

Into the Blue

From enchanting estuaries to pristine coastal waters, Perth in Western Australia is defined by bodies of water – each brimming with tales of its storied past and offering thrill seekers and nature lovers a gateway to aquatic adventures.

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Over 200 wild bottlenose dolphins inhabit the waters of Rockingham, a picturesque seaside town 45 minutes from Perth City.

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White, wispy clouds dot Western Australia's bright blue skies, floating across a sun that is anything but forgiving. But the charming port city of Fremantle – dotted with Victorian-era buildings and artsy cafés – welcomes the cool, briny breeze of the Indian Ocean.

The sea breeze may have tousled my tresses but I couldn't care less. From Fremantle's fishing boat harbour – just 20km from the capital city of Perth – the scenery is worth every knot. Wild dolphins flip playfully in the water, and seagulls skim the waves of the shimmering sea, their squawks echoing the occasional honk of small fishing trawlers.

Just down the road from the harbour lies a site of great spiritual significance to the Noongar Whadjuk people – the traditional owners of the Perth region – which includes Fremantle, or Walyalup as

it has been called for over 45,000 years. It is here that the Noongar dreamtime reveals how Wagyl, the Rainbow Serpent, fought Yondock, the ancestral saltwater crocodile, preventing it from entering the Swan River – marking the separation of saltwater and freshwater sources.

Wagyl is more than just the spirit who saved the Swan River; to the Noongar of South West Western Australia, the serpent is believed to have slithered its way around the flat land, crafting hills and gullies and creating lakes, swamps and rivers. Today, these water sources, as well as Perth's many beaches still hold as much significance as they do the promise of adventure in Australia's largest state.

Tunnel Vision "You good to go?" my guide asks as she tightens the strap of my helmet and safety harness. I'm a bit hesitant to answer. I am, after all, heading

deep down into the tunnels of the Fremantle Prison – one of Perth's most iconic landmarks, and certainly its eeriest.

Sitting on a former limestone hill, the prison – the state's sole UNESCO-listed heritage building – was built in the 1850s by convicts who were shipped to Fremantle from the overcrowded jails of Britain. Since its closure in 1991, the prison, notorious for its harsh treatment of inmates, has been open to the public who are welcome to explore its grounds and learn its history. Interestingly, beneath the gaol lies a water source that once saved this new port city.

I'm sweating bullets – not from the physical effort of climbing down – but from the sheer horror of looking 20 feet down with nothing below me, except for a trail of cascading ladders. The trench gets darker and slightly chillier as I inch closer to the ground where my guide is waiting





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1. Exploring the waters of Pinky Beach on Rottnest Island is incredibly easy and fun using the SEABOB – an electric scooter that can go down to depths of 40 metres or cruise above water. 2. When on board Mandurah Cruises, expect a feast of the freshest locally sourced crayfish, prawns, salmon, octopus and fish. 3. A large pelican sits on a jetty at Rottnest Island. The island's large and diverse ecosystems are home to myriad species of birds, reptiles and marine life. 4. Kayaking along the Swan River in Perth is one of the most memorable ways to take in the beauty of the city.

with a punt that bobs gently. The silence here is so deafening, I can hear the thumping of my heart as I switch on my headlamp and steer through the narrow labyrinth of limestone tunnels.

"The prisoners had to dig the tunnel by hand" my guide informs me. The Western Australian gold rush of the 1880s brought with it an influx of new settlers, many of whom entered the colony via the port of Fremantle. With the increase in population came an urgent need for clean, drinkable water. Since the prison sat on a natural limestone aquifer, it was the one place that could supply freshwater to the rest of Fremantle town.

"The back breaking work of digging the kilometre long tunnel took more than six years. They had to do it with their heavy chains still attached! Some prisoners never saw daylight," my guide adds. As we snake through the maze of darkness, it makes me wonder – how many stories will I find submerged in Perth's waters?

City of Swans As sunrise bathes Perth in hues of amber, the banks

of the Swan River are abuzz with activity. Joggers zoom past parents pushing strollers, teens race on their bicycles and serious rowers glide along the river with graceful strokes. I decide to join the Perthians by making a date with Leonie Cockman – a local kayaking and canoeing guru who runs Water Wanderers, an outfit that offers a refreshing view of Perth, from the water.

I'm a little nervous around water, but Cockman teaches me the basics and assures me that there are no crocs in the Swan River! It's a bit of a challenge to manoeuvre at first but within minutes, it becomes almost effortless. Cockman leads the way in a separate vessel, but I take my time, rowing along the river and observing the beauty of Perth. Gleaming skyscrapers rise over heritage buildings while lush greenery – from weeping willows and peppermint groves to gum trees – line its vast, manicured lawns.

Of course, this wasn't the sight of the Swan River Captain James Stirling came across 200 years ago. Back then, the Derbarl Yerrigan as it is known to the Noongar, boasted



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1. An expert instructor from Jetpack Perth shows off sleek moves on the Hoverboard on Rockingham beach. The clean and clear waters here make it an ideal spot for a variety of watersports including paddle boarding and jet skiing. 2. Fremantle is full of trendy eateries and bars that offer a variety of fresh seafood. *Boquerones & pepperonata pinxtos* – vinegar-cured white anchovies with sweet peppers from Strange Company is a seasonal must-have. 3. The guides at Fremantle Prison take visitors on a mind-blowing journey through the limestone tunnels of the jail, dug by prisoners 4. The boardwalk in the historic precinct of Fremantle is a popular spot for people looking to savour fresh seafood with spectacular views of the harbour.



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thriving freshwater sources with wetlands abundant with native shrubs and ferns. This may not have pleased the European eye, but for Stirling, it was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen.

