

View across the coastal heath to Redgate Beach



Bottle display at Vasse Felix in Cowaramup



Leeuwin Estate winery



Land of Plenty

Explore Margaret River's jewelled caves, towering karri forests and stunning coastal playgrounds to find out just how much more there is to Western Australia's vineyard capital than wine, says Liz Mencil



Once upon a time, farmers heading to local livestock auctions would pile anxious stud rams into the backs of old trailers. Along the rugged coastline, salt-faced surfers would stack their boards atop clapped-out Kombis and head for lunch at the corner bakery. Before wine catapulted Margaret River onto the international tourism stage, it was a charming rural backwater and chilled-out surfer town. While the place is a far cry from what it once was – for one thing, Chardonnay has long since replaced

chocolate milk as the lunch-hour beverage of choice – its undeniable beauty remains. Die-hards still reminisce about the early days, but the fact is that Margaret River has matured into a major travel destination, one that successfully blends the relaxed rural-surfer vibe of the past with a contemporary and sophisticated food-and-wine scene. Margaret River's origins as a paradise for wine lovers date back to the mid-'60s, when a Western Australian agricultural expert noted that the region's climate was similar to that of Bordeaux. A handful of Bordeaux-loving Perth doctors was drawn

to Margaret River like moths to a flame and, several years later, planted the region's first commercial vines. Their early success with Cabernet Sauvignon prompted others to make the journey here and a world-class wine industry began to take shape. Along with the wineries came a host of restaurants, artisan food producers, art galleries, accommodation spots and tourism facilities, all drawn by the burgeoning wine scene but also by the region's spectacular landscapes. The wine industry has unquestionably made its mark, but the region has a whole lot more to offer.

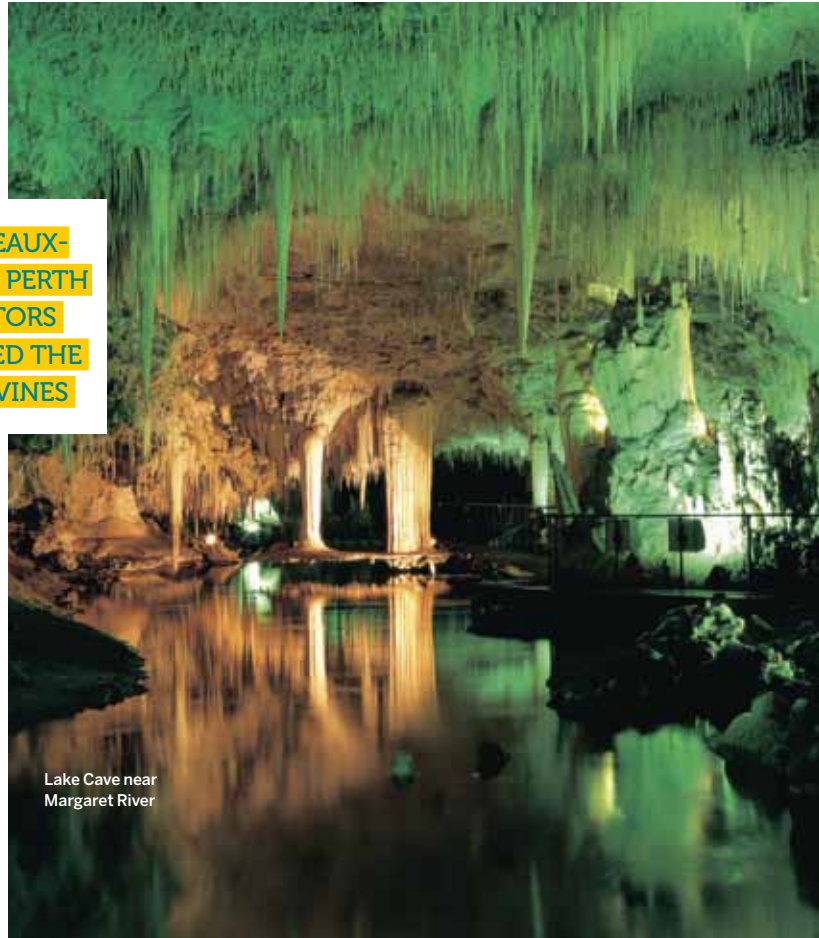


Bootleg brewery

**BORDEAUX-
LOVING PERTH
DOCTORS
PLANTED THE
FIRST VINES**



Vineyard at Amberley Estate winery



Lake Cave near Margaret River



Abandoned farm at Margaret River

PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM WESTERN AUSTRALIA; PHOTOLIBRARY



