



Margaret River Dreaming

Kookaburras, canoes, Jack Johnson, a didgeridoo and a Bentley.

Notes on an exploration of one of Australia's premier wine regions.

BY STEVE WILLIAMS

IT'S PROBABLY THE grapes that first bring you to Margaret River, but there is so much more to experience in this absolutely stunning part of the world.

'Margaret River' is the colloquial name for one of Australia's premier wine producing areas, situated on the rugged South West coast of Western Australia, just over three hours drive south of Perth. It really has it all—magnificent vineyards just one kilometre from untouched coastline, majestic forests, unique flora and fauna, fine dining, and eclectic galleries. The region takes in several rustic small towns and there actually is a Margaret River, which I saw quite a bit of—my canoeing skills

need some work—but more about that later.

My wife and I spent four days in Margaret River, far too short, and it's easy to see why people plant themselves there for life, just as Dr Tom Cullity planted the area's first commercial grapevines in 1967.

Vasse Felix was the first commercial vineyard in Margaret River—the afore-mentioned good doctor would drive from Perth on weekends, work on his vines, sleep in a shed, and then head back to his other job as a cardiologist. Another doctor, Kevin Cullen and his physiotherapist wife Diana had planted an experimental acre of vines the year before; all proving the fact that wine does have medici-

Just four kilometers away from the Indian Ocean, Vasse Felix is a tranquil retreat for wine lovers.

THIS PAGE & TOP OPPOSITE: PHOTOS BY STEVE WILLIAMS



BOTTOM: PHOTO COURTESY OF LEEUWIN ESTATES

The Leeuwin Estates vineyard (above) is best explored in a 1955 Bentley SL Saloon (top).

nal properties. From these pioneers, Margaret River's fledgling wine industry has gone on to produce just four percent of Australia's total wine by volume, but an impressive 23 percent of Australia's premium wine.

But enough of the numbers and history lesson, what of the luxury Margaret River experience?

Our first introduction to Margaret River *Robb Report* style was spending half a day touring in a magnificent two-tone 1955 Bentley S1 saloon. It's not difficult to feel slightly special sinking into the sumptuous burgundy leather interior with glossy walnut finishing, as the purr of The Lady's 4.88 six-litre engine effortlessly snakes around some of the world's most spectacular coastline and tight, dusty roads criss-crossing through vineyards.

Nola Gaebler established Lifestyle Margaret River in 1997, combining her passion for classic motor vehicles and the unique Margaret River lifestyle. With her ultra-personalised tours, she gives you an exclusive insight you simply wouldn't get if you were driving around in your hire car—and the Bentley is infinitely more glamorous than any rental car—I don't recall any envious looks when we were in the Hyundai.

Fashionably dressed head to toe in black, including her trademark gloves, Nola is as stylish as the car. As we cruise with the sunroof open, the sunlight filtering through the canopy of majestic Karri forests, Nola regales us with the history and stories of the region. She knows everyone, the wine-makers (she also has her own small vineyard), gallery and restaurant owners and the characters that make up this fascinating part of the world. This is far more than just a day trip; it's an elegant experience and one that can be tailored to suit your tastes.

Speaking of wineries, we head to Voyager Estate, tour the magnificent landscaped gardens, then into the Cape Dutch-style cellar door build-

ing for some wine tasting. I particularly enjoyed the ‘Girt By Sea’ Cabernet Merlot—a tongue-in-cheek nod to one of the more obscure lines in Australia’s national anthem.

Our tour continues with a visit to Leeuwin Estate, originally a cattle farm and one of the founding wineries of Margaret River. The winery is named after Cape Leeuwin, Australia’s most south-westerly point.

Apart from its wine, the estate is famous for the annual concert series, which started in 1985. Every year, the stunning natural amphitheatre fringed by towering Karri trees has echoed with the sounds of performers from the London Philharmonic Orchestra to Jack Johnson—all supported by the resident choir of kookaburras. I tried to prise the identity of next year’s artist from Leeuwin Estate’s Manager—Hospitality Travers O’Rafferty—but unfortunately he wasn’t that hospitable!

From the multi-million dollar operations of Voyager and Leeuwin Estates to a small boutique winery—Cape Grace owned and managed by husband-and-wife team Robert and



Karen Karri-Davies. Cape Grace is located on the farm that Dr Tom Cullity originally wanted to establish Vasse Felix, and it’s a fairly down-to-earth operation that’s all about the wine, and the people who make it. We chatted with Karen while sampling some of Cape Grace’s award winning “hand-crafted and luxury” wines. From their very first vintage onwards, Cape Grace has won some very impressive awards—definitely a name to look out for. Make sure you try the Cane Cut Chenin Blanc—very impressive.

