specialise in travel to Australia) to explore the more compact south-west of WA (an area bordered by Lancelin to the north of Perth, Kalgoorlie to the east, Esperance to the south-east, and the coast). Before you plan a driving tour of other parts, remember that people, petrol stations and services in general are rarely seen in some parts. Avoid driving at night, dusk, and dawn outside cities and towns as it's easy to ram a roo.

Unless you are a fan of driving long distances through sparsely populated areas, fly. To reach Exmouth (and Coral Bay), Broome or Kimberley, Skywest (00 61 8 9478 9999; skywest.com.au) is the state's main regional airline, with Qantas (0845 7 747 767; qantas.com.au) providing services to smaller towns.

Bus travel is largely in the hands of Greyhound Pioneer (00 61 8 9328 9920; greyhound.com.au) and Transwa (transwa.wa.gov.au) which operates coach and rail services in the southern half of the state. Train lovers also visiting eastern Australia can spend three nights on the Indian Pacific, which links Perth with Sydney, 4,352 rail kilometres away, via Kalgoorlie and Adelaide (0870 751 5000; international-rail.com).

Aerial tours make sense in Western Australia, and Kookaburra Air offers a number of options (00 61 8 9417 2258; kookaburra.iinet.net.au). Or take to the waters: Kimberley Quest (00 61 8 9193 6131; kimberleyquest.com) operates one- and two-week cruises from Broome between February and November.

More information

Australia.com has information on how to plan a holiday in Australia, as well as events listings, or visit westernaustralia.com.

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