View of the beach from a cave in Margaret River



Canal rocks, south of Yallingup



Two oceans meet at Cape Leeuwin lighthouse



Sign up for a Samudra surfing experience



Surfing action near Margaret River



PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM WESTERN AUSTRALIA
AUGUSTA MARGARET RIVER TOURISM ASSOCIATION, SAMUDRA, PHOTOLIBRARY

Inquisitive stingray near the old jetty at Hamelin Bay

MARGARET RIVER'S SURF CULTURE DRAWS YOUNG AND OLD

FOR BEACHGOERS

Margaret River's coastline stretches 100km from Cape Naturaliste in the north to Cape Leeuwin in the south. The latter, a jagged and wind-swept area that is the continent's southwesternmost point, is where the Indian and Southern Oceans crash together with all the theatre of giant cymbals.

A popular swimming beach can be found at Meelup Bay. Here, families congregate under massive eucalyptus trees, their tables laden with picnic fare. Children out in the water lie stomach-down on their colourful body boards, bobbing up and down to the gentle rhythm of the bay. Couples scattered along the white stretch of sand typically sunbathe, read or people-watch. Dinghies and luxury catamarans dot the horizon.

Yallingup's Smiths Beach is the place to watch the sunset. Late in the day after the surfers are gone, stroll along the water's edge, breathe in the sea air, and enjoy a picnic against the saffron-shaded backdrop as the sun sinks below the horizon.

Margaret River's surf culture continues to attract young and old. Here you'll see kids dragging surfboards twice their size down to the beach, teenagers squeezed between cars changing into board shorts and wetsuits, and long-time surfers respectfully waxing their boards. There are impressive surf breaks at Surfer's Point in Prevelly, to the south as far as Boranup Beach, and northwards along the route to Injidup, Yallingup and Cape Naturaliste. For novices, there are smaller, gentler waves near the mouth of the Margaret River, where lifeguards remain on duty all summer.

Yallingup Surf School offers private and group lessons for surfers of all ability levels. For something a bit different, Samudra holds weekend yoga and surf retreats where participants experience two virtuous days of stretching, riding the waves and digging in to organic vegetarian meals.

Margaret River boasts a six-month whale-watching season. Peering over the

rails of the lofty Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse is not for the faint of heart, but you might just see a female humpback with a newborn calf alongside. Sightings in Flinders Bay tend to occur between June and September. Or head north between September and December to rock-strewn Point Piquet.

For closer encounters, take a whale-watching cruise with Naturaliste Charters. Owner Paul Cross, who has been plying these waters for 10 years, reckons the whales recognise his boat: "They know the acoustics of our vessel and that we're there to interact with them. Every year, they get more comfortable coming up to us, especially the juveniles. We'll just switch off the boat and watch the show. It's crazy how close you get to them." Paul says he's had a 99% success rate seeing whales during the past 210 days of operation. "When you have 30,000 whales migrating, it's pretty hard to miss them," he says. "No special equipment is needed. We just see them." ☞



WHERE TO EAT

*** YALLINGUP WOODFIRED BREAD** Artisan bakers produce beautiful, chewy-textured organic sourdoughs. Cnr Sheoak Dr & McLachlan Rd, Yallingup, tel: (0)8 9756 6306

*** MCHENRY'S FARM SHOP** Legendary winemaker David Hohnen (of Cape Mentelle fame) has turned to farming free-range pigs and Wiltshire sheep. 5962 Caves Rd, Margaret River, tel: (0)8 9757 7600, www.mchenrysfarmshop.com

*** YAHAVA KOFFEEWORKS** Follow the aroma of freshly roasted organic coffee. Cnr Bussell Hwy & Rosa Brook Rd, Margaret River, tel: (0)8 9757 2900, www.yahava.com.au