Stirling convinced the British government to establish the land as the first free settlement in Australia, prompting the 'Swan River Mania' that led many British families to migrate with the promise of fertile, abundant land.

Reel Community One of the wealthy Britons who bought into Stirling's dream was Thomas Peel – often credited as the person who pioneered European settlement and developed land in Mandurah, now one of Perth's most popular cities for anything water-related.

Sitting 72 km south of Perth, it is home to one of Australia's largest estuary systems – the Peel Harvey Estuary. Abundant with crayfish, crabs and fishes, the area is also home to 130 species of birds. The best way to appreciate this natural richness is to hop on board Mandurah Cruises. The award-winning cruise has quite a

few tours to choose from, but as a self-professed glutton, I naturally opt for the Wild Seafood Adventure tour – a three hour cruise on board an ultra-luxe boat, equipped with a barbeque grill, a large dining space and a snug sundeck to enjoy stunning vistas of Mandurah's pristine waters.

We kick-off the journey with a little detour to the Indian Ocean, where I try my hand at catching lunch – Western Rock Lobster – a crimson coloured crustacean, native to Western Australian waters. After successfully failing at landing the bait in the right area, the skipper offers a little help by reeling in the catch. "If it's not fully grown, we throw it back into the ocean," the skipper explains as he pulls out a special gauge to measure the crayfish. "That's how we keep it sustainable," he says, revealing the key to Mandurah's century-old fishing industry.

For the rest of the afternoon, I cruise down the estuary, admiring the dream homes that line Mandurah's tranquil waters, and spotting schools of wild dolphins, and large pelican ospreys. Later,

Making a Splash

Perth offers lots to do in and on the water!

Enjoy the picturesque Swan River in Perth City with the Little Ferry Company (littleferryco.com.au). This electric ferry takes passengers on a round trip from Elizabeth Quay to Claisebrook Cove. To understand the significance of the Swan River to the Aboriginal people, join an enlightening tour by Walter and Meg McGuire of Go Cultural (gocultural.com.au) and wrap up your evening with a dinner cruise on board Captain Cook Cruises (captaincookcruises.com.au) or take in the tranquil beauty of Mandurah while having a scrumptious BBQ on the donut-shaped Eco BBQ Boat (ecobbqboats.com). Thrill seekers will love paddle boarding with Rockingham local Stand Up Paddle guru Rick Maxwell at WASUP (wasup.net.au), and James Bond-inspired stunts – from jetpacking to flyboarding – with expert instructors at Jetpack Perth (jetpackperth.com.au), as well as Rottnest Island's latest offering – riding the exhilarating Seabob – an electric scooter for exploration both above and underwater (rotnestisland.com). To get to Rottnest Island, hop on the Rottnest Express (rotnestexpress.com.au) a clean, comfortable ferry that departs from B Shed Victoria Quay, and Northport Rous Head Harbour, North Fremantle.

I sink my teeth into the freshest catch of the day prepared by the chef on board – from fillets of barramundi, to sweet blue swimmer crabs, slivers of buttery salmon sashimi, marinated octopus, seafood skewers and of course, the perfectly grilled crayfish from my morning catch.

Rolling in the Deep Less than half an hour away from Mandurah is the quaint seaside town of Rockingham, an old favourite R&R spot amongst locals. These days, its immaculate waters also attract a different kind of crowd. "The fact that we have so many wild dolphins here is an indication of just how healthy the water and ecosystems are," a crew from Rockingham Wild Encounters says of the 200 dolphins that inhabit Rockingham's waters. I am on board one of Western Australia's most outstanding eco-

tours – a brainchild of local lad Terry Howson.

For years, Howson studied and interacted with bottlenose dolphins before opening his own tour company – a dream he had harboured ever since falling in love with one of the world's most social and intelligent creatures. Today, through Rockingham Wild Encounters, he shares the joy of swimming with dolphins in their natural habitat.

"Okay guys, it's time to get into the water!" yells a crew-member. We are in the deep waters off the coast of Rockingham and a mix of nervousness and anticipation suddenly engulfs me. After a safety briefing and donning my wetsuit and snorkels, a leader guides my group off the boat into the chilly waters. Within minutes, my nervousness evolves into sheer excitement; a pod of dolphins

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Fisherman Damien Bell goes crab scooping – a popular local pastime – in the shallow waters of the Peel Inlet. Sustainability is extremely important for fishermen like Bell, who want to keep Mandurah’s waters rich with aquatic life for future generations.

GRAM IT TO WIN IT!



Upload your best beach snaps on Instagram and win an all-inclusive trip for two to Perth, Western Australia! The prize includes return flights to Perth from Kuala Lumpur or Bali on board AirAsia X; airport transfers; a 4D/3N stay at the chic QT Perth; a Fremantle Prison Tunnel Tour; day trip to Rottnest Island for an afternoon of aquatic adventures; and a day of swimming with dolphins with Rockingham Wild Encounters.

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swirls and twirls in the water just beneath us, as if showing off their underwater acrobatic skills! Baby dolphins swim in synchronised movements next to their mums – at times, coming almost face to face with us. We spend a few hours in and out of the water, watching these enigmatic creatures in their most natural state – hunting, mating and even sleeping!

As we head back to the shore, an unmistakable sense of euphoria is felt on board – this is a feeling everyone on the boat will remember for a lifetime. And just like Perth’s other thrilling aquatic offerings, the experience is nothing short of magical. 🌊

A BIG THANK YOU travel360’s trip to Perth was made possible courtesy of Destination Perth.



GETTING THERE

AirAsia flies to Perth from Bali and Kuala Lumpur. airasia.com