



An Outback Adventure

Text and photos by Dr Tina Tan

Getting to and around

Our drive from Perth to Margaret River was supposed to be an “easy drive” that would take roughly three hours, according to the lady at the car rental place. Nevertheless, I was feeling rather nervous because our original designated driver (hubby) had forgotten his driver’s license (*oh, of all the things to leave behind...*) and I would be at the wheel instead for the next four days.

Australia has strict driving rules. Our friend in Perth admonished us to always stay within the speed limit, ensure the kids were buckled into their car seats at all times, and signal whenever we were supposed to; or risk hefty fines amounting to hundreds, if not thousands. Case in point, as my parents drove from Margaret River to Perth in a separate rented sedan, a police car pulled them over for “not signalling while changing lanes and turning”. Fortunately, they played the tourist card and were let off with a warning.

Okay, admit it; when was the last time you diligently signalled every time you were supposed to in Singapore? I’m not saying I don’t, but still...

We arrived after a four-hour drive, with a break for ice-cream in-between. The drive was uneventful, except for the one kangaroo I saw bounding across the highway and a kangaroo roadkill I spotted along the way. It’s no wonder that some

of the larger vehicles in the Australian outback are equipped with monstrous-looking “roo bars”, meant to minimise impact and damage in the event of accidents involving kangaroos.

Sights to breathe in

The place we checked into was a large Airbnb beach house situated in the neighbourhood called Gnarabup (*try pronouncing that*), and it overlooked the Indian Ocean. The first night was cool with a clear sky, giving us a spectacular view of the Milky Way – something that we hardly get to experience under Singapore’s urban night sky. Call me a *mountain tortoise*, but I had not seen so many stars blanketing the sky above me before. And the oceanic weather – which involved sudden rain showers, sea-salt breezes and temperatures below ten degrees Celsius – was a welcome change from home.

The climate at Margaret River is very similar to that of California’s Sonoma and Napa Valleys, and the area is well known for its wineries as well. We visited a handful of them, ranging from the vineyards of the famous Vasse Felix, to the understated Ashbrook Estate which, as we discovered, supplies a lot of wine to NTUC FairPrice! Wine aside, the Margaret River region is also home to several well-known

breweries, such as Bootleg Brewery. In the latter, you can drink beer by the lake and listen to music from the 1960s and 70s, while your kids run amok in the sheltered playground or out in the open grass. Alas, as the designated driver, I satisfied my taste buds with coffee, juice and yes, water.

For the more inquisitive visitors, the area also boasts several underground caves. We visited the Jewel Cave, Western Australia’s largest show cave, which included a one-hour tour to see spectacular stalagmites and stalactites, a 400-year-old possum skeleton and a 500-step climb. It was no easy feat with young kids, but they too enjoyed the underground journey. Of course, having had a couple of giant outback-sized cookies at the visitor centre’s cafe before the tour probably helped fuel them with some sugary enthusiasm.

Speaking of kids – mine loved the beaches. A visit to Margaret River would be incomplete without a seaside





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Tina went for a vacation to Perth and dropped by the seaside at Margaret River. While Perth was remarkably similar to the suburbs of California (flat, desert-like in heat and dryness, with tons of strip malls), Margaret River was a relaxing treasure trove of holiday activities, provided you could drive around. She was surprised by the number of Singaporeans she met there, but on hindsight, where else would you go if it were the school holidays and you wanted a destination that was kid-friendly, with a short flight time, and that was “not Asia”?



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Legend

1. Welcome sign of Bootleg Brewery
2. Frolicking at the beach
3. Barbeque by the sea, lamb chops on the grill, beer on standby
4. Tiny unripe grapes at the Ashbrook Estate winery
5. Panoramic photo of the view from our rental home on a sunny morning

escapade – it’s a must-do for those travelling with their families. For two consecutive evenings, the kids had the chance to sink their feet in the wet sand, run screaming from the cold incoming tide and watch windsurfers battle the monstrous waves beyond the beaches. Hubby even had his chance to walk into the Margaret River, whose mouth we encountered on our second beach excursion. It was certainly a different experience from the tropical beaches of Singapore.

And as with any trip that involves staying in a large house with a barbeque pit, we made sure to have just that – barbeques. We didn’t even need charcoal because the pit was fired by

an electric grill. Several trips to the local grocery store allowed us to stock up on the essentials: various types of meat, wine, beer, and the customary rice and vegetables (for the kids, of course). There’s something to be said about having a barbeque by the cool seaside, watching the sun set over the ocean, with a beer in one hand and a lamb chop in the other, without sweating from heat and humidity, and doing this some place other than East Coast Park.

One of the last places we visited was the Margaret River Chocolate Factory – a place choked full of Southeast Asian tourists, including Singaporeans like us. *Guess they all used TripAdvisor too.* The highlight of the Chocolate Factory

was not its huge retail shop or cafeteria, but the window that allows visitors to view the goings-on of the chocolate-making process. We stared wide-eyed at the huge vats of warm chocolate being stirred and blended, and the vast amounts of butter being used. Naturally, we tried their hot chocolate (*too milky*), chocolate ice-cream (*too sweet*) and bought some chocolates (*overpriced*). That being said, it was the grandparents who did the purchasing to indulge the grandkids.

Bits of advice

Before we left, someone asked me what there was to do in Margaret River. Apparently, a lot of options are available! Be sure to bring sunscreen for the beach, a warm jacket for those cold nights, and an empty stomach so that you can barbeque to your heart’s content. But don’t bring your driver’s licence. Unless, of course, you’re the designated driver. ♦