

Paul Rush samples the good life in Western Australia's bountiful Margaret River region

I'VE arrived at a place that *Lonely Planet* has named as a world top-10 destination and, after a seven-hour flight from Auckland, I'm naturally curious to see what all the fuss is about.

Margaret River has the sort of world-class brand profile that is normally achievable only with attention-grabbing Australian publicity stunts like "The Best Job in the World", "The Ultimate WA Taxi Ride" or the Sydney "Oprah" House.

But without such fanfare, this region has gradually built a reputation for its diverse mix of wine and lifestyle, blended with a captivating coastline and ancient forests.

In setting out to discover the appeal of Western Australia's blessed southwest corner, the first thing that impresses me is the amenable Mediterranean climate. Margaret River enjoys an average of 7.8 hours of sunshine a day, which sets the scene for a perfect holiday experience.

On a prominent corner of the picturesque and lively Margaret River township is the Darby Park Serviced Residences, where manager Vanessa Thomson greets me warmly and recommends a restaurant for my evening meal, the Must Wine Bar &

Bistro.

So, on my very first evening, I'm destined to become intimately acquainted with the region's premium wines. One glance at the wine list tells me that it is as solid and durable as the granite boulders of the southwest coast. Over 500 wines are listed, including 200 in the A-Z of local producers, as well as a careful selection from around the world.

The Must's degustation menu is a standout, starting with a chicken liver parfait and a glass of Burgundy wine, followed by a charcuterie plate and Bellarmine riesling. The main course is a succulent dry-aged beef rump and Frankland River Plan B shiraz. Dessert is a superb creme brulee with a Juniper Estate riesling.

What I find particularly satisfying is Must's practice of recording a big thank you to its local producers as a footnote to the menu.

Sean Blocksidge stepped out of the corporate world three years ago to boldly launch The Margaret River Discovery Company, with a mission to help visitors discover the "real" Margaret River. He rolls up to my accommodation in a shiny 4WD vehicle with a broad smile on his face and calmly tells me he was voted Western

Australia Top Tour Guide at an award ceremony the previous evening.

We begin the day with a serene paddle on the river under overhanging paperbark trees. The scene is so tranquil that the marron, brim and mullet are resting on the bottom in a languid state and dragonflies are hovering in the heat haze.

Sean explains that this is just an appetiser, as we are going behind the scenes at Cape Mentelle vineyard for a light degustation lunch, which instantly gets my attention. Turning to a Brisbane couple in our group, he says: "Their semillon-sauvignon blanc is mostly what you people drink in Queensland." The reply is music to my ears: "Sorry, we drink New Zealand wines like Cloudy Bay."

Robert Dewar is our very personable host at Cape Mentelle and explains that this winery has put Margaret River on the world map, along with four other parent vineyards — Cape Leeuwin, Cullen, Mosswood and Vasse Felix.

"Our reds are very consistent year on year," he says. "The 2007 cabernet was awarded 97 points as the best red wine in Australia. Cloudy Bay in New Zealand is our sister company but, along with Cape Mentelle, they have been swallowed up by the biggest fish in the pond, the giant LVMH group."

Robert explains that good terrain and a maritime influence are crucial to Cape Mentelle's success. "We are at latitude 34 degrees south and have an average temperature of 20.4C — Bordeaux in France is 35 degrees north and 20.3C."

A dining table has been set up in an atmospheric room lined with French



HIGHLIGHTS: (clockwise from above) A meander down the Margaret River helps work up an appetite; the table is laid for a degustation lunch at Cape Mentelle winery; the writer's Platinum Beach campervan is dwarfed by lush forest.

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oak barrels of premium cabernet sauvignon. A selection of 10 canapes has been crafted to complement a particular wine from a set of four glasses of red and two of white wine in front of us.

We work our way through the wines while judging the food's weight, texture, acidity and flavour. There are ideal pairings — like the smoked trout and riesling and the gorgonzola cheese and chardonnay. Others are interesting contrasts, where acid and alkaline elements clash.

We come away from Cape Mentelle with an appreciation of the achievements of Margaret River wineries in producing less than 5 per cent of Australian wine but 25 per cent of its premium wine.

I'm intrigued by the colourful names that wineries pull out of the hat for their products. Some are as interesting as the contents of the bottles — Frog Choir, Howling Wolves, Knee Deep, Mongrel Creek, Cow Bombie (named after a monster surf break) and Fifth Leg Shiraz.

Our tour continues up Caves Rd through Willingup, where the biggest concentration of

wineries is found, and out to an isolated section of the Cape to Cape Track. We walk through coastal heathland dotted with clusters of late-blooming wild flowers and stand atop a craggy limestone outcrop to view the dramatic cliffs, which are being assailed by booming, foam-tipped swells.

Here and there I spot tiny black dots bobbing on the ocean. This Willingup section has some of the 75 top surfing breaks along this rugged coast, where 8m waves are not uncommon and surfers are a permanent feature of the seascape.

Visitors come to this region primarily for the wine or beaches. That means surfing, swimming or diving in crystal-clear water off the country's longest, widest and cleanest white-sand beaches.

I continue driving north to discover a place of idyllic seclusion called the Forest Rise Eco Retreat. Manager John Ashford shows me around my superbly appointed chalet, "The Laughing Kookaburra". It nestles unobtrusively in an unspoilt grove of lakeside red gums and jarrah trees, and is surrounded by carefully selected plantings that mirror the subtle kookaburra plumage of greys, browns and

whites. It would be quite impossible for stress to survive the night in a place like this.

I relax on the porch as night draws in and soak up the pure silence of the bush. Soon I have a visit from my neighbours, an affectionate, toe-biting ringtail possum and a little busybody bilby. They are curious about their Kiwi visitor, so I give them a potted history of my life across the ditch. However, in time I realise that their blank looks and persistent approaches suggest that their primary focus is food.

In the morning, John introduces me to a few more permanent residents around the picturesque man-made lake. Bandicoots, quendas and skinks seem to regard this as their ultimate eco-retreat. But we can't locate racehorse goannas, which are renowned for running up your leg thinking you are a tree.

John has a keen ear for avian music and spots silvereyes and cockatoos flitting about. There is a delightful sign in the summerhouse with images of willy wagtails, shelducks, rosellas and splendid fairy wrens. The sign reads: "These are some of our guests that dropped in this week around the lake."

The Margaret River region has struck me as an extremely friendly, unpretentious but sophisticated destination that values its lifestyle, natural environment and tourist potential.

I'm convinced that you won't just have a great time in the Margaret River, you'll have a "grape" time.

— Paul Rush travelled to Margaret River courtesy of Air New Zealand and Tourism Western Australia.



FACT FILE

■ GETTING THERE

Air New Zealand offers daily non-stop flights from Auckland to Perth and connections are available from around New Zealand.

■ MARGARET RIVER

This one-time chilled-out surfer town, 3½ hours' drive from Perth, has 200 vineyards and 80 wineries. New-release wines are most abundant in spring (which coincides with the wild-flower explosion) and also in autumn (March-May).

■ ACCOMMODATION

The Darby Park Serviced Residences in the centre of town are an ideal base for exploring. For seclusion and tranquillity in a woodland setting, Forest Rise Eco Retreat has eco-certified, self-contained timber and earth chalets 20 minutes north of town.

■ WEBSITES

www.westernaustralia.com.au
www.airnewzealand.co.nz
www.margaretriver.com.au
www.margaretriver.darbypark.com.au
www.must.com.au
www.margaretriverdiscovery.com.au
www.forestrise.com.au