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MARGARET RIVER: A GOURMET GETAWAY

Ignore the New World-phobes: Australia's south-west is where gourmands go to eat and drink like kings

BY CAROLINE LEWIS 12 FEBRUARY 2015



Picture: the Aravina estate near Dunsborough

It quickly transpires that it's very easy to eat and drink well in Margaret River. A three-hour drive south from [Western Australia](#)'s state capital [Perth](#), this gourmand's



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playground has a climate suited to cultivating vines: thanks to a heaven-sent mix of salty sea breeze and not-too-hot summers, the region's estates regularly produce award-winning wines.

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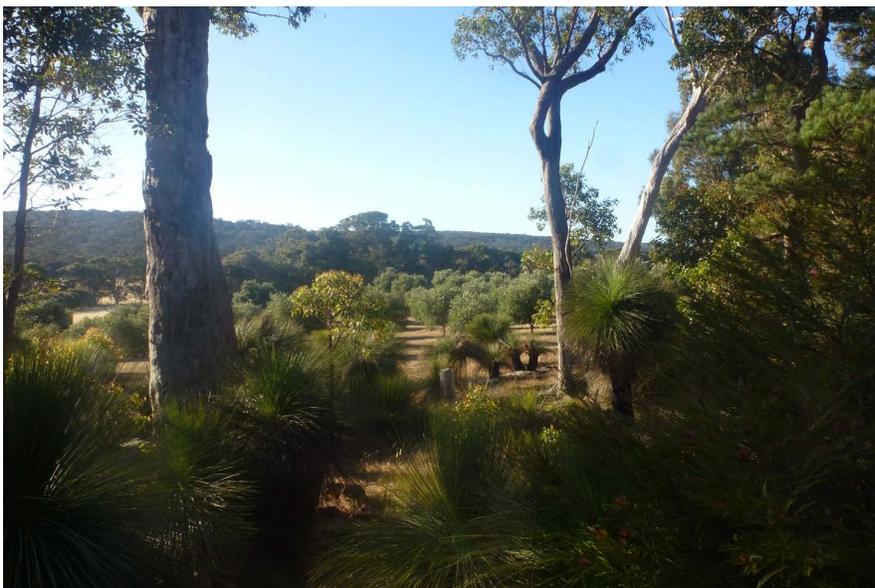
We arrive at Yallingup at dusk and check in at [Empire Spa Retreat](#), a glorious homestead styled to be more private house than hotel. We soon feel fully at ease padding to the outdoor hot tub in our slippers, to watch kangaroos slowly come out from hiding as we sip champagne at sunset. The main house is left unlocked, with muffins laid out to help ourselves to, DVDs to borrow and an enviably stocked larder to peer at but not touch. We can leave that to Cook, who come morning whisks up her spinach, feta and mushroom on toast special, as well as a fresh batch of those muffins and gourmet hampers for those who are wise enough to have pre-ordered one.

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Rooms are spacious, with artfully positioned pieces collected from the owners' travels and more than a sprinkle of Asian influence. From the wrap-around terrace, it's easy to spot for more 'roos in the silent, sun-baked grounds.

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In the morning, we meet Sean Blocksidge, somewhat of a local legend, who has set up his own [tour company](#) to share with visitors his knowledge of an area he loves so much. His 'tour for people who don't do tours' takes in a delicious deli lunch in the barrel room of the lauded Fraser Gallop estate, a bumpy ride down a 4WD track he cut back himself and a taster of the Cape to Cape coastal walk (hiking the full 85-mile trail, from Cape Naturaliste near Dunsborough to the north, to Cape Leeuwin, Australia's most south-westerly point, will take seven days). We stop for a honey-tasting by a stream where we appreciate the aboriginal significance of the area; the indigenous history dates back 30,000 years, compared to the two centuries or so of European settlers, and the sheer magnitude of time is helpfully demonstrated with some coins, each of which representing a mere 100 years.



