

Surfers Point is internationally renowned as the main surf break along the south-west coastline

River of dreams

Margaret River's world class food and wine is best served up with some adrenaline-pumping activities, as **Samantha Lewis** discovered, when she explored this idyllic coastal region of Western Australia...



Left: Shutterstock Below: margaretriver.com Others: Tourism WA



These uber-tall karri and marri trees are native to this region of Western Australia



Vasse Felix in Willyabrup was one of the first vineyards to be established in Margaret River

Above Margaret River's wine grapes have Australia's premium wine market cornered

Above right A hidden gem, the clean, clear waters of Hamelin Bay offer safe swimming

Top Some surfing lessons will give you the confidence to tackle those huge waves

Whatever I did in Margaret River filled my stomach with either food or fear. For not only is this celebrated wine producing region also famed for its superb restaurants and gourmet food, but for its adrenaline sports where you can try your hand at every sort of outdoor activity imaginable.

It was my first day in the region and, after a few too many glasses of wine the night before, I'd somehow agreed to abseil for the very first time down a cliff, 30-feet above the ocean.

As waves crashed on the rocks below and, with just a rope round my waist – attached to a man I'd only just met – I felt just a little apprehensive as I teetered on the edge of the rock face at Willyabrup Cliffs.

With one last glance at my instructor Trevor, I stepped backwards over the edge, reminding myself that he'd 20 years experience abseiling. My heart rate soared and my breakfast flipped inside me, but half-way down, the stunning scenery diverted my attention and I forgot my precarious situation. Soon I was bouncing off the cliff face and scrambling back up for another go.

Margaret River is located in the south-western coast of Western Australia, around three hours' drive south of Perth in a somewhat isolated, rural location.

The entire state is famed for its captivating coastline and beaches that stretch as far as the eye can see. Rumour has it that Hawaii imports sand from here and if it's not true, perhaps they should consider it.

GETTING WET

Not only is Margaret River blessed with vast stretches of bone-white sand, but dramatic jagged cliffs bounded by the incredible clear blue seas of the Indian Ocean.

A visit here would not be complete unless you get your feet wet, although it's not for the faint hearted – the water temperature (at around 20 degrees Celsius) can be a little chilly without a wet suit and, in places, the surf can be big.

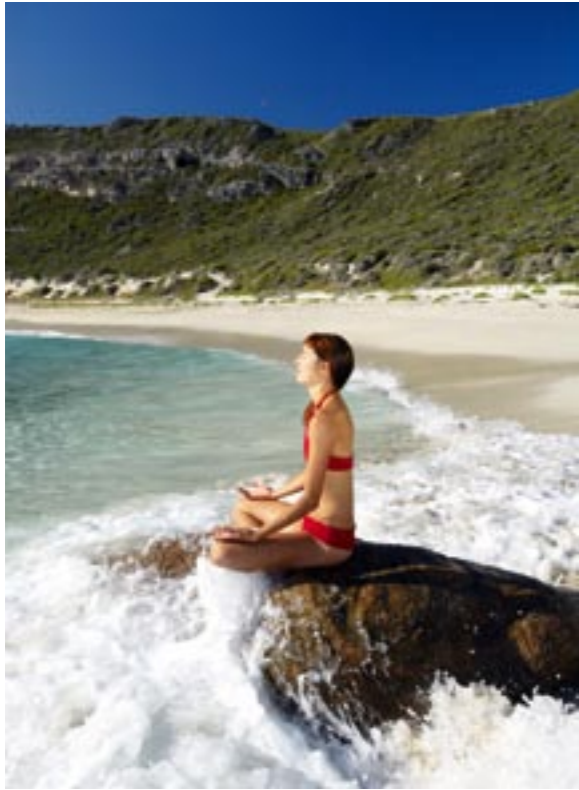
Nonetheless, I had an incentive to take the plunge – a surf lesson with Josh, a rather dishy local surf champion, once placed 45th in the world. Blonde, toned and tanned, Josh is your typical surf dude in looks and temperament. Laid back, extremely friendly,

As waves crashed on the rocks below, I felt apprehensive as I teetered on the edge of the cliffs

but unfortunately for me, in love with only one thing – the next big wave! With my fantasy of an affair cruelly crushed, I was buoyed by his claim that he can teach complete beginners how to catch a wave and stand up in just two hours.

I followed his every order, eating sand and seawater in a desperate attempt to impress and look like a cool surf chick. After two hours – and a few pints of seawater later – perseverance prevailed. I surfed – albeit only for a couple of seconds in a rather frenetic fashion until I wiped out, arms and legs flailing like an overturned beetle.

Over the next couple of days, the adventures continued: I cantered a rather grumpy camel at Yallingup, one of the most picturesque beaches in >>



Western Australia, and canoed down river on a Bushtucker River Tour to get a taste of the traditional Aboriginal way of life. I paddled to eerie underground caves and grottos with gigantic stalactites (there are over 200 underground caves in the region) and I visited a deserted island where I tasted emu, kangaroo, and some of the less appealing dishes such as witchetty grubs, just like *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here*.

