

## The Travel Bubble: Planning Your Post-Lockdown Escape

Members of the UK have become all too familiar with the concept of bubbles over the course of 2020. Bubbles are, and have always been, forms of escapism: to be living in a social bubble, to be surrounded by like-minded people and to be protected from worry and distress. As well as the newly created literal sense of COVID support and Christmas bubbles, we are floating ideas of hope and optimism at what the New Year may bring. Whilst being told to physically “stay at home” for now, many are left dreaming up the prospect of travelling, working, and studying abroad. A prospect that might seem a while off yet, it is also one providing a light at the end of a very long tunnel.

Planning your post-lockdown retreat is the stretching of your legs after a twenty-four-hour flight, the ping of the ‘fasten seatbelts’ sign switching off, the first hit of heat as you step off the airplane: a tease of the adventure that lies outside. To keep your mind busy and those bubbles of optimism afloat, I have the ultimate road-trip all ready for your release.

In 2018, I was lucky enough to travel to Australia as part of a study abroad program, an opportunity that so many current students have been denied this year, but one that I encourage you to hold out for. Let the disappointment and desperation to travel drive you, because, once you get there, believe me it’s worth it.

After being confined within county borders, how does 12,500km of spectacular coastline sound? Driving for miles without passing another car, wandering along beaches where your footprints are the only to disturb the sand – the freedom and sheer scale of Australia’s West Coast is the total antithesis of lockdown and thus, your perfect playground to explore.

### **The West Coast**

#### ***Getting Around***

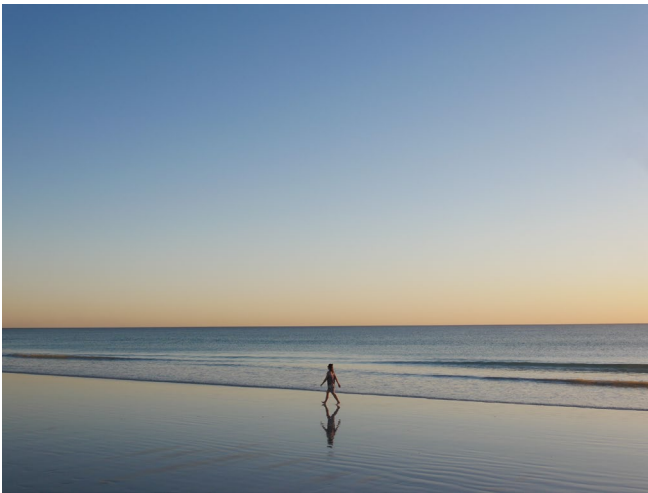
*Hiring a campervan is the obvious and most convenient way to combine your means of transport and accommodation. The cupboards and extra storage that comes with a large vehicle is also extremely useful when having to carry large supplies of food and water.*

*Once in your van you are mostly self-sufficient, but will still need to rely on campsites to park up overnight. There are a number of free campsites along the side of the Great Northern Highway that takes you right down the coast. However, occasionally, it is necessary to pay a fee for a spot at hostels and more established campsites in the towns that can provide charging points for your vehicles power supply, water taps to refill, as well as shower facilities. A great resource to locate these sites is the app, WikiCamps, allowing you to download maps that make directions and stops accessible without any signal – something you will struggle to achieve along this remote route.*

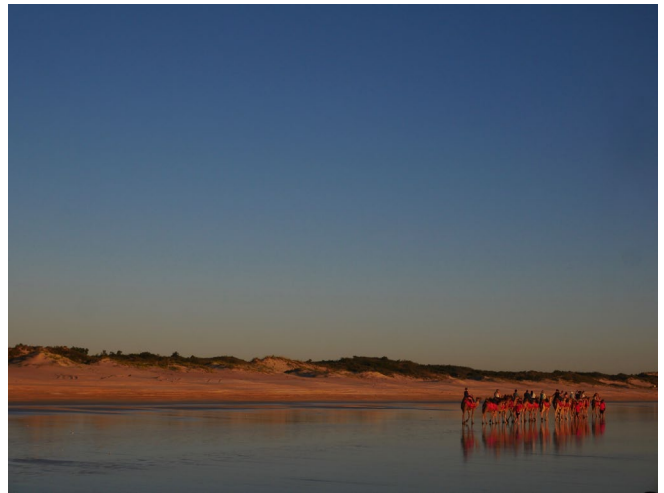
*Alternatively, you can rent a car and pack a tent (although the ground can be pretty hard to pitch into), or stay in hostels whenever you reach civilisation. Guided tours are also run along the coast that will organise this all for you and can be a great alternative for those travelling alone and looking to meet new people.*