Picture: the grounds of Empire Spa Retreat in Yallingup, Margaret River, © Caroline Lewis

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Had it not been for Blocksidge's commitment to Margaret River, the majestic Willyabrup cliff-face would be missed by most: thanks to his dedicated path-clearing, we are able to enjoy this bracing sight at the edge of the Indian Ocean (from June to



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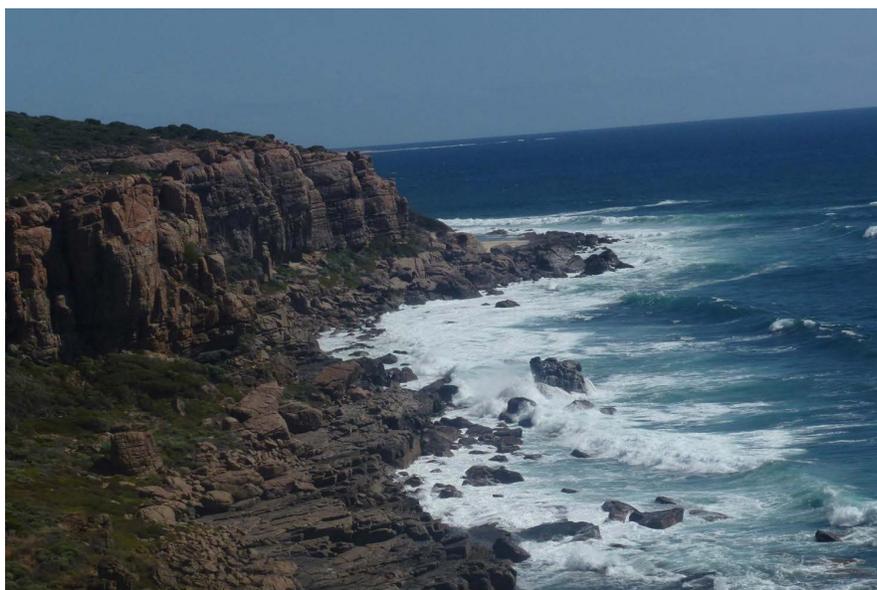
November, it's likely the view will be enhanced by more than a few migrating whales, too). He is also devoted to the region's diverse wildlife, most of which is grateful for his efforts – the same can't be said for the bobtail lizard who pees on his coffee cup after being rescued from the roadside (the discovery of this toilet trip sadly wasn't made until after a rather strange-tasting sip).

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At Watershed, we eat giant asparagus from Esperance, a salad that somehow makes a star out of tomatoes and sublime, sticky tarte tatin. At the Hamptons-style Aravina, chef Tony Howell cooks trout with wasabi purée, scallops with bresaola and two of the most memorable puddings I've ever eaten: creamy coconut sorbet with kiwi and berries, and white-chocolate mousse with honeycomb hunks and cacao 'soil'. After lunch, we wander the owner's impressive car collection, which includes Twiggy's old Lamborghini from the 1960s.

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In Margaret River, you get the best of all worlds: peerless wineries, perfect produce and surfers' paradise, the latter nowhere more so than at Prevelly or Gnabarup, tiny coastal towns regularly frequented by enormous waves. The foodie is king here: Heston Blumenthal and Rick Stein come year after year for the [Gourmet Escape](#) festival each November.



Picture: the Willyabrup cliffs on the Margaret River coast, © Caroline Lewis

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And with foodies come truffles: Europe's esteemed *tartufo nero* is now being farmed here in south-western Australia. For a chance to forage for your own, a [Go in Style](#) tour will deliver you to the Oak Valley estate in Manjimup, which has a similar climate to the truffle-growing regions of France, in one of the company's fleet of Rolls-Royces.

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It's worth making the drive south, down the Caves Road through the lofty silver trees of the Boranup Forest, to see the end of the world, or where the Indian Ocean meets the Southern one, at the Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse. Augusta, the region's most southerly town, may be known as 'god's waiting room', but there's a tranquility that makes it easy to see why people choose to retire here. For the young, Margaret River is a surfer town of ice-cream shops and excellent eateries like [Morries](#) and [Miki's Open Kitchen](#).

Australia's wine industry may be young in comparison to the grand, golden chateaux of Bordeaux – the first vines were only planted on the Vasse Felix estate in 1967 – but what the wineries lack in age, they make up for in ambition. That ocean breeze that nurtures the vineyards contributes to the quality of the incredible wine being made here. Nature is their friend – this is Australia after all.

For more information on Margaret River and the rest of Western Australia, click [here](#). *Qantas flies to Perth from London Heathrow via Dubai (0845 774 7767).*

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