WINE COUNTRY

Thankfully, wine helped wash the critters down – and surprisingly, not one bottle I tasted during my entire visit tasted bad.

Indeed, most visitors to the region are amazed by the quality of wine. Although Margaret River contributes only around three per cent of the country's wine grapes, it accounts for more than 20 per cent of the premium wine market in Australia.

Margaret River has around 100 cellar doors to explore with most offering tastings and cellar tours daily from 10–4.30pm. Most estates are within easy driving distance of each other and just a short journey from the beach.

Vasse Felix, situated in Willyabrup, was one of the first vineyards to be established in the region, and was



Above Venture into the underground caves to check out the awesome stalactites

Left Let the crashing waves and stunning beaches lull you into a meditative state

Left Yallingup Beach Caravan Park is one of the best located parks in Western Australia

Margaret River accounts for more than 20 per cent of the premium wine market in Australia

planted in 1967. It came shortly after a Dr John Gladstones identified Margaret River as having an ideal Mediterranean climate and soils for quality winegrowing and his work encouraged a band of pioneers to begin planting vineyards here.

Mild, wet winters and warm, dry summers have indeed proved ideal for the production of grapes and Vasse Felix' vintages can be sampled in a rather atmospheric underground cellar or in the superb restaurant which also serves up an innovative menu, combining local produce with French-style cooking.

Here you can tuck into some of the region's famed local produce, from fresh seafood to delicious cheese, washed down with world-acclaimed wine. While the region's first claim to fame was its powerful, yet >>

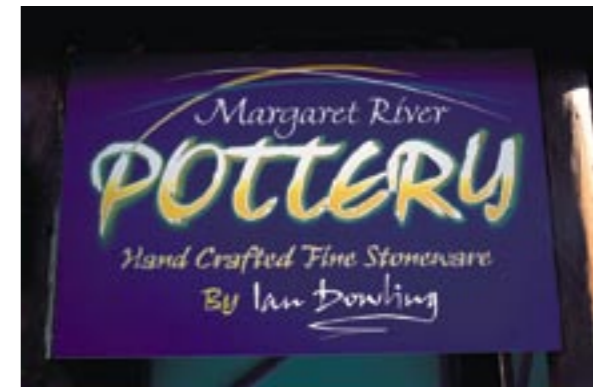
Did you know?

- Western Australia is the size of Europe and around 80 per cent of Western Australia's population live in Perth, just three hours' drive from Margaret River.
- Of the 6,216 residents in Margaret River, around nine per cent of them were born in the UK.
- There remains a significant farming industry around Margaret River and a thriving hospitality and retail sector catering to 1.5 million tourists a year.
- Margaret River has around 120 wine producers. Between them, they crush over 35,000 tonnes of grapes.
- Margaret River is famed for its tasty local produce, most notably olive oil, olives, cheese, chocolate, fudge and ice cream. On the fourth Saturday of every month from September to May, locals and visitors alike gather together at the Margaret River Farmers' Market to taste the region's produce. There's also a food and wine trail to follow.
- Margaret River is in the centre of an internationally recognised 'biodiversity hotspot' (one of only 34 in the world, and the only one in Australia), with nearly 80 per cent of its plant species found nowhere else on the planet.
- Wineries showcase their produce every year at the Margaret River Wine Festival (www.margaretriverfestival.com). The next one is on 16-20 April 2010.
- Boranup Beach, accessed through the beautiful Boranup Forest, reputedly offers the best surf south of Margaret River, as well as pristine, empty beaches.
- Don't miss the Bouzy Champagne Bar at Smiths Beach Resort overlooking sand dunes and clear blue water as far as the eye can see.
- People of all ages, particularly kids, will love the Bushtucker River Tour (www.bushtuckertours.com), from A\$40 (£19). The company also offers superb escorted wine tours.

Left, right & bottom right: margaretriver.com Others: Tourism WA



A biodiversity hotspot, local flora includes this purple star flower



Left You'll find a great selection of world-class pottery in the Margaret River region

Below Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse stands at the point where the Indian and Southern Oceans meet





elegant, Cabernet Sauvignons, nowadays there are many Bordeaux-like blends and the Shiraz has also carved out a name for itself.

Most of the popular vineyards – such as Cullen and Brookland Valley – are those that have a restaurant where you can enjoy a long, leisurely lunch. But Leeuwins, a bright and modern cellar door with a variety of local art on display (much of which is for sale) is a particular treat.

There's a superb restaurant, but best of all there's an amphitheatre, the venue for a number of outdoor performances. So far, it's attracted a host of famous personalities, from Julio Iglesias to Shirley Bassey, with concerts taking place outside in the open air.