A tip: If you’re googling Cape Grace Wines, make sure you select the Australian website (.com.au), otherwise you could end up at a totally unrelated U.K. website featuring pictures of a naked (male) wine maker who will apparently make you “wine with pleasure”. Not so impressive.

It’s time for lunch—even though it’s after 3pm—we’re on Margaret River time now, and headed to where the story started—Vasse Felix.

It really is the best way to sample the Vasse Felix wines—over an indulgent lunch at the excellent restaurant look-



Art reigns at Leeuwin Estate where chardonnay from the Art Series and a classical concert can be enjoyed (this page).
Wine is enjoyed by the fire or with excellent food at Clairault (opposite page).

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LEEUWIN ESTATES



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CLAIRAULT

ing out over the vineyards, the sun thinking about retiring for the day, golden light shining red through the vine leaves. Sorry to go all poetic, but it’s that kind of place. We were joined by Manager and genial host Michael Whyte. Definitely a day to remember.

A more adventurous, but also ultra-exclusive tour is run by Sean Blocksidge and his business The Margaret River Discovery Company. Like so many people, we met in Margaret River, Sean has an interesting background. He was the general manager of a five star hotel, and formerly cellar door manager of Voyager Estate. Sean jokingly describes his tour as “Al Gore meets Jamie Oliver” but it’s more than that—a truly unique experience. Like Nola, Sean can tailor the tour to suit you; this was his ‘Margaret River Discovery Tour’. Sean met us in his luxury 4WD, and on the way to our first destination while black cockatoos flew overhead,

he spoke of the area’s history—aboriginal and European, as well as the ecology, geology and climate of Margaret River.

Sean is very passionate about the area: he is a volunteer for the local fire service, and that passion comes through. It’s not a boring geography lesson, just a fascinating chat with a good bloke. The first stop was canoeing the Margaret River. Now as a canoeist, canoodler...er, someone who canoes, I make a very good writer but my nautical navigation skills need some work—however, this was a serene, pleasurable experience, gently paddling down the tranquil, glassy river, navigating the meandering turns.

While Sean casually pointed out native flora and fauna, I (most of the time) evaded obstacles. Back on dry land and after a much-needed coffee, we headed off-road, down narrow bush tracks that only he has access to—again that exclusivity. Sean took

us on a walk through the bush and explained the history of the Wardandi people, the original custodians of the area. We explored the beautiful Meekadarabee Waterfall—a dream-time site that has great significance to the aboriginal people. In establishing his company, Sean wanted to create a unique experience that wasn’t being offered elsewhere, he also worked with Australia’s National Trust, the Wardandi people and winemakers including Fraser Gallop Estate, which happened to be our lunch destination.

Sitting in their barrel room over a gourmet lunch that Sean magically produced and several glasses of the barrel’s contents, we chatted with Fraser Gallop’s award-winning winemaker Clive Otto, one very easygoing guy—you get a lot of that here. Fraser Gallop is a magnificent property, but there is no cellar door, so if you’re not on Sean’s tour, access would be virtually impossible.

The day concluded with more off-road driving, taking in the unique sights of Margaret River's wilderness, and exploring a section of the picturesque 'Cape to Cape Walk' before taking in the incredible views from the Wilyabrup Cliffs over the Indian Ocean. Thankfully, the entire Margaret River coastline is a national park, so there are no mega-storey hotels, garish malls and apartment blocks desecrating the view. As Sean said, "I once heard a saying that 'if you love what you do, you never work a day in your life'". It's obvious he loves what he does, but he does have a pretty good office.

For the spiritually inclined, another tour I would highly recommend is Koomal Dreaming. Josh Whiteland, grandson of the matriarchal elder and cultural custodian of the Wardandi tribe, established this to share his deep knowledge and respect of his culture. It was empowering to see the passion,

commitment and connection he has for his people and his land. He took us down into the mystical Ngilgi Cave that at a mere 500,000 years old obviously has special significance for the Wardandi. Josh told us the traditional dreamtime story of creation, through speech and music. Hearing the haunting sounds of his didgeridoo echoing through the cavern was an unforgettable experience.

Josh walked us through the Wardan Aboriginal Cultural Centre, where his culture is shared with tourists, school groups and aboriginal people from outside the area. The aim is to increase knowledge and understanding of their heritage, and to provide more opportunities for his people.

