



The Grape Escape

On a five-day escape to the picturesque Margaret River region in Western Australia's southwest, KERRY VAN DER JAGT strikes a balance between outdoor adventure and gourmet delights.

A three-hour drive south of Perth, Margaret River or Margs as the locals call her, is the hedonistic kind of best friend your mother warned you about. She'll ply you with wine, seduce you with chocolates, encourage you to hang out with musicians and drink beer before breakfast.

SHAPE readers, however, will be pleased to know that although 90 percent of the region conspires to weaken your will (and expand your waistline) Margs also has a rugged, outdoorsy side. There's a multi-layered side of waves and caves, tracks and trails that will leave you breathless, push your boundaries and challenge your fitness.

Communing with this 'back-to-nature' side will feed your soul, but more importantly, it will allow

you to sneak a few more treats. Try these ideas.

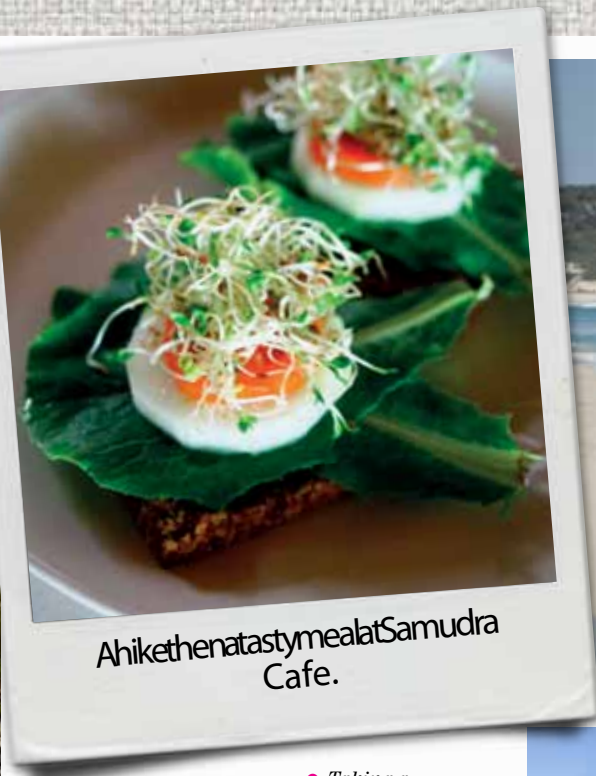
1 Sip and Cycle

Exercise: 18km mountain bike ride

Treat: Wine tasting at four cellar doors

For some people the words bike and fun go together like champagne and strawberries. I'm not one of those people: the gears confuse me, the hills kill me and the steep descents terrify me. I'll admit I was hesitant to sign up for a mountain bike tour, until I read about a half-day, guided 'Sip n' Cycle' tour where participants pedal from vineyard to vineyard tasting world class wines. Sounds like my glass of shiraz.

Margaret River cycling enthusiasts Rob and Tamara Oostdam have used



AhikethenastymealatSamudra Cafe.



Surfing paradise in Margaret River.



Taking a break from the 18km bike ride.



Surfing fun on Condos Beach.



Warming up on a kayak.

their local knowledge to set up Dirty Detours Mountain Bike Adventures. Alongside their Sip n' Cycle tour they also offer a Café Cycle Cruise, Boranup Forest for Sporty Types and All Mountain for Fit Buggers.

The first leg is an easy 6km ride along back roads and forest paths to Cape Mentelle, one of the pioneering wineries in the region. The remaining 12km lead through private properties, past vineyards, through soaring karri forests and along quiet gravel roads.

→ **Treat:** The four wineries visited - Cape Mentelle, Xanadu, Watershed and Stella Bella - are some of the most prestigious in the region and include a full tasting at each. The tour finishes with a platter of local produce and, thankfully, a lift back to the start.

→ **Details:** Dirty Detours Mountain Bike Adventures offers guided tours using quality Kona mountain bikes. They supply helmets, water and full riding instructions. \$80, dirtydetours.com

“The words bike and fun go together like champagne and strawberries in the Sip n' Cycle tour over 18km.”

2 Surf and Slurp

Exercise: Two-hour surf lesson
Treat: Beer, cheese and chocolate

“PADDLE!” yells Scotty Bailey, the man behind local surf venture Saturation Surfaris, giving me a mighty push towards the shore of Contos Beach. I don't so much spring like a ninja, as scramble like a baboon, but I'm up, on my knees anyway. Kneeling tall, I spread my arms wide like Rose on the Titanic and ride the half-metre monster all the way to shore.

The lesson begins on the sand with Scotty giving paddling

demonstrations and safety advice. After “popping” to our feet a few times to work out if we're natural or goofy (the stance, not the skill), we pull on wet-suits and carry our planks into the surf. I slide onto my board and paddle like a propeller, punching through the waves to get past the breakers.

Over and over again I catch a wave in, sometimes getting up, sometimes not, but it doesn't matter, mild-mannered Scotty has given me the courage and the skills to try something I was always afraid to do.

→ **Treat:** After a morning surf lesson with Saturation Surfaris, participants on the Surf and Slurp tour enjoy a gourmet lunch at Bootleg Brewery followed by visits to cheese, chocolate and liquor factories.

