





Where red meets blue

Located between Perth and Exmouth, Shark Bay is the perfect starting point to a truly Western Australian adventure close to nature – with astonishing conservation projects on the side.

Words by Nane Steinhoff
Photographs by Tourism Western
Australia & Tourism Australia

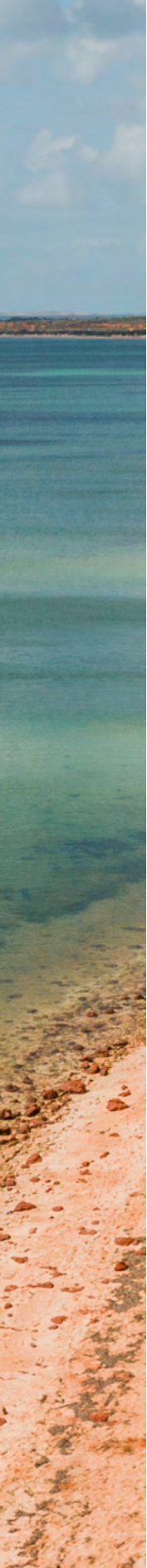
“We say ‘looks good – feels better,’” explains Darren ‘Capes’ Capewell, my guide for this leg of my Western Australia trip. He urges me to really listen inwards as I take in the natural beauty of my surroundings. I stand on a small hill in the middle of Shark Bay / Gathaagudu-Gutharraguda, overlooking the steep, rust-red cliffs that are so often associated with Western Australia and try to follow his advice. I dip my toes into the warm, soft sand, listen to the waves, and admire this special place with all of my senses. The steep red cliffs form the perfect contrast to the turquoise ocean that glistens in the sun, while a spotted eagle ray graciously flaps its wings in the shallows in search of its next meal. It’s easy to see the region’s beauty as soon as you land, but the more time I spend in Shark Bay, the more I begin to truly feel what Capes, the founder and owner of Wula Gura Nyinda, an ecotourism company offering sustainable tours that explore the ancient cultural ties of the region’s first people, the Nhandu and Malgana Aboriginal people, is talking about. “We have the energy from the desert and the ocean, and we want our guests to feel the energy of Gutharraguda, or the place of two waters, our Aboriginal name for the Shark Bay area,” he explains.

Shark Bay World Heritage Area, located around 800km north of Perth, sports a coastline that stretches for 1,500km, and covers an area of 2.2 million hectares of outstanding natural beauty on the edge of the Australian continent. With its diverse landscapes, and rare flora and fauna, the region became Western Australia’s first World Heritage-listed area in 1991. It is one of three World Heritage Areas within Western Australia, and one of 20 Australia-wide. The area is known for its exceptional natural beauty, including a beach that is made up of trillions of tiny shells from the *Fragum* cockle. Here, the water’s hypersalinity led to the dominance of the species so that shell deposits measure up to 10 metres deep along this 60-kilometre-long beach. After I get off the small passenger plane and show my passport at the open-air airport desk that only has one employee working there at the time, my Western Australia adventure sets the right tone straight away. As I drive the rental car off the airport premises, two large emus

| PREVIOUS: Dirk Hartog Island, near Denham.

| RIGHT: Wula Gura Nyinda Eco Adventures in the Shark Bay World Heritage Area.

“The region became Western Australia’s first World Heritage-listed area in 1991.”





“I set up Wula Gura Nyinda as a way to protect our cultural assets and to educate our clients about our local Aboriginal culture and history.”

run across the road, curiously tilting their long necks to get a better glimpse of me. The straight, long road to my hotel, the Heritage Resort Shark Bay, crosses untouched outback and I can't wait to explore the region and its many natural wonders, including migrating whales, a resident population of 10,000 dugongs, and the world's largest plant for which Shark Bay was recently in international news.

After genetically testing an underwater seagrass meadow, a group of scientists from the University of Western Australia determined that the patch of seagrass is in fact one single plant, covering around 180 square kilometres. Jane Edgeloe, lead author of the related study, published in the journal *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, explains: “The answer blew us away – there was just one! That's it, just one plant has expanded over 180km in Shark Bay, making it the largest known plant on Earth.” As the species *Posidonia australis*, or ribbon weed, only grows around 35cm annually, the researchers estimate that the plant spread from one tiny seed over 4,500 years ago. “Shark Bay is a pretty unique environment which is largely undisturbed and has remained that way for some time, leading to its listing as a World Heritage Site. It is largely protected from the ocean which provides a fairly calm environment for the plant to keep growing. This could help explain why the clone is so big,” says Dr Elizabeth Sinclair, co-author of the study.