He showed us plants and trees used for bush tucker and traditional medicine and how shelter and hunting tools are made. There is an art gallery, and traditional craft demonstrations that are really

worth a visit. As I mentioned, there is far more to Margaret River than wine.

The last winery on our itinerary was Clairault, one of the oldest vineyards in Margaret River. Like a lot of wineries in the region, Clairault is a family run business—Bill and Ena Martin with their three sons Shane, Conor and Brian bought the winery in 1999. Another stunning property in a post-card setting, we had a winery tour with Conor and Brian, tasting barrel samples including 'Bill's Reserve', which was far too good to go anywhere near the spittoon!

Over lunch in the excellent cellar door restaurant, with the affable Bill, Conor, Brian and Chief Wine Maker Will Shields, we sampled some first-class Clairault wines, and heard of their plans for a European-styled five-star vineyard spa resort, which will be developed over the next few years. Definitely a reason to return.



Brian and Jack take time off at Clairault where venison curry is a hit.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CLAIRAULT WINES



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAPE LODGE

Cape Lodge's Superior Spa (top left) and Forest Suite (above) are the perfect spots for relaxation. Top right: A lobster salad.



CAPE LODGE

Accommodation in Margaret River includes boutique luxury; we opted for two Small Luxury Hotels of The World properties.

There is an overwhelming feeling of serenity as you drive through the gates of Cape Lodge, due in part to the fact there is no mobile phone reception. It has the atmosphere of a sprawling country estate—40 acres of manicured lawns, sweeping gardens and private lakes, with a working vineyard. There are 22 rooms and suites, and 'The Residence', a five-bedroom private retreat. We stayed in a Forest Lodge suite, open plan, a large balcony overlooks the lake with a forest as the backdrop. Peaceful and relaxing, the only sounds were the native bird-life. The suite was beautifully laid-out and the bathroom included a massive spa that was definitely designed for two; the rooms are 'romantically secluded'.

The award-winning restaurant, overseen by Executive Chef Tony Howell, another totally laid-back character, topped off our experience at Cape Lodge. A cooking class with Tony was arranged for us in the lounge. While we



enjoyed a glass or two, he took us through the night's menu, effortlessly preparing ingredients, passing on some tips, while speaking of who inspired him to become a chef, his thoughts on celebrity chefs, surfing, motorbikes, and how he has worked at Cape Lodge for 11 years and loves it. His easy personality seems to infuse Cape Lodge.

Dinner that night was the 'Five-Course Chefs' Tasting Menu', which seemed to become 37 as extra courses would appear "compliments of Tony". Easily one of the best meals we've had. Ever. Anywhere. A Margaret River must.

The General Manager of Cape Lodge Drew Bernhardt confirmed that one of the recent mega-star performers at a Leeuwin Estate concert, tried to "pinch" Tony and the kitchen staff. Glad he didn't.

There is absolutely no surprise Cape Lodge was voted best boutique hotel in Australia 2008 and 2009.

INJIDUP SPA

The other SLH property we stayed at was the magnificent Injidup Spa Retreat. There are only 10 private villas, stylishly designed in keeping with the natural environment, each with its own



plunge pool, and a breathtaking ocean view best enjoyed from the pool with a glass of wine. This really is a place to get away from it all; there is a feeling of peaceful isolation. There isn't a restaurant on-site, so we had dinner at Bathers Restaurant at Injidup's sister property Smiths Beach Resort. There is a BBQ on the deck of each villa and a breakfast hamper is delivered every day. You can arrange a dinner hamper as well so you really never have to leave.

The staff at Injidup Spa Retreat are extremely attentive, yet unobtrusive. I recommend a sojourn in the Spa. We were treated to a couple spa treatment by excellent therapists, Sodashi products and magnificent ocean views added to that holistic feeling of tranquility.

A short stroll along a track from Injidup and you find yourself perched on a cliff top with a 180-degree seascape, windswept vegetation and a kaleidoscope of wildflowers that blanket the region in spring. This is a section of the "Cape to Cape Walk", which is about 140kms-long and takes a few days, but after our week of indulgence we walked for a strenuous 10 minutes.

The sunset over the Indian Ocean from this view? Not telling—you'll have to experience that for yourself... ☒

1. Cape Lodge, www.slh.com/capelodge
2. Clairault Wines, www.clairaultwines.com.au
3. Injidup Spa Retreat, www.slh.com/injidupretreat
4. Vasse Felix, www.vassefelix.com.au

Injidup Spa Retreat is a luxurious hideaway.