

# W A ROAD TRIP

City life getting you down? Yearning for the great outdoors? Western Australia, a mere five-hour hop, skip and jump away from Singapore, holds travel possibilities as limitless as its seemingly infinite stretches of natural bush and cerulean skies. Here's what VERNE MAREE found on a five-night odyssey from the WA capital, Perth, east to Wave Rock, south to Albany and back west along the southern coast to marvellous Margaret River.

PHOTOGRAPHY VERNE MAREE



Perth has a lot to offer. On your first visit, we'd suggest spending a few days in this friendly capital before making a beeline for the bush, the winelands or more far-flung coastal destinations. Enjoy the laidback vibe of the pedestrianised city centre, catch a wave off Cottesloe's pristine beach, lunch alfresco in the nearby port town of Fremantle, or cruise up the river to the Swan Valley's lovely wineries. There's plenty to do.

### Wheels and a Roof

Caravanning is big in Australia. You could hire a caravan (as our family in Perth does) for as little as under A\$100 a day, along with a sturdy vehicle to pull it; or keep it all together with a campervan. Or, if you (like my husband Roy) detest anything that smacks of camping, you could book accommodation in advance and head off – as we did – in a cool little convertible with a boot big enough to hold a six-pack Esky, a packet of crisps and a change of knickers.

Here's what our six-day road trip itinerary looked like:

- Head east for around 400km to spend a night at the tiny town of **Hyden** and its famous **Wave Rock**.
- Point the car south to coastal **Albany and Denmark** for two nights – “Oooh, aah, beautiful”, said everybody.
- Follow the coast up to **Margaret River** for another couple of nights, before driving back to Perth.

### Perth to Hyden and Wave Rock

There are two options for this route, said the internet, taking 3.5 and 3.25 hours respectively. I fancied the first, which joins the Great Eastern Highway up into the Darling Range – the oldest plateau on earth – to historic York, across the grazing farmlands and lake chains to Quairading, Corrigin, Kondinin and to Hyden.

But I was outnumbered by Roy and the in-car GPS navigator, who jointly agreed to head southeast to join Brookton Highway instead, before traversing the beginning of the Wheatbelt via Brookton, Corrigin, Kondinin and on to Hyden. In fact, Brookton Highway turned out to be a pleasant drive.

**Brookton** – one of the towns effectively created by the building of the Great Southern Railway in the late 1800s, was a prototype of the Wheatbelt's charming little towns. Expect to find scrupulously clean public toilets, a hotel, a petrol station and roadhouse, a memorial hall, a CWA (Country Women's Association), a tyre centre and various purveyors of agricultural services. You won't see a scrap of litter.

Of **Hyden's** 400-strong population, 70 are said to be employed in this tiny settlement's heroic tourism industry. There's no tavern in the town, but you can get a drink from the Wave Rock Motel ([waverock.com.au](http://waverock.com.au)) – clean, comfortable and not a bad place to stop for the night, considering that the Wave Rock Caravan Park is its sole competition. Take the kids for a dip in the big community swimming pool, or visit the bakery that was closed for the entire six-week summer holiday over December and January.



Four kilometres on from Hyden is the famous **Wave Rock**: a 14-metre-high, 100-metre-long marvel of geology. Was it worth the trip? Oh yes, but it shouldn't take more than 20 minutes or so to admire it, strike a pose on it and then either Instagram or Facebook the moment.

I have no experience of mad dogs, but I do have some of Englishmen, being married to one – and it's simply not true that they go out in the midday sun. Not often, anyway, and certainly not happily. So, while mine sat in the **Wildflower Shoppe Café** with a copy of *The West Australian* and a flat white, I headed off in 40 degrees and a hat to explore the 3km loop around the perimeter of the Rock to **Hippo's Yawn**.

If your children are anxious to see a couple of rare white kangaroos, a moth-eaten emu, a chatty parrot named George and a remarkably buck-toothed alpaca, you could take them to the slightly dispiriting **Wave Rock Wildlife Park** (\$12). But choose a cooler day than we did, if you can.

### Hyden to Albany

Both the town of Albany and its neighbour Denmark offer picturesque bay after halcyon headland after idyllic, white-sand beach, with one sweeping vista after another – simply magnificent.

How completely different this was from the countryside we'd travelled through for four hours to get here, following the route through country towns Kulin, Lake Grace, Dumbleyung (watch out for the Dumbleyung Dunny) and Katanning to the Chester Pass Road.

Golden fields of wheat, dotted with bales of hay after a bumper harvest, stretched as far as the eye could see. Now and then we passed an eerie-looking dry, white-salt-crust inland lake that would be full of water in the wetter winter months.

### Amazing Albany

For now, with the sun starting to sink and temperatures cooling, it was time to take down the roof of the Z4 and to follow the coast to the old **port** and what's probably the most historic part of town; founded

in 1826, Albany is WA's oldest European settlement.

From the old port town, you head to **Torndirrup National Park**, passing Flinders Bay on your left. Here you'll find two impressive geological formations, **The Gap** and **The Bridge** (\$12 to park here, for those few who heed the signs). The powers that be have done a great job of making the site safely accessible via paths and viewing platforms, plus providing some good explanatory signage.

Albany isn't only geologically gifted, it's also historically significant: visiting **Anzac Heritage Park** is another must. The Anzac movement was born in Albany, and this park's state-of-the-art **National Anzac Centre**, overlooking King George Sound, has been voted the country's best museum. (One wonders how the average family can afford entry, though, at almost \$25 per adult.)

