

SOUTH-WESTERN SLICE OF WA

THE RUGGED, NATURAL BEAUTY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA IS REVEALED DURING THIS TWO-WEEK ROAD TRIP.

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Convergence of the Southern and Indian oceans at Cape Leeuwin.



Statue of a fisherman on Fremantle's waterfront.

LEAVING PERTH AND driving north on the Indian Ocean Drive, the cityscape morphs into market gardens, then limestone-spotted scrub and punk-haired grass trees soundtracked by raucous black cockatoos and clattering windmills.

At Lancelin, 125km north of Perth, it's time for a coffee break and my first glimpse of the Indian Ocean banked by shimmering sand dunes.

It's a haven for off-roading, sandboarding, quad-biking and surfing.

Continuing north to the Lobster Coast, past more mirage-like dunes, I reach my lunch destination, Cervantes.

At the Lobster Shack, it's time to tuck into what they're famous for while overlooking the vista of bobbing trawlers and opalescent ocean.

With a citizen scientist curiosity, I backtrack a couple of kilometres to the shallow, hyper-saline Lake Thetis, home of stromatolites, rare pillow-shaped rock structures formed by bacteria.

They are our earliest fossil evidence and resemble life on Earth 3.5 billion years ago.

After viewing the stromatolites from the lake's boardwalk, I'm onto my next geological discovery 20km south.

Driving the Nambung National Park's 4km loop, I feel I have passed through a time-vent into a Narnia fairy kingdom. Thousands of sky-reaching limestone spires have pierced the ochre sand for the past 30,000 years.

Heading south-east in the late afternoon towards Albany on the rim of the Southern Ocean, the desert wilderness tessellates into the bucolic Swan Valley, Australia's second-oldest wine-growing region.

After overnighing at Henley Brook, I'm back on the Albany Highway.

A stop at Williams Woolshed offers homely sustenance before hitting the road for the last stretch of the day through the sweeping wheatbelt and past the Stirling Range's granite peaks.

In 1914, Albany was the final departure point for the first Anzacs en route to Egypt and Gallipoli. It's deemed the birthplace of the Dawn Service.

The National Anzac Centre contains a deeply moving interactive tribute where you can follow a personal journey from enlistment onwards.

After wandering Albany's streets, I join a tour of the whaling station where a pygmy blue whale skeleton glides eerily beside me and a harpoon gun spearheads the prow of a whale-chaser ship.

Venturing west along the Rainbow Coast, I pull into Denmark.

After a coffee stop at Mrs Jones Cafe, it's a short drive into William Bay National Park to see the photogenic Greens Pool and Elephant Rocks, where whopping 1.5-billion-year-old granite boulders resemble a herd of pachyderms having a sea bath.

Leaving the majestic boulders I'm soon in the Valley of the Giants in Walpole,



Driving through the Pinnacles in the Nambung National Park. Photos Marian McGuinness.

navigating a springy skywalk through the canopy of 400-year-old giant tingle trees.

I later wander the Ancient Empires Walk and tree-hug the gnarly, 450-year-old Grandma Tingle.

With an overnight stop at Pemberton and a romantic tramway ride through the Karri forests over trestle bridges to the Cascades, it's time to continue west where the landscape changes to open fields with cows, vineyards and a meadery.

Ninety minutes later, I'm standing at the most south-westerly point of mainland Australia at the base of Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse.

It earns its landmark stripes as the mainland's tallest lighthouse.

With a fascinating seafaring history, this monumental lighthouse bears witness to the convergence of the mighty Southern and Indian oceans.

With only 50km to Margaret River, my next place of rest, I exit the Busselton Highway north of Augusta onto the scenic Caves Rd, to explore Leeuwin Naturaliste National Park with its stingray bays and limestone caves famous for their megafauna fossil finds.

Margaret River needs no introduction. It's world-acclaimed for its surf breaks and vineyards with more than 100 cellar doors to grace.

It is also an artisan hub brimming with distilleries, providores and chocolate

WHILE ON THE GRUESOME PATH, TAKE A DAY OR NIGHT TOUR OF FREMANTLE PRISON AND DEEP-DIVE INTO ITS PAST...

companies, but I visit the bakery with its retro decor and scrumptious offerings.

Continuing north through towns ending in 'up', which in Noongar dialect means 'place of', I stretch my legs at Busselton; the jetty I'm after extends 1.8km over Geographe Bay. Here I take the solar-powered 'Jetty Train' to the underwater observatory at its end.

En route to Fremantle, my last port of call, I detour to Lake Clifton where my geology pilgrimage continues.

I find the stromatolites' younger cousins, the thrombolites and, as if by magic, tiny strings of oxygen rise in the water. They are breathing.

After finding my digs in Fremantle, I'm off exploring. Fremantle's street names reflect its rich maritime history and there's plenty on show.

Not to miss is the Shipwrecks Museum, which houses the hulking, splintering stern of the *Batavia*, excavated by archaeologists in the 1970s.

She harbours a gruesome story of mutiny and murder after the ship hit a reef off the WA coast in 1629.

While on the gruesome, take a day or night tour of Fremantle Prison and deep-dive into its past, through tunnels, into cells and punishment blocks, for stories of horror, heroism and humour.

From Fremantle, it's 25 minutes on the fast ferry to Rottnest Island with its secluded swimming coves, snorkelling spots and salt lakes. It's teeming with wildlife in the sea and on shore.

Being car-free, it's perfect for walking or cycling.

And of course, the drawcard celebrities, the quokkas, will keep you entertained.

Finishing my triangular loop in Perth, after 12 days and roughly 1,500km, I'm leaving WA enriched and primed to explore more of our largest state's bounty. ■



SCAN FOR MORE WAYS
MEMBERS CAN SAVE
WHEN VISITING WA

The impressive 1.8km Busselton jetty. Photo Tourism WA.