Our journey started up in **Broome**: the entry door to the Kimberley area and a town with a rich and colourful history. A camel ride at sunset down the 22km stretch of white sand known as Cable Beach couldn't have been a better introduction to the stunning landscape. Tourists and locals drive down onto the beach itself to keep the sun company with a few tinnies as it slowly sets over the uninterrupted horizon. Each year from March to October, you can also witness the natural phenomenon, the Staircase to the Moon. When a full moon rises over the exposed tidal flats of Roebuck Bay it's reflections create a staircase image over the water.

At the most southern end of Cable Beach, you can find Gantheaume Point and, at low tide, discover dinosaur footprints up to 130 million years old. The red dirt and turquoise waters make for an iconic postcard picture and dolphins and migrating whales can be spotted from the Lighthouse.



*Cable Beach, Broome*



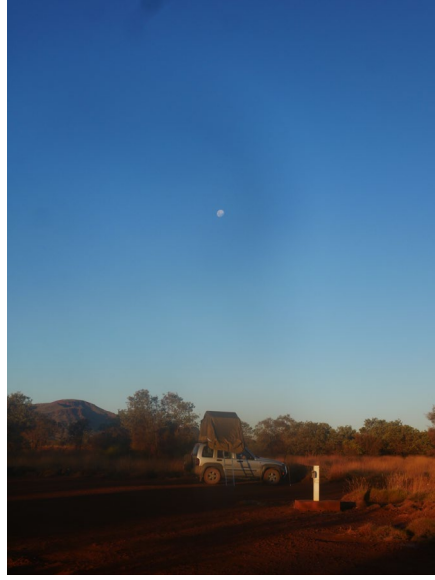
*Cable Beach, Broome*

**Eighty Mile Beach** was our next stopover, ideally located to break up the drive between Broome and Port Hedland. As the name suggests, you can enjoy a magnificent stretch of white sand, popular for fishing and birdwatching, as one of the world's most important feeding grounds for small wading birds that migrate to the area each summer.

**Port Hedland** is an important fuel stop before venturing inland to the beautiful **Karijini National Park**. This area is so rural and remote that you must prepare enough drinking water, food, and petrol for the duration of your stay – the nearest town of Tom Price will be your last opportunity to refuel before entering the park. Located in the Hamersley Range, this is the second largest park in Western Australia, with endless hikes, natural swimming pools and a variety of wildlife to enjoy.



*Hancock Gorge, Karijini*



*Karijini National Park*



*Mount Bruce, Karijini*

The Hancock Gorge, or ‘Spider Walk’, is a unique trail through the canyons, having to climb through the gorge itself, even swimming along through it if you like to reach Kermits Pool. Fortescue Falls is another treat at the end of a short walk and Remote Pool is another 10 minutes further, both offering flat rock for a picnic or the perfect spot for some sunbathing.

A favourite of mine and a must-do for keen hikers is the challenge of climbing Mount Bruce! The second highest mountain in WA is just a few miles from the main road that runs through the park and takes about 5 hours to complete. It is recommended, as we did, to start the hike at sunrise to beat the midday heat and – this goes for your entire stay in the park – WEAR A FLYNET! It will take time to get used to, but, eventually, you will stop seeing the point in shoeing every last fly that settles on you away and they will become your closest travel companions.

Rather reluctantly, we left Karijini (definitely worth making a lengthy stop!) to return to the coast and head to the town of **Exmouth**. A key entry-point to the World Heritage listed Ningaloo Reef, this stop promises the clearest turquoise water and some of the most amazing marine life to rival its infamous sister on the opposite coast, the Great Barrier Reef. If you are a keen diver, this is paradise and offers the chance to dive at one of Australia’s top ten dive sites, the Navy Pier.

Eco safari trips and day charters venture out to encounter dolphins, manta rays, turtles, and, most famously, the largest fish in the ocean: the whale shark. Between mid-March and late July you can get up close and personal with this magnificently gentle creature in one of the best places in the world to sight them. From June to November, humpback whales take their season and then, from November to March

it is turtle nesting time – no matter when you visit, this coast is alive with natural wonders.

