

Western Australia – south-west corner itinerary and Indian Pacific

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COVID lockdowns had seen our first ever trip to Western Australia put on hold in 2021, but we finally made the journey in September 2023. Our 24-day itinerary was designed around three main themes. From my wife came “I’d like to see the wildflowers”. From myself came “I’d like to do the Indian Pacific”. From both of us came “Make sure we spend more than one day in each location that we visit”.

Our first decision was to book the Indian Pacific for the return journey, Perth to Sydney. Our second decision was to gobble up half of our total trip budget by booking the Platinum carriage onboard. We then mapped out the itinerary that follows.

Perth – 3 days

Our accommodation was in west Perth, within walking distance of the beautiful **Kings Park**. We spent our first afternoon there, where you can enjoy a variety of walks through the magnificent **Botanical Gardens** and observe a number of features such as the **State War Memorial**. The Federation Walkway offers great views over the Swan River as you wander by all types of trees and wildflowers.

We kept up our steps on the second day, visiting the nearby **Elizabeth Quay** and surrounding areas. Some of the interesting sights included the impressive **Bell Tower**, **St. Mary’s Cathedral** and **Government House**.

A ferry ride from Elizabeth Quay then took us to the **Perth Zoo** (in South Perth) which was beautifully presented.

Having now satisfied all the requirements for our daily fitness routine, we gave closer attention to the timetable for the **Central Area Transit (CAT) Bus** which provides a free service to get you around to most places of interest within the Perth central business districts.



For our final day in Perth, we joined a tour of the **Perth Mint** which included a demonstration of the pouring of melted gold into a half-million-dollar ingot. We had enjoyed **Kings Park** so much on the previous day that we returned there to join a volunteer guide on an informative walk along lesser-trodden bushland paths. Here we found kangaroo paws, wattle, cowslip and spider orchids, banksias, gums, tuart trees and parrot bush. Quite a delight for any nature lover or anyone simply wanting to escape the rush of the city.

Bunbury – 2 days

It was only a 2-hour drive south to Bunbury in our SIXT rental car and our B&B accommodation was right alongside the **Leschenault Inlet**. Dolphins are regular visitors to this waterway and we later enjoyed the 5km walk around the inlet perimeter which included a picturesque wetland boardwalk.

We were to join a dolphin watching cruise on the next day but this was unfortunately cancelled. Our booking was through the **Dolphin Discovery Centre** and they none-the-less had an interesting **interpretive centre** that was well worth a visit.



Our evening was well spent with last-minute tickets to see the *Pirates of Penzance* at the **Bunbury Entertainment Centre (BREC)**. Their annual program features a number of great shows.

Margaret River – 3 days



We had planned two stops on the way to Margaret River. The first was a 45-minute drive to the **Busselton Jetty** where we boarded the mini-train that takes you straight out 1.8km over the waters of Geographe Bay. This is the longest timber-piled jetty in the Southern Hemisphere. Then there was a guided tour down eight spiralling metres of the underwater observatory, offering unique views of the surrounding marine life.

Back on land, we ventured an extra 40 minutes to the **Cape Naturaliste Lighthouse** where a guided tour to the

top provided great views over the ocean and sightings of numerous whales breaching. Our B&B at Margaret River was then only 50 minutes away, but all of today's climbing up and down stairs encouraged us to interrupt the scenic drive along **Caves Road** with a stop at one of the many wineries to be found along the way. Our selection was the **Swings and Roundabouts** complex.

Margaret River provides many activity choices for visitors and we began our second day with a short drive to the beach at **Surfers Point** and its spectacular coastal outlook. Later, the **Eagles Heritage Raptor Wildlife Centre** featured a release and feeding demonstration of magnificent red kites and other displays of birds of prey. With numerous wineries to choose from, we visited those at **Leeuwin Estate** and **Cape Mentelle**.



Some 50km south of Margaret River was the town of Augusta and the **Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse**. Being the most south-westerly location in Australia, we made this our target for the next day and arrived at the peninsula with the Indian Ocean to the west and the Southern Ocean to the south. Another tour with 176 stairs took us to the top for fantastic views over the merging oceans.

Returning to our B&B along Caves Road, we toured the **Jewel Caves**, the largest show cave in Western Australia. Our legs carried us down 250 stairs to the cave floor 42m below, only to be reminded that we had to climb back up again. The caves however were quite stunning. A stop at the **Redgate** winery on the drive back offered some refreshment relief.

Bridgetown – 2 days

Our next destination of Bridgetown was directly east and inland of Margaret River, but we chose a longer route which initially headed south-east for 90 minutes, following the coast to **Pemberton**. Here, we had booked an excursion on the 2-carriage **Pemberton Tram** that takes you on a pleasant trip into the **Gloucester National Park**, including a brief stop at the **Cascades waterfall**. We then enjoyed a beautiful 50-minute forest drive north to Bridgetown and our B&B which was close by the Blackwood River and not too far from the welcoming **Bridgetown Hotel**.