→ **Details:** Saturation Surfaris offers single and multi-day adventures, as well as customised tours including 'Just the Gals' and 'Family Adventures'. They can combine surf lessons with abseiling, tennis, canoeing, snorkelling or mountain biking. \$125, saturationsurfaris.com.au

● *Gliding on the Margaret River.*



● *Samudra Cafe.*



● *Stunning beaches.*



● *Fresh is best.*

3 Paddle Power

Exercise: 1km canoe
Treat: Lunch at Fraser Gallop Estate

It is mid-morning when we lower our canoes into the tranquil Margaret River, the namesake of this premium wine district. As we push off, the canoes slice through the clear water, startling a pair of Baudin's white-tailed black cockatoos from their perch. The only sounds are the rush of wings and the trickle of water around our canoe bows.

"It's your lucky day," says a

smiling Sean Blocksidge, owner and operator of Margaret River Discovery Co, and my paddling partner for the morning. "These birds are endangered and this is one of the few places you'll see them."

With a few dips of our paddle we catch up to the canoes in front, gliding past stands of jarrah forests and weeping peppermint trees. Over the next hour we alternate between serious paddling and moments where we let the river take the lead. "This place is a massage for the soul," says Sean.

→ **Treat:** The Margaret River

Discovery Tour includes a gourmet lunch of regional produce served in the barrel room at the region's emerging superstar winery, Fraser Gallop Estate. The tour concludes with a short hike on the Cape to Cape Track.

→ **Details:** The Margaret River Discovery Company gives you the chance to do something 90 percent of the locals haven't done – canoe the actual Margaret River. Together with fine food and wine it's a real David Attenborough meets Jamie Oliver experience. \$250, margaretriverdiscovery.com.au



Hike a portion or the lot of the 135km Cape to Cape Track.

“Reopened after 10 years, you can explore the Moondyne Cave and see The Tower of Babel stalagmite.”

4 Hike and Seek

Exercise: Half-day walk on the Cape to Cape Track

Treat: Breakfast at Samudra Cafe

The two humpbacks are breaching in unison, like perfectly coiffed synchronised swimmers. I can't believe my luck, given it's December and most of the whales have returned to Antarctica. "During migration (May-November) we see so many whales it's a humpback highway," says Drew McKenzie, guide, environmental scientist and co-director of Cape to Cape Explorer Tours.

Drew is leading me on a half-day tour of the famous Cape to Cape Track. The entire track runs for 135km along the spine of the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge, between the Cape Naturaliste and Cape Leeuwin lighthouses. Drew and his team offer several ways to tackle it: half or one day tours; two- or three-day bites; or fully-guided end-to-end, either camping trackside or in comfortable accommodation.

From Smiths Beach we scramble across lichen-covered granite boulders, passing Gatorade-coloured Christmas bushes and sweet-smelling coastal rosemary, before taking a quick dip in a sheltered cove known as the Aquarium.

→ **Treat:** Samudra Café, serving 'super food for a magnificent life', is the place to fuel up for breakfast or lunch. Try the gluten-free banana pancakes or 'miraculous burger'. They also have two yoga studios and an eco clothing store. samudra.com.au

→ **Details:** Cape to Cape Explorer Tours offers a range of full and half-day tours year round, but the guided, eight-night end-to-end trips only operate from April to November. They also offer ocean kayaking, caving and abseiling adventures. \$65, capetocapetours.com.au

5 Deep and Meaningful

Exercise: Three-hour Moondyne cave experience

Treat: Margaret River Chocolate Company

I'm hiking through a dense section of karri forest, decked, not in walking pants and sun hat, but overalls, hard hat and a gleaming pair of white, cotton gloves. "There's the entrance," says cave guide Steve Harrison, pointing to a grate-covered rabbit hole. Like Alice in Wonderland we slip through the opening and spend the next three hours exploring one of the most beautiful caves in the state.

There are more than 350 limestone caves under the surrounding countryside, one of which is Moondyne Cave. After being closed for 10 years it has recently reopened, offering small-group adventure tours. Moondyne boasts some of the largest pendulites in the world, an ancient megafauna history and the largest stalagmite in the South West, known as 'The Tower of Babel'.

With only headlamps for light we cross narrow wooden bridges, descend ladders and crawl through limestone tunnels. In many cases we are following trails which first opened in the 1880s.

→ **Treat:** If there's one thing I know about caving, it's this: chocolate is a vital component of an emergency ration kit. Before joining the tour, stop at the Margaret River Chocolate Company for a block of dark chocolate, and perhaps a few samples... chocolatefactory.com.au

→ **Details:** The Moondyne Experience, located in the Jewel Cave precinct near Augusta, runs twice weekly, June to December, and includes lunch at the Jewel café. Three other caves, Lake, Mammoth and Jewel, are open year round. \$150, margaretriver.com

• A caving adventure at Moondyne Cave.



• A platter of local produce on the Dirty Detours tour.



Want more information?

Augusta Margaret River Tourism Association
margaretriver.com

Geographe Bay Tourism Association
geographebay.com