

The good life

Send clients in search of the softer side of Australia to Margaret River, says David Whitley

PICTURE: TOURISM WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Faces in Margaret River have a default setting. There's a little bit of colour from the rarely too ferocious sun, and a little from the wine consumption. The mouth is set to a mellow, slightly smug lazy grin. And the eyes twinkle with contentment.

It's an area that goes heavy on the good life, largely fuelled by wine, but surprisingly diverse in its offerings. This southwestern pocket of the continent is rarely Australia at its most dramatic, but frequently Australia at its most agreeable.

► SELL

From a UK traveller's perspective, Margaret River is a wonderful place to ease themselves into Australia, and that's partly due to its accessibility from the UK. Flight times to Perth aren't quite as daunting as to the rest of the country – around the 20-hour mark rather than 24 hours.

From Perth airport, it's a three-hour drive south to Margaret River, although the most sensible option is to build an itinerary with a city/country split. A few days in and around

Perth, then a few more in the Margaret River region works well. It's also possible to make it a looping road trip around the southwestern corner by adding on the Southern Forests region and the historic city of Albany.

Most who have heard of Margaret River will have read the name on a wine bottle. The region produces around 3% of Australia's wines but a whopping 20% of its premium wines. Put simply, this is where the good stuff comes from – albeit generally cabernet sauvignons,

semillons and sauvignon blancs rather than the roaring full-bodied shirazes with which Australia is often associated.

There's a fair bit of scope for confusion, as Margaret River is both an endearingly compact, buzzy town, and a wider region that spans roughly from Busselton to Augusta. That area packs an awful lot in – with show caves, explorable lighthouses, forest hikes and world-renowned surfing breaks thrown into the mix. For the energetic, there's also the 84-mile-long



→ Cape-to-Cape track that connects the lighthouses at Cape Leeuwin and Cape Naturaliste via wildflower-decorated bushland, photogenic clifftops and cute, deserted beaches.

Distances aren't huge in the Margaret River region, but it's certainly an area where you'll feel the benefit of having your own wheels. Just try to avoid driving at dawn or dusk – that's when kangaroos have a nasty tendency to leap out unexpectedly into the road.

SEE

On the way down to Margaret River, it's worth stopping at the seaside town of Bunbury, which has a handily sheltered harbour that's mighty popular with bottlenose dolphins. They come close to the shore, and the Dolphin Discovery Centre offers \$165 (£77) swim encounters from the beach, with snorkels and masks provided.

The centre also runs \$49 (£23)



Distances aren't huge in the Margaret River region but it's an area where you'll benefit from hiring a car

eco-cruises that head out to favoured dolphin hang-outs to watch them play in the water. dolphindiscovery.com.au

Many of the 180-odd wineries in the region have their own cellar door, and are open to visitors coming in for a sampling session. There are obvious flaws to this if you're self-driving, so it's far better to book on a tour.

Margaret River Tours runs full-day gourmet tours, including lunch at the Voyager Estate, for \$160 (£73). These tours stop off at six wineries on the way, including Vasse Felix, the first