Huge winds and thunderstorms had been forecast for our second day in Bridgetown, and when they arrived in force our activities were confined to the local **Visitor Centre** and the unique **Brierley Jigsaw Gallery** at the same location. For those with an interest, one Ravensburger Disney image comprised 40,320 pieces – enough to keep any retired, stress-free principal entertained for quite some time. With continuing

miserable weather, we found the **Blackwood Valley Cidery** for lunch and settled for take-away and bubbles for dinner back at the B&B.

Walpole – 2 days

The southerly drive to Walpole took less than 2 hours and returned us to the coast. Having enjoyed terrific hospitality at each of our B&Bs to date, we had chosen to partially rough it with different accommodation in a “glamping tent” at **Coalmine Beach Caravan Park**, adjacent to the inlet. Being steel framed and quite spacious, with an ensuite, the tent was very comfortable. An expansive camp kitchen was also close by.



Our second day in Walpole proved to be one of the most memorable overall. We had booked an “eco-cruise” in a flat-bottomed vessel around the **Nornalup Inlet**, skippered by the amazing and knowledgeable Garry Muir. Certainly a “must-do” experience, as the 30 passengers were thoroughly entertained and well informed, being taken around the local waterways and sand dunes for around two and a half hours.



We later explored the unsealed Hilltop Road that took us to a magnificent lookout and then to the **Giant Tingle Tree** in the **Walpole-Nornalup National Park**. This giant is the largest girthed eucalypt known in the world. Some older photographs of these trees show cars parked in the hollowed cavity at the base of the towering trunk.

Albany – 3 days

Although Albany was only a 90-minute drive away, following the coast to the east, we broke the journey with a detour after just 30 minutes to the impressive **Valley of the Giants**. This featured a 600m elevated steel walkway that took you to a height of 40m above the forest floor. From here, the views were beautiful amongst the Tingle, Karri, Marri and She-Oak trees. For those who preferred the solid forest floor, the **Ancient Empires Walk** was similarly inspiring.

A further 50-minutes on was a lunch stop at **Denmark** and then a similar drive brought us to Albany. We spent the afternoon walking through the commercial streets to the **Anzac Peace Park** on the edge of **Princess Royal Harbour**.

It was from Albany that the ANZAC soldiers departed for Gallipoli and other WW1 campaigns. Our weary legs later welcomed the fact that our apartment was only a few doors from the **Earl of Spencer Hotel** for a great “old British pub” dinner and ale.



The next day saw us drive to **Ellen Cove** at the southern end of **Middleton Beach**. Here, there was a 3km boardwalk and path that ran parallel to Marine Drive back towards the city centre. There are plenty of lookout points along the way with information boards relating to the areas around **Middleton Bay** and the **Ataturk Entrance**. There is also a memorial statue to Mustafa Ataturk himself.

We then drove a short distance to the **National Anzac Centre** where the displays were extraordinary, yet quite moving. Further on was the **Desert Mounted Corps Memorial** on the summit of Mount Clarence and also the **Padre White Lookout** from which the views over King George Sound were sensational.

Our final day in Albany further demonstrated just how much is on offer for the visitor to this city and its surrounds. South of Princess Royal Harbour, we arrived at the peninsula to view the breathtaking rock formations at **The Gap** and the **Natural Bridge**.

On the other side of the peninsula, we then visited the **Historic Whaling Station** in **Discovery Bay**. With more energy in the tank, we finally stopped at the spectacular **Wind Farm** where some 20 wind turbines stood tall over the rugged ocean cliffs.



Hyden – 2 days

When designing our Western Australia itinerary, we engaged in a lot of discussion about what to do after Albany. If we drove directly back to Perth, this would be nearly 5 hours driving or 420km. Many people had highly recommended travelling the extra 500km east to Esperance, and this would then leave an 8-hour return journey from there to Perth of about 700km.

However, the quirky thing that had been in our minds was the alternative of visiting **Hyden** to see the unusual **Wave Rock**. With this planned, we drove north from Albany for a distance of 350km (over 4 hours) past the farmlands, wheat fields and salt lakes to the town of Hyden. We broke the journey with a coffee stop at **Lake Grace**, noting that there were not many other comfortable offerings on the way.



Our accommodation was the motel attached to the Hyden pub and it was then a short 4km drive to explore the awesome Wave Rock. From the car park, a bush walk circuit brings you to this 15m high and 110m long towering wave of granite rock. You can walk along its base as well as climb to its crest. Further along the walk is also the **Hippo's Yawn** rock formation, which is shaped as the name suggests.

The next morning, we did a short walk around Hyden – short, because there wasn't a great deal to see. The highlight was a humorous display of old metal scrap sculptures set along the side of the town's main road. The neighbouring town of Kulin is also well known for its own display of around 100 tin scrap horses along the roadway. We then drove about 18km out of town to the site of two other rocky formations – **The Humps** and **Mulka's Cave**.