*** MARGARET RIVER FARMERS' MARKET** A lively spot with a good variety of produce, located up the road from the Margaret River Visitor Centre. Cnr Tunbridge & Farrelly St, Margaret River, tel: (0)8 9757 9095, www.margaretriverfarmersmarket.com.au

*** THE LARDER** Chef Andrea Ilott provides delicious hampers along with tourist maps highlighting choice picnic and barbecue spots across the region. Shop 2, 99 Bussell Hwy, Margaret River, tel: (0)8 9758 8990, www.larder.biz

*** PROVIDORE** 448 Harmans South Rd, Wilyabrup, tel: (0)8 9755 6355, www.providore.com.au

*** MEALUP SHOP 3 BAYVIEW CENTRO**, Dunn Bay Rd, Dunsborough, tel: (0)8 9755 3411, www.mealup.com.au

FOR NATURE LOVERS

The Cape to Cape Track is suited to both short scenic walks and multi-day hikes. This 135km trekking route traverses the coastal landscapes along the Leeuwin Naturalist Ridge, taking in majestic headlands, limestone cliffs, verdant karri forests and long beaches. You're likely to come across walkers in slick designer gear and sweaty, hard-core hikers weighed down with ancient backpacks. And you're sure to be in awe at the sight of the gleaming turquoise bays, wind-whipped coastal heath and vertical cliffs here.

The track can be completed in five to seven days or tackled in shorter sections. Hikers can camp along the trail or find accommodation nearby. Many accommodation providers in the area offer a drop-off and pick-up service for Cape to Cape Track users. Visitor centres provide copies of *The Cape to Cape Guidebook* if you've decided to find your own way. They also take bookings for guided walks lasting anywhere from one to six hours.

Margaret River is also known for its extensive network of limestone caves. Greg Miller is a keen surfer and musician, but he earns a living as an adventure tour guide at Ngilgi Cave in Yallingup. "The limestone is relatively young at just one or two million

years old," he says. "This means it's incredibly porous and the water can dissolve the limestone easily. That's why there are so many pockets and caves along this stretch of coastline." Caving options here include guided tours at Lake and Jewel Caves, semi-guided tours and adventure caving at Ngilgi Cave, and self-guided expeditions at Mammoth, Giants and Calgardup Caves.

Greg's adventure tours take explorers off the well-lit boardwalks and into the depths of caves, where it's necessary to crawl along ancient riverbeds and negotiate tight squeezes with names like "Pinch Gut". The reward is the sight of pristine, luminescent crystal formations that thrive in their secret chambers, away from the tourist crowds.

At the cathedral-like Boranup Forest, tall, sun-dappled karri trees are surrounded by lush vegetation and, in the spring, a range of unique and colourful wildflowers. Just driving through here is unforgettable, and detouring off the main road to explore one of the many cycling and walking trails only adds to the experience.

Savour the heady scent of peppermint trees (willow myrtle) and hear the magnificent cry of the red-tailed black cockatoo and the satisfying crunch of dried leaves as you move through the forest. ◁

WHERE TO STAY

*** INJIDUP SPA RETREAT**

Luxury accommodation offering a variety of pampering spa treatments against the backdrop of beautiful Injidup Bay. 32 Cape Clairault Rd, Yallingup, tel: (0)8 9750 1300, www.injidupsparetreat.com.au

*** MERRIBROOK**

Individual villas set in picturesque lakeside gardens. Don't miss the decadent gourmet breakfasts. Armstrong Rd, Off Cowaramup Bay Rd, Margaret River, tel: (0)8 9755 5599, www.merribrook.com.au

*** FOREST RISE ECO RETREAT**

Self-contained chalets in a 970,000m² nature reserve, complete with walking trails, flora and fauna. Armstrong Rd, Off Cowaramup Bay Rd, Margaret River, tel: (0)8 9755 7110, www.forestrise.com.au

*** MUST MARGARET RIVER SUITES**

Conveniently located in the heart of Margaret River, just above the excellent Must Winebar & Bistro. 107 Bussell Hwy, Margaret River, tel: (0)8 9758 8877, www.must.com.au/MMRfolder