Intrigued by this exciting discovery, Capes and I travel to Francois Peron National Park. When we enter the park, I first notice the vastness of the surrounding landscape. Acacia-cloaked, rust-red sand covers the land as far as the eye can see. As the roads here are unsealed, we have to drive a four-wheel drive and upon entering the park, have to deflate the vehicle's tyres to prepare them for driving on the soft sand. Threatened species such as the bilby, woma python, thick-billed grass-wren and malleefowl can be found here, as well as the thorny devil, bearded dragon and many more species. In the sea, Capes explains, bottlenose dolphins, green and loggerhead turtles, manta rays, dugongs and sharks are frequent visitors and can be best seen from Cape Peron and Skipjack Point. Our journey continues until we reach Cape Peron where red cliffs meet white sand beaches and turquoise waters – the perfect place to learn more from Capes and his approach to tourism: “I set up Wula Gura Nyinda as a way to protect our cultural assets and to educate our clients about our local Aboriginal culture and history. Like all of our Aboriginal tour operators, our job is not tourism but to look after



| TOP: A thorny devil in Francois Peron National Park.

| BOTTOM: A humpback whale in the Shark Bay World Heritage Area.

country,” he explains. “We believe that everyone has connection to nature. We encourage our guests to not fold their arms but to keep themselves open to receive the ‘spirit of nature.’ We use our local cultural knowledge to teach our guests to use their senses to look, listen, smell, touch and taste and learn how nature talks to us.”

When standing at Cape Peron, you quickly feel the essence of what he means. Nature here imbues all your senses – but this hasn’t always been the case. Since French explorers Nicholas Naudin and François Péron visited Shark Bay in 1801, habitat was destroyed as goats, sheep, cattle, rabbits, foxes and feral cats were introduced. Before 1801, 23 mammal species lived in the region. In 1990, due to habitat destruction and competition for food, less than half of them remained. To combat this, the Project Eden conservation project was launched to reverse the ecological destruction. Over 15,000 sheep and cattle and around 12,500 goats were removed, while a constructed fence in combination with a poison baiting programme managed to reduce fox and feral cat numbers on the Peron Peninsula. Captive breeding pens were also established to reintroduce native animals to the peninsula. Albeit only partly successful – only the bilby and malleefowl established viable populations – Project Eden led to the widespread recovery of vegetation and habitat. “My biggest concern now is the impact on the environment from humans, such as four-wheel drives driving across fragile dunes or cultural sites and across nesting areas for our migrating seabirds. Boats and other water vessels can also have an impact on our seagrass meadows and marine life. We continuously try to educate people and work with other key stakeholders in the region to protect country,” adds Capes.

Another site of an impressive restoration project to protect country can be found on Dirk Hartog Island, or Wirruwana as it is known to the Malgana traditional owners, just off the coast of Shark Bay. From Denham, the ferry takes me to the island in just over an hour and I am greeted by rugged terrain and a few friendly faces of the family that has lived and worked here for over 50 years. Today, they run the Island Lodge, guided tours, and provide 4WD access to the island via the ‘Hartog Explorer’ barge. A homestead camping site, as well as National Park campsites are further dotted around the island for those seeking more adventurous off-the-grid camping experiences. Dirk Hartog Island’s colourful European history began in 1616 when the Dutch skipper Dirk Hartog first set foot on Western

Australia’s largest island on 25 October. The event was the first recorded landing of a European in Western Australia or wider Australia. When he arrived here in 1616, the island was in pristine condition, left untouched for centuries. Since European settlers arrived and introduced sheep and goats, the vegetation significantly changed, thus reducing shelter and habitat of native species. Just like on the mainland, feral cats further added to the pressures on native species. As we drive around the island, I learn that numerous small mammals and marsupials, as well as one bird, did not survive the changes to their habitat. To counteract this negative trend, the ‘Return to 1616’ project has been brought to life after the Western Australian government bought the privately held pastoral lease in 2009 to convert most of the island to a National Park. The ambitious project officially began in 2012. Dr Sims, senior officer on the Dirk Hartog Island Ecological Restoration Project, told ABC News: “We are trying to return the island back, as near as possible, to what we think it was like before Europeans first set eyes on it.” Not only has the island since been cleared of feral cats, goats and sheep, but invasive weeds have also been removed, allowing native vegetation to slowly return so that the island’s native animals could be re-introduced.

In 2018, the first two species were translocated – the rufous and the banded hare-wallabies. As of early 2023, the dibbler, Shark Bay bandicoot, Shark Bay mouse, western grasswren and the greater stick-nest rat have also been re-introduced. In 2023, 100 rare brush-tailed mulgaras, a relative of the Tasmanian devil, were also taken to the island to help balance the population of other small mammals on the island, resulting in eight native species having been translocated to date.

As we drive around the island, I see the restoration efforts for myself. Vegetation is slowly coming back, and life can be seen everywhere. When we stop at a peaceful sand beach, juvenile blacktip sharks roam the shallows and large coral boulders can be seen off the shore in the crystal-clear waters. Suddenly, my guide points out something in the distance: A group of humpback whales on their annual migrations. My departure from Dirk Hartog Island also means the end of my Western Australia adventure. As I look out the window of the small plane that brings me back to Perth / Boorloo, I gaze across the red, rugged terrain, divided by countless watery veins. While it’s a stunning sight from up here, Capes’ words still ring in my head: To truly feel country, you need to move away from merely looking at nature. In this special region, you can’t help but do exactly that. 