**Coral Bay** is another popular destination from which to experience this reef and offers many of the same experiences as Exmouth. Many prefer one over the other, but why not visit both! Coral Bay is a little more quiet and popular with families, with its beach providing the perfect place to relax and hire some snorkels of your own to take out and explore.

**Carnarvon** is another good stop off point to replenish your supplies as we then headed off to the UNESCO World Heritage Area of **Shark Bay**. Where the outback meets the ocean, there are yet more incredible views of red dirt, white sand and the turquoise ocean. A bit of history is also on offer, as Hamelin Pool is home to the most abundant examples of stromatolites ('living fossils') in the world. These apparent rocks are living representatives of life over 3500 million years ago and a 200m boardwalk allows you to observe them up close.

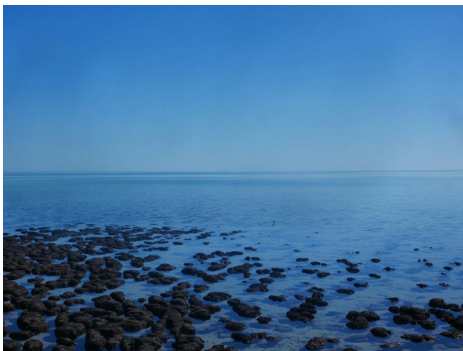
You can also continue down Shark Bay Road/the World Heritage Drive to **Monkey Mia**, where, famously, wild Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins visit the shallows. Along the same stretch, Shell Beach, as implied, is made up entirely of shells and provides super-salty shallow waters to keep you afloat.



*Ningaloo Reef, Exmouth*



*Ningaloo Reef, Exmouth*



*Hamelin Pool, Shark Bay*



*Shell Beach, Shark Bay*



*Eagle Bluff Viewpoint, Shark Bay*



*Nature's Window, Kalbarri*



*Z-Bend Lookout, Kalbarri*

Back on the road again and it is time for our second spectacular park, **Kalbarri National Park**. Over the past 400 million years, the Murchison River has created deep red and white banded gorges through which we can now explore – and which get extremely hot in the summer months, so be sure to carry plenty of water!

The Loop is a popular 8km class 4 hike and its beginning and end is marked by the iconic Nature's Window attraction: a rock formation that perfectly frames a view of the river. The Z-bend Lookout is considered to be the most stunning view in the whole park, overhanging a sharp bend in the Murchison River. For those seeking a greater challenge, there is also a hike down into the gorge from this point to reach the river's edge.

There is no camping inside the park, so you will have to venture out again to the nearby town if you wish to stay overnight!

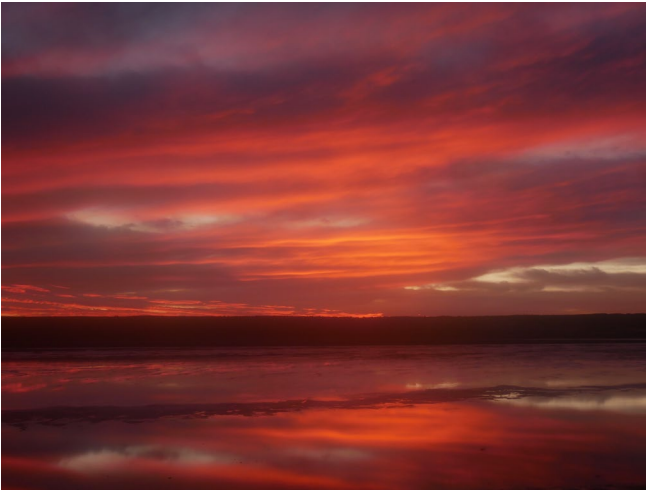
After Kalbarri, you must make a stop off at **Port Gregory** to check out the bubblegum pink water of the Hutt Lagoon. It's extremely high levels of salinity gives the lagoon it's pink, lilac, and occasionally red hues that change in vibrancy with the seasons and time of day. The best times to view this phenomenon is on a clear day at either sunrise or sunset.

