

ANTIPODEAN SHORES

SUNSHINE, SCENERY AND SUPERB WILDLIFE ENCOUNTERS ABOUND IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA. FROM ITS DUSTY OUTBACK TO THE 12,889-KILOMETRE COASTLINE, THERE'S MORE THAN MINING WEALTH IN THE COUNTRY'S LARGEST STATE.

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER

Perth is officially Australia's sunniest capital city. It's also the most remote, lying 3,291 kilometres from Sydney. Yet locals proclaim it's a great place to live, citing the weather, water and work opportunities as contributing factors. Located on the Swan River, a stone's throw from the Indian Ocean and home to 19 pristine metropolitan beaches, it's easy to be seduced by this flourishing metropolis.

The city is often likened to a country town, where locals burst forth with a cheery "G'day". Perhaps it's the isolation that lends that laid-back air or the sheer scale of its holding state – Western Australia covers 33 percent of Australia. Were it independent, the state's 2,529,875 square-kilometre bulk would place it within the world's top-ten-largest countries. I have no chance of doing this landmass justice in a week, so I've settled for a few of the highlights along its near-endless coastline, starting in Perth.

Its fortunes are tied to the river and there are plans afoot to cement the waterway's status with a waterfront development extending the tributary to the city's doorstep.

"People really want to see the city grow and to use the river as an asset," says Ryan from Two Feet & a Heartbeat during a Perth walking tour. "The idea is to capitalise on the fact that we have a large amount of water in the city with the river stretching from the city centre all the way out to the ocean. From both river and beach perspectives, the city is made for water pursuits."

Ryan's personalised tour makes it clear that to understand Perth a beach visit is a must, so I hop on the train to Cottesloe, a popular surf area fringed with restaurants and nightspots. Sitting on the outdoor terrace at Barchetta café, sipping a cappuccino and gazing at the hardy souls braving the waves on this chilly morning, a self-satisfied smile creeps across my face. There's no place I'd rather be. ⇒



LEFT TO RIGHT: Cottesloe Beach is a popular surf area; Western Australian sculptor Tony Jones' *Seahorse* was part of the *Sculpture by the Sea* exhibition at Cottesloe Beach; aerial view of Cottesloe Beach.



After exploring a beachside art gallery, Kidogo Arthouse, and the “Cappuccino strip” in trendy waterside Fremantle, a kangaroo-hop from central Perth, I board the Rottnest Express ferry. At 11 kilometres long and 4.5-kilometres wide, cycling Rottnest Island’s circumference will fill the day. On the isle, an attendant at Pedal & Flipper gives me a searching glance before wheeling over an electric bike. “This will help,” he nods.

One push on the pedal and the bike surges forward. This takes far less vigour than the leg-powered version – I feel positively sporting. On the uphill sections I gleefully overtake the peloton, leaving lycra-clad cycling enthusiasts wheezing in my wake. Making my way around the island’s undulating coastline, I see lighthouses and lakes, panoramic viewpoints and clifftops. With two villages and no cars, it’s a peaceful oasis, only tweeting birds and the whir of my bicycle battery punctuating the silence.

At one stage, I spy a furball by the side of the road. It’s a *quokka*, a native animal peculiar to Rottnest that looks like the result of an unlikely liaison between a kangaroo and a rat. This little guy has rocked forward, rounding his back and resting his head on his tail, and called it nap time. Catching the ferry back to Perth’s Richardson Hotel & Spa, I know how he feels, but my nap will be in more luxurious surrounds.

Flying along the coastline of Western Australia a few days later, I watch it stretch on endlessly under the plane’s wing. The Sapphire-blue ocean kisses the burnt-ochre shore as we head towards Exmouth in the far north. There’s a light-green fuzz covering around three-quarters of the land below, courtesy of recent unprecedented rain. The remainder is bald patches of rust-red earth that wouldn’t look out of place in the Sahara.

Lying 1,260 kilometres north of Perth, Exmouth holds no major terrestrial landmarks – in fact with a population of around 2,200, it doesn’t hold much at all. It’s the transient visitors here that are the main attraction – from April to July it’s whale sharks, and then humpback whales take over the show, lingering from August to October. In season, visitors flock in by plane and road, many on lengthy sojourns along the coast.

Travelling by bus from the airport, my head swings from side to side as if I’m following a tennis match. On the left a low mountain ridge runs parallel to the road, while the cobalt-blue ocean shimmers to the right. Between is a flat expanse of red earth speckled with lime grass shoots and grey-green low-lying shrubs. There’s a stark beauty to this land, where birds wheel overhead and termite mounds pepper the landscape like sculptures. Fellow passengers and I keep our noses pressed to the windows. A collective sigh escapes when a lone emu unfolds its spindly legs from its

roadside resting place, and runs beside the vehicle before veering off across the plain.

After a peaceful night at the Novotel Ningaloo Reef, I’m up early to see the sun rise from the depths of the Indian Ocean. “Are you excited?” asks Stuart, the guide from Ocean Eco as he ushers me and a group into the waiting minivan to rumble along what passes for a highway in these parts: a narrow road that hugs the coast.