PHOTOGRAPHY TOURISM WESTERN AUSTRALIA. AUGUSTA MARGARET RIVER TOURISM ASSOCIATION. MARIUS MENCEL



Lake Cave in Leeuwin - Naturaliste National Park



On the trails in Boranup Forest

**CAVERS
SQUEEZE IN TO
TIGHT SPOTS
WITH NAMES
LIKE 'PINCH GUT'**



Castle Rock at Cape Naturaliste

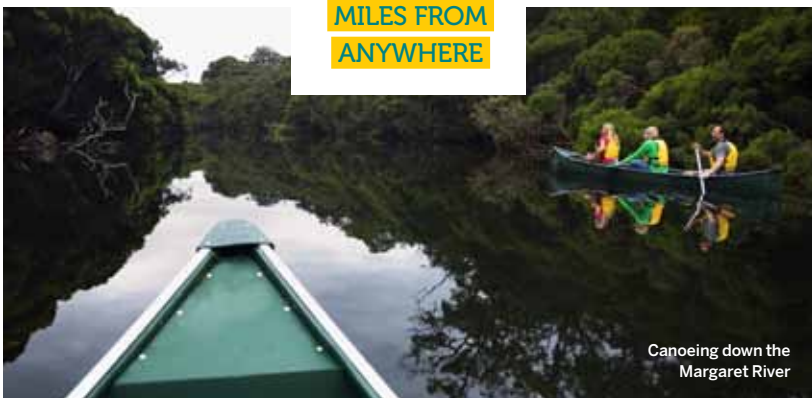


Mountain biking in Boranup Forest



Abseiling at Wilyabrup Sea Cliffs

**YOU'LL FEEL
LIKE YOU'RE
A MILLION
MILES FROM
ANYWHERE**



Canoeing down the Margaret River

GETTING THERE

- **BY CAR**
Margaret River is three hours south of Perth along a sign-posted route.
- **BY COACH**
South West Coach Lines has regular departures from the international airport, domestic airport and city bus port. Buses travel to all major points in the Margaret River region. tel: (0)8 9753 7700, www.veoliatransportwa.com.au

FOR ADVENTURE SEEKERS

Margaret River's sea cliffs offer some breathtaking abseils and climbs, including the revered Stainless Steel Wall at Wilyabrup Sea Cliffs. Rope up with an experienced guide like Mick Dempsey of Margaret River Climbing Co. Mick has been scaling cliff-faces around the country for more than 20 years. His tours start with a 1km bush walk to the secluded sea cliffs (part of the Cape to Cape Track) and include abseiling and climbing on a variety of sea cliffs from 10 to 40m in height. His tours run for about four or five hours.

Cycling is another great way to explore the region. Bikes can be hired in Margaret River and Dunsborough or may even be provided free with your accommodation. Maps are generally supplied with bikes, so riders can work out personalised itineraries. Dirty Detours Mountain Bike Adventures

offers high-energy guided tours into the depths of the Boranup Forest. "It's nice to really lose yourself out on our private trails," owner Tamara Oostdam says. "You could be a million miles from anywhere, even though you're only a few miles from the main road."

Adrenalin junkies can combine the above activities with a tandem sky dive for an experience known as the South West Triple XXXTreme, a relatively new offering from experienced operators Margaret River Climbing Co, Dirty Detours Mountain Bike Adventures and Southern Skydivers. The website says it all: "Finished sipping SSB? Now get out there and sample something really exciting..." The popular Semillon Sauvignon Blanc blend is affectionately known to oenophiles as "SSB".

For those seeking something a bit less taxing on the nerves, there's the prospect

of sea kayaking or paddling along the beautiful Margaret and Blackwood Rivers. Kayaks and canoes can be hired at launch points and guided journeys are available. "One of the absolute must-dos is canoeing the Margaret River," says Sean Blocksidge of the Margaret River Discovery Co. "It's a stunningly beautiful river system that meanders up through paperbark trees and has abundant fish just below the surface."

Margaret River is a destination that seduces beachgoers, nature lovers, adventure seekers and foodies alike. And lest we forget, it's possible to cap each day with a refreshing glass of wine. 🍷

t Tiger Airways flies to Perth from Singapore and Melbourne. Book your flights at www.tigerairways.com.