From there, the cute little town of **Geraldton** is supposed to be a nice stop, which sadly we had to miss out. There are some quirky cafes, great street art and some historical sites and museums to visit. Slightly inland, Ellendale Pool offers the amazing chance to camp and picnic under shady gum trees and swim in the freshwater pool beneath red cliffs.

We headed straight for **Jurien Bay**, where it is not uncommon to spot endangered Australian Sea Lions lying out in the sun on the beaches. Sandy Cape, just north of the bay, also provides great sandboarding opportunities. We opted to relax and read

on the beach for a pit-stop before entering **Nambung National Park**, renowned for its Pinnacles.

One of Western Australia's most unique natural attractions, thousands of limestone pillars rise from the yellow sands like something from Mars. You can get up close on a scenic drive or via a walking trail that includes an epic lookout. It is believed that the Pinnacles are millions of years old, created when seashells were broken down into sand and then eroded by water and wind.



*Hutt Lagoon, Port Gregory*



*Pinnacles, Nambung National Park*

Finally, **Perth**: the thriving metropolis of the West Coast. As the most isolated city of its size on Earth, it offers a rare blend of urban, cultural spaces with raw natural coastline and rural landscape not far away. There are plenty of parks, museums, the famous Cottesloe Beach, heritage buildings, and Aboriginal tours to entertain your days and learn about this great city.

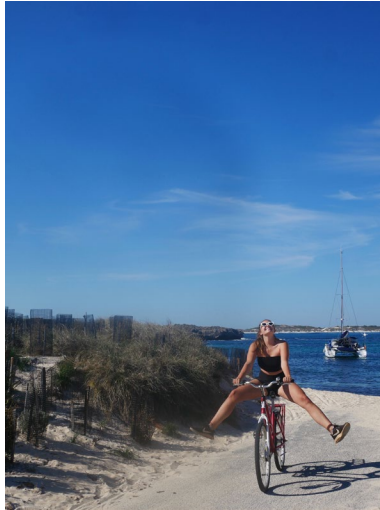
Just a ferry ride away is Rottnest Island, home to the happiest little animal in the world: the quokka. It is practically mandatory that you get a quokka selfie, although they will undoubtedly come out more photogenic than you every time! You can experience this habitat by foot, bus, or, best of all, by bike. The island is a car-free zone and so cycling around its perimeter is the most popular mode of transport and hire can be attached to your ferry ticket. Snorkel gear is another addition that is worth considering, with sixty-three beaches providing an inviting chance to cool off from all your pedalling action.

Freemantle is a trendy port, with its Freemantle Markets taking place Friday to Sunday, offering Aboriginal artwork and local produce, as well as plenty of street food. A pub crawl is a must, visiting craft brewers including The Monk Brewery and Kitchen and, a favourite of mine, Little Creatures Brewery, where you can sample a tasting board of their favourites.

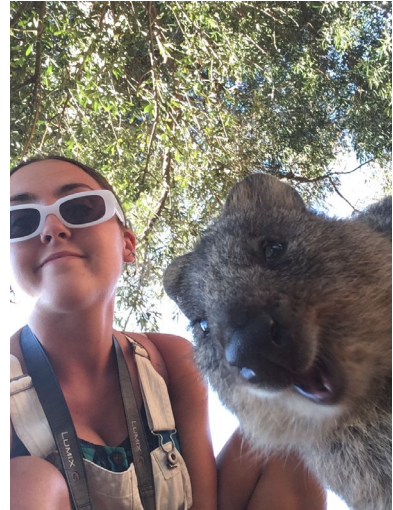
If tastings are your thing, then a whole day can be dedicated to the Swan Valley wine region. You can book a tour, or a hop-on-hop-off bus pass can take you around the wineries, many of them are even walking distance apart. Be sure to ask if any do some free samples, otherwise a few Aussie dollars will get you a guided journey from your white grapes all the way to fortified wines.



*Swan Valley, Perth*



*Rottnest Island, Perth*



*Rottnest Island, Perth*



*Fremantle, Perth*



*Fremantle, Perth*

We are forever blowing bubbles this past year and prospective travel is one that cannot burst: it is going to happen...it is just a matter of when! The brilliant part about making your own adventure is it is all up to you – the where, the how, the what, and why. You can challenge yourself on a hike, relax on beaches, or meet new creatures that you can't find anywhere else.

As soon as we *are* told when, just go for it! But, in the meantime, planning trips like this can help to keep us afloat.