Fremantle – 3 days

Our drive from Hyden to **Fremantle** was to be the longest of our trip – about 370km and more than 4 hours, with the one coffee stop at Brookton. After returning our hire car, we were more than ready for a late lunch and refreshment at the **Gage Roads Brewery** at **Victoria Quay**. Later for dinner, we were pleasantly surprised by the great variety of eateries in **South Terrace** – otherwise termed the Cappuccino Strip.

For our next day, we had booked a full day's trip to **Rottne Island**, a 30-minute cruise from Fremantle. We firstly joined a volunteer guide on an informative *Pioneers and Prisoners* walking tour. This gave us a better



understanding of the history of the island. One of the popular attractions on the island – the resident **quokkas** – were quickly spied, even around the busy terminal area in **Thompson Bay**. Tickets for the **Hop-On-Hop-Off Bus** were an essential to then get us around the entire perimeter of the island. Amongst a number of possible stops, we initially jumped off at **Little Salmon Bay** where we joined a second volunteer guide who offered fabulous information about the local plants and birdlife. We also visited **Cathedral Rocks** (seals), **Mabel Cove** and **Geordie Bay**. We walked the final section and were rewarded with beautiful views over the ocean at **Longreach**

Bay and The Basin. We had no problem filling in a full 8-hour day on a visit to this beautiful island.

The next day, we were amongst the first customers at the **Fremantle Markets** in South Terrace. We didn't fill our bags, but chose instead to explore further. We walked through Esplanade Park to **Fishing Boat Harbour** where attractions included the Little Creatures Brewery, water-side sculptures and a number of fish and chips cafes and restaurants. Our circuit walk brought us back to Victoria Quay and there we visited the impressive **Western Australia Maritime Museum**. Being the first day of the school holidays, there was quite a crowd and the museum was also marking the 40-year anniversary of Australia's win in the 1983 America's Cup Yacht race. Their overall displays were excellent.

The Indian Pacific to Sydney – 4 days



The **Indian Pacific** departs from Perth Station, around a 30-minute drive from Fremantle. We departed close to 10.00am on a journey to Sydney that would traverse 4,352km. Our cabin, with a good sized ensuite, was spacious enough and incorporated a day lounge that converted to a comfortable double bed. The Platinum lounge and dining carriage catered for around 30 passengers and the coffee on arrival was soon replaced by enjoyable Bollinger Champagne (available whenever the need arose).

We were soon travelling through the **Avon Valley** and a quality lunch ran into a similar dinner before we found ourselves at **Kalgoorlie** by 9.00pm. Despite the late hour, a tour had been organised off the train to the **Hannan's North Tourist Mine** and the **Super Pit**, an enormous open cut gold mine. More could have been appreciated by the light of the day and it was approaching midnight by the time we returned to the train. The reverse journey from Sydney to Perth might provide a more suitable time for this activity.

Early morning brought views of the amazingly flat and barren **Nullarbor Plain** speeding by our large cabin windows. We were on the longest straight section of railway (478km) in the world. Some will wonder how this often-featureless landscape can hold your attention and interest on such a long journey, but we were enthralled by its unique vista. We passed through **Rawlinna** and **Forrest** before arriving for a stop at **Cook** before midday. This "near ghost town" was established in 1917 to originally support the then new railway. Today, the train refreshed its water supply whilst passengers stretched their legs and sought out a chat with the few locals who remain here to continue offering the vital transport services.

The next day called for an early and light breakfast as we were booked on separate excursions upon arrival in **Adelaide**. For myself it was an excellent tour of the **Adelaide Oval**, which included a climb inside the historic 120-year-old scoreboard, and my wife was off to the enjoyable Adelaide **food markets**. With a

second locomotive added, we departed Adelaide before 11.00am and the subsequent views from the lounge included hundreds of wind turbines, endless wheat crops and a number of pink salt lakes. Visits by a singer/guitarist and an entertaining “drag queen” added to our enjoyment before our arrival in **Broken Hill** in the late afternoon. This was only a service stop and we remained on the train. Underway again, some group conversation focused on the perception that the train was rocking a little more now that we were on NSW tracks, but others reflected on the possible effects of the delightful Bollinger.



On our final day, lots of people were up for an early breakfast as they were due to leave the train at **Mount Victoria** for a **Blue Mountains** tour. They would later be coached onwards to Central. We had chosen to stay on the train all the way to **Central Station** and we arrived there just before midday, with the train having to split into two sections to fit along the platform. We had thoroughly enjoyed this unique train journey onboard the Indian Pacific and it provided a wonderful conclusion to our Western Australia adventure.

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Ken was Principal of Richmond High School (1992-2004) and Macarthur Girls High School (2005-2010). In retirement he enjoys the challenges of golf, the discoveries of travel and the wonders of watching grandchildren growing up.