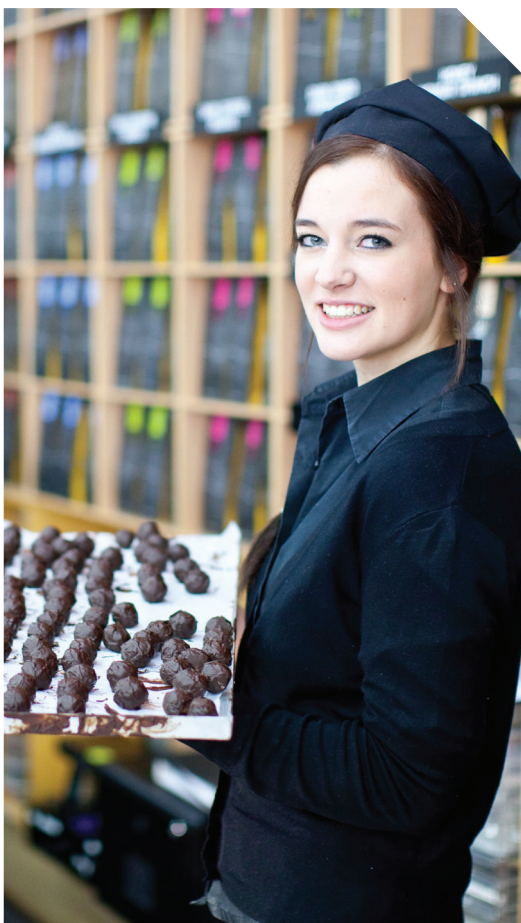
ABOVE: Cape Naturaliste

to plant grapes in the area back in 1967. There are also cheese and chocolate tasting stops on the way, for full-on gluttony. The company can arrange private tours and half-day tours as well. margaretrivertours.com

Taste The South also runs wine tours but, perhaps more interestingly, it has separate \$95 (£44) tours for beer lovers. This may be wine country, but the craft brewers are muscling in, using much the same tactics –

offering samplings and tasting notes at breweries in pretty countryside locations. The route picks out the best of around a dozen breweries, one of which, Bootleg, has a mini-museum covering West Australian brewing history. tastethesouth.com.au

The Margaret River Discovery Co's \$208 (£95) full-day tour also visits a winery – and one that doesn't have a cellar door, so it's a properly authentic lunch →



RIGHT: Margaret River Chocolate Factory

TOP RIGHT: Vasse Felix Winery

BOTTOM RIGHT: Dolphin Discovery Centre

PICTURES: TOURISM WESTERN AUSTRALIA; VASSE FELIX WINES





LEFT: A Margaret River Discovery tour

RIGHT: Cape Lodge

BELOW: Pullman Bunker Bay



→ among the barrels experience. But its focus is on showing off the region's other aspects. This starts off with a canoeing trip down the river, continues with a visit to the feisty surf breaks at the river's mouth, throws in a bit of a four-wheel-drive rough and tumble, then finishes with a walk along a particularly scenic stretch of the Cape-to-Cape Track.

margaretriverdiscovery.com.au

Many of the best wineries are along Caves Road, and there's a clue to the region's other abundant attraction in the name. There are numerous show caves, all with impressive flowstone, stalagmite and stalactite formations. Ngilgi, Mammoth, Jewel and Lake Caves have the wow factor, but if pushed for time, then make sure you visit Jewel. Entry costs \$22.50.

margaretriver.com

STAY

The Pullman Bunker Bay Resort is in the north of the region, with bungalow villas made from local jarrah wood, plus plenty of sunbeds around a rather generous pool.

There's a boardwalk down to the beach and the award-winning on-site Vie spa is a major selling point for those who want a bit of pampering. Studio villas start at £101 a night.

pullmanbunkerbayresort.com

For that proper wine-country feel, Cape Lodge has its own vineyard and is mighty close to many of the big-hitting wineries in the region. The 22-room property has a swimming pool, tennis court and highly regarded restaurant. There's a refined country-house feel to the place – it's a luxurious retreat rather than a hive of action, although you can

sign up for cookery classes while there should you wish. Even the lowest-end, garden-view rooms are a sizeable 38 square metres, and come with appealingly large windows. Bed-and-breakfast stays cost from £185 a night.

capelodge.com.au

A lot of the most attractive accommodation options in the region are out on their own somewhat, making getting around without driving tricky.

And if you are planning on indulging in plenty of wine and beer during the day, there's a lot to be said for basing yourself in the town of Margaret River, where shops and restaurants are within walking distance.

The Darby Park Serviced Apartments are an excellent bet. Private balconies overlooking the forest, free Wi-Fi in a country where that's still not the norm,

fully equipped kitchens and laundry facilities are all major plus points. The look leans towards business functional rather than boutique flair, but its space, facilities and convenience are its calling cards. Studios start at \$185 (£85), and one-bedroom apartments at \$246 (£112).

darbypark.com.au

Alternatively, Austravel packages up a handy six-day, self-drive itinerary that loops around the southwest region from Perth, with stays in Margaret River, Pemberton and Albany. Based on twin-share, three-star accommodation such as the Quality Inn in Margaret River and Ibis Styles in Albany, its Southwest Highlights trip costs from £354 per person. Upgrade to slightly more lavish four-star hotels, and the price is from £575.

austravel.com **TW**