Pulling up at the marina, we’re greeted by captain Andy. “You’re in for a great day,” he promises. “There’s a lot of plankton in the water and they had a good number of whale sharks yesterday – today shouldn’t be any different.”

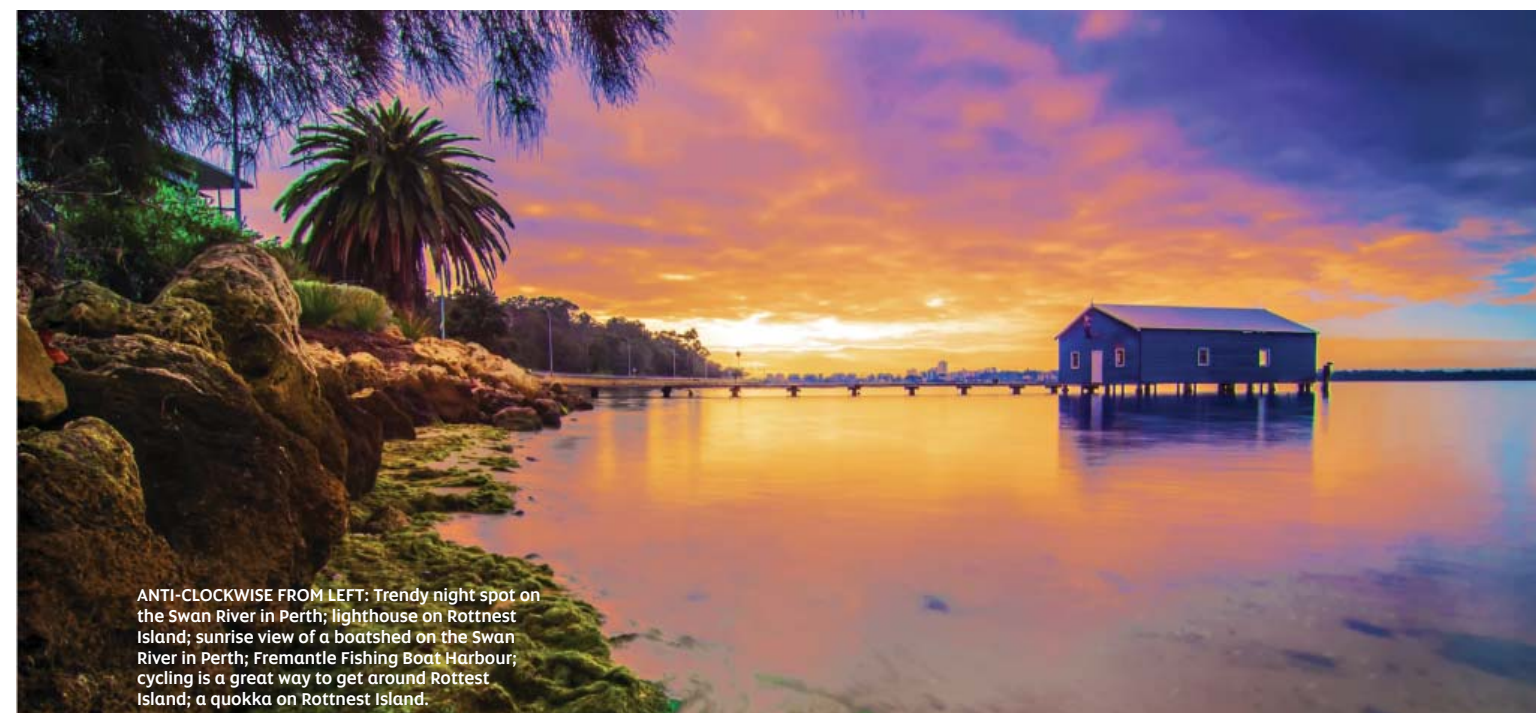
We hop in the boat motor to a spot just outside Ningaloo Reef, which runs along the coast, forming a somewhat protective barrier. A profusion of snorkelling spots lie inside and opportunities for diving, game fishing and whale-spotting abound in deeper waters. ⇒



Ryan’s personalised tour makes it clear that to understand Perth, a beach visit is a must, so I hop on the train to Cottesloe, a popular surf area fringed with restaurants and nightspots.



Making my way around the island’s undulating coastline, I see lighthouses and lakes, panoramic viewpoints and clifftops.



ANTI-CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Trendy night spot on the Swan River in Perth; lighthouse on Rottnest Island; sunrise view of a boatshed on the Swan River in Perth; Fremantle Fishing Boat Harbour; cycling is a great way to get around Rottnest Island; a quokka on Rottnest Island.



“Now”, Mia directs, and we duck our heads under to see the enormous creature gliding towards us.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A whale shark swims just under the surface; Novotel Ningaloo Resort; a scenic flight with Norwest Air Work from Exmouth; an emu; a green turtle swims over the coral at Ningaloo Reef; limestone crags in the Cape Range National Park near Exmouth.