A quick side trip to Denmark – 56km west from Albany via National Route 1 – was well worth doing. In places like Albany and Denmark, you can't possibly see or do everything in just a couple



of days. So, I was fairly resigned, this time, to not eating oysters from Albany's Oyster Harbour (or, indeed, emu from Emu Point); but a longer, more leisurely stay in this natural wonderland is firmly on the cards. Coming direct from Perth, it would be an easy 420km drive.

Albany's centrally located **Dog Rock Motel** ([dogrockmotel.com.au](http://dogrockmotel.com.au)) has comfortable, spacious accommodation and a treasure of a restaurant: **Lime 303**. Despite the restaurant's unprepossessing entrance, tucked away behind the main building at 303 Middleton Road, it delighted us with its array of authentic dishes featuring fresh, local and seasonal ingredients.

### Albany to Margaret River

After the three-and-a-half-hour drive west, turn left and southward to spectacular **Cape Leeuwin**, where the Indian Ocean meets the Great Southern Ocean. English explorer Matthew Flinders named Cape Leeuwin in 1801 after the Dutch ship *Leeuwin* (meaning lioness): it was the first vessel known to have visited these waters, in 1622.

Here you'll find a lofty and photogenic **lighthouse** that dates from 1895. The \$8 entry fee includes an audio-tour headset that's crammed with all you could ever wish to know about the history and geography of this spot.

Our accommodation at the conveniently located **Grange on Farrelly** (\$130 through [booking.com](http://booking.com)) was ideal for strolling to any of Margaret River's restaurants. Thanks to our hotel receptionist's recommendations, we had two outstanding experiences:

- At top-rated **Miki's Open Kitchen** (131 Bussell Highway), the "Trust Miki" *omakase*-style menu (\$60 per head) uses only local ingredients – nothing is flown in expensively from Tsukiji Fish Market, for example – and is jolly good value. Observing the food preparation was like watching poetry in motion, and each dish was divine.
- The very next night, the gifted barman at **Morrie's** crafted cunning cocktails while the chef put the finishing touches to a sticky feast-for-two – a 72-hour-braised beef-rib (\$69) with roast vegetables and all the trimmings.



### Margaret River Vintage Wine Tour

Glenn was our guide for the day, and also the driver of the 13-seater bus. Including a total of nine stops between the 10am hotel pickup and 5.30pm drop-off, our \$115 each included lunch and was good value, we thought.

**1** At **Watershed Winery**, just down the road from Margaret River Town, we tasted a teaspoonful each of a long list of wines – none stood out particularly for us, but then 10.05am might not be the ideal time for wine, especially on an empty stomach. It has gorgeous grounds and a lovely visitor centre, though, and we're told it's famous for its cabernet sauvignon.

Established as recently in 2001, the wine-growing is all computerised; for example, rainfall sensors indicate how much irrigation is required. Harvesting usually takes place at the end of January, Terri told us – but if the winter is long, can take place in mid-February, when the sugars have had time to develop in the grapes.

**2** **Voyager's** lovely Cape Dutch architecture was directly inspired by somewhere like Boschendal, in South Africa's Cape winelands, and comes complete with slave bell. Its 30-metre flagpole is the highest privately owned flagpole in the country; any higher, we're told, and it would have to be registered for aircraft clearance. (Roy and I had lunch here ten years ago, and I remember it was delicious.)

This time, the experienced and knowledgeable Mark introduced us to the four wines on the tasting list, starting with a most palatable chenin – and threw in another couple, just because we're such lovely people. Finally, a walk around Voyager's exquisite rose garden and its formally symmetrical double garden, done in the Dutch style, we're told.



**3** At **Leeuwin**, it was straight to our alfresco lunch table, for a choice of pasta, fish or a Black Angus sirloin that was beautifully aged and perfectly presented. You overlook a grassy amphitheatre where the likes of James Taylor, Shirley Bassey, Queen and Dame Kiri te Kanawa have all performed.

**4** Acres of grazing deer are a hint that you're approaching WA's first commercial deer farm, operated by **Margaret River Venison** – turn left along Carter Road, just north of Margaret River. Here you can taste various processed meat products made from venison, beef, goat and lamb, including chorizo and biltong, plus cheese, crafts and more.

**5** They're generous with the tasting buffet at **Olio Bello** – not only different olive oils, but a wide variety of pesto, tapenade-style and other products to taste – and that really does encourage you to buy.

**6** **Bettenay's Wine and Nougat**. Why wine and nougat, you may ask. Well, why not?

**7** This is the original branch of **Margaret River Chocolate Company**, and it's just like the outlet in the Swan Valley; there's another in Murray Street in the city of Perth, too. Free tastings of the chocolate pellets imported from Belgium make it popular; but if you're annoyed by swarms of greedy children of all ages, I suggest you steer clear.

**8** We're on the home straight now, and the folk at **Margaret River Dairy Company** look as though they, too, have just about had enough for the day.

**9** Saving the best for last, Glenn drives us through Cowamarup – a town festooned with dozens of life-sized faux Friesland cows – to **Adinfern** wine estate. In her very engaging presentation, Jan explains that the place was originally a dairy farm and then a sheep farm, before her husband Merv retrained in viticulture and then wine-making at the age of 50. It seemed hard to leave without buying a bottle of the white port (\$30), so we didn't. *u*

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