WINES OF SUBSTANCE

But don't miss the smaller wineries either. Jane Bailey is a British expat and owner of Woody Nook, a 27-year old boutique winery set against a backdrop of magnificent marri and jarrah trees with an attractively quaint and rustic cellar door and Nookery Café.

It produces just 5,000 cases of hand-crafted wines, including its Cabernet Sauvignon 2004 'Gallagher's Choice' which earned its sixth gold medal at this year's Decanter International Wine Awards in London.

While Jane acknowledges that running a winery is hard work, she wouldn't change her job – or her location – for the world. She says: "I don't know of any other wine-growing region that has more than 200 vineyards, 80 wineries and is close to so many pristine beaches, rolling hill country, amazing forests, spectacular caves and so many excellent galleries, restaurants and cafés."

Jane says she would recommend the region to all ages and tastes. "There is upmarket accommodation and dining establishments, medium-priced attractions to suit most pockets; and more casual locations, where families can relax and keep children amused. But the best way is to see for yourself and pay us a visit."

In my opinion, Jane is right. But the risk is that once you've had a taste of Margaret River, you'll have an appetite for more.  >>

Right Seek out Berry Farm for a delicious selection of wines, jams and preserves

Far left Eroded by the ocean, the incredible Canal Rocks formation in Yallingup

Below Surfers keep an eye on the sea as they prepare themselves for their next big break



Head for the cellar doors of Brookland Valley to taste a full selection of wine




The huge, epic waves at Surfers Point are not for the faint hearted!

Need to know... Margaret River


GETTING THERE

 Multiple airlines fly to Perth from the UK via destinations such as Singapore and Hong Kong. These include Qantas, British Airways, Emirates, Cathay Pacific, Singapore Airlines and Royal Brunei. Flying time is between 18-25 hours.

CARBON BALANCE IT!

 The return flight from London to Perth will generate 6.34 tonnes of carbon emissions. This can be offset with a donation of £95.10. www.carbonbalanced.org


GETTING AROUND

 Hiring a car when you arrive in Perth is the best way to see the region although there are a variety of good tours.




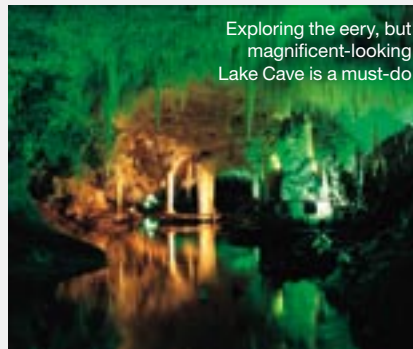
An idyllic sunset stretches over Busselton Jetty

CLIMATE

 Margaret River's climate is similar to the Mediterranean, being strongly maritime-influenced and surrounded by the ocean on three sides. Summer falls between December and February and winter falls between June and August.

MORE INFO

 www.margaretriver.com
 Tourism Western Australia:
www.westernaustralia.com
www.bushtuckertours.com



Exploring the eery, but magnificent-looking Lake Cave is a must-do



Escape to secluded Redgate Beach for panoramic ocean views



globetrotter

SLEEP The centrally-located Inne Town Backpackers (www.mrlodge.com.au) can be found on Bussell Highway. Prices from A\$27 (£13) per person per night. Email: innetown@westnet.com.au. Margaret River Lodge is another option but is 1.5 kilometres out of town

EAT Margies Pizza on Bussell Highway. Prices from around A\$20 (£10) for a traditional, family pizza.

DO Factories such as the renowned Chocolate Factory (www.chocolatefactory.com.au) offer free entrance and tastings. Or try surf lessons (www.mrsurf.com.au) from A\$45 (£22) per person for a group lesson with Josh Palmateer.

family

SLEEP Forte Leeuwin Apartments (www.leeuwinapartments.com.au) offer fully self-contained apartments with pool and tennis courts, just a five-minute stroll to the shops. Prices from A\$195 (£97) for a one-bedroom apartment per night per couple.

EAT The wine bar and bistro, Must, on Bussell Highway. Prices from around A\$70 (£35) per person for a three-course meal including wine.

DO You can get a fantastic adrenaline rush abseiling at Willyabrup Cliffs with Margaret River Climbing Company (www.margaretriverclimbingco.com.au). Prices start from A\$100 (£50) per person for a half day (4-5 hours).

indulgence

SLEEP Cape Lodge (www.capelodge.com.au) on Caves Road in Yallingup is a glorious 22-room boutique hotel only minutes away from pristine beaches and the great wine estates of Mosswood, Vasse Felix, Cullen and Pierro.

EAT Eat at nearby at Flutes on the Vasse Felix wine estate with fabulous views of the vineyard. Prices from A\$100 (£50) per person for a three-course meal with wine.

DO Chelmsford Chauffeur Drive (www.chelmsford.net.au) offers a VIP insiders tour of Margaret River by Bentley or Jaguar. The tour includes wine, chocolate tastings, lunch and a trip to one of the region's best beaches. Prices from A\$795 (£397).