We trial our equipment in a cove, slipping into the turquoise water while the guides assess our water competence. Fish dart between the hard corals, shimmering in the sunlight filtering through in gently flickering beams. On a blank patch of sand a large grouper lies dead still and is camouflaged. Black-and-white-striped humbugs peek shyly from their anemone homes and a giant pufferfish flaps its flowery fins, propelling itself under a coral overhang. It's a lovely scene, but we're itching to move on to the main event.

With a dedicated spotter plane overhead, it doesn't take long for Andy to secure a prime position. Spotter Rennee stands starboard, gazing out to sea. She points to a bulky grey shape near the top of the water. “Whale shark,” she calls, and we rush to see. “There's another one,” guide Mia calls, while Stuart slips into the water, finning to a whale shark and raising his fist to indicate he's in position.

The first group drop into the water, while the second lines up, anxious not to miss out. As the boat circles back for the drop, another whale shark crosses our path. “We're going to have our own whale shark. Mask on,” says Mia and we slide into the water, gathering in

a huddle in the path of the behemoth. “Now”, she directs, and we duck our heads under to see the enormous creature gliding towards us. As it passes, we swing around to join, kicking alongside, leaving a clear space of three metres – whale sharks are timid and we don't want to scare it away. This bad boy is moving at a fast clip and the weaker swimmers start losing ground, so Mia calls us in to prepare for a second run.

Again we drop in and swim, this time at a more relaxed pace. I can't tear my eyes away from the grandeur of this denizen of the deep as it gracefully cuts through the water, propelled by the slightest flick of its powerful tail. Mia yanks on my fin, jolting me out of the moment and I stop dead, wondering if I've drifted too close. She pulls me to the left where another of the creatures is approaching, making us the meat in a whale shark sandwich. Being wedged between these mammoth marine-beings is a breathtaking experience.

We drop in time and time again, the group shrinking as people tire. At the end there's only 14-year-old Emily, Shaun and myself paired with a six-metre whale shark and five hitchhiking remora suckered on to its belly. We swim almost two kilometres in a companionable synchronised formation before the shark banks slightly and heads into the depths.

In the morning, pilot Nathan from Norwest Air Work collects me from my comfortable abode at Novotel Ningaloo Reef for a scenic flight. He looks too young to drive, let alone fly.

“I've been in Exmouth about two months,” he tells me. “I got my pilot's license on Tuesday, got the job on Wednesday and now I'm flying.” This does not engender confidence, but when we climb into the tiny plane, Nathan takes control, flicking the bewildering array of switches and levers with a confidence that belies his age. We launch into the air and the peninsula unfolds, the contours ranging from ridges and ripples to flat plains, canyons and crevices. Exmouth is a tiny speck behind us – there's nothing else out here to mar the landscape – just us, drifting between the russet earth and the pale blue sky.

“That's where most of my job is – out there, looking for tadpoles. That's what whale sharks look like from here,” says Nathan scanning the endless span of ocean. “But today we're going to land there,” he adds, pointing to a dirt strip in the middle of nowhere.

Touching down, I realise I could spend months exploring Western Australia's bounty. In a week I've barely scratched the surface. Like the whale sharks, I'll plan another migration next year. ☺

EXPERIENCE WESTERN AUSTRALIA

STAY IN PERTH AT: THE RICHARDSON HOTEL & SPA

This five-star boutique hotel near Perth's stunning King's Park is an urban haven. The service is impeccable, the suites ultra-comfortable, and the fine-dining at the hotel's Opus restaurant is outstanding, all within walking distance to the CBD.

WWW.THERICHARDSON.COM.AU

WALK WITH: TWO FEET & A HEARTBEAT

This company specialises in small-group guided walking tours, led by local, knowledgeable guides keen to showcase all that Perth has to offer.

WWW.TWOFEET.COM.AU

EAT IN FREMANTLE AT: BREAD IN COMMON

One of Fremantle's latest hot-spots, this is a superb kitchen and bakery in a renovated warehouse. The focus is on communal dining, and locally sourced, seasonal and homemade produce.

WWW.BREADINCOMMON.COM.AU

IN EXMOUTH SLEEP AT: THE NOVOTEL NINGALOO RESORT

This resort is the gateway to the World Heritage-listed Ningaloo Reef and Cape Range National Park, sitting metres from the waterline on Sunrise Beach.

WWW.NOVOTEL.COM

EXPERIENCE WHALE SHARKS WITH: OCEAN ECO ADVENTURES

Whether it's spotting whale sharks, humpback whales, dolphins or Manta rays, Ocean Eco's professional guides ensure a memorable experience.

WWW.OCEANECOADVENTURES.COM.AU

FLY WITH ETIHAD

Experience Perth with a package from Etihad Holidays with return economy class flights between Abu Dhabi and Perth, three nights' twin share accommodation at the five-star Crown Metropole Perth, with breakfast, starting from AED 7,499 per person. Terms and Conditions Apply. To book, call 800 2324.