The Indian Ocean Drive

Discover white beaches, coral reefs, salty fishing towns and rugged national parks on this spectacular journey along Western Australia’s Coral Coast. Head north to taste fresh crayfish in Geraldton and mouth-watering tropical fruits in Carnarvon. Swim with the huge whale shark on Ningaloo Reef and four wheel drive through the canyons of nearby Cape Range National Park. On your way back down the coast, meet the dolphins of Monkey Mia, along with whales, manta rays, turtles, sharks, dugongs and fish in the wider Shark Bay World Heritage Area. See seasonal wildflowers break out their brightest colours all along the coast, from Cape Range to the cliffs and gorges of Kalbarri National Park.

AT A GLANCE

- Perth – Geraldton (4.5 hours)
- Geraldton – Carnarvon (5 hours)
- Carnarvon – Exmouth (5 hours)
- Exmouth – Coral Bay (2.5 hours)
- Coral Bay – Shark Bay (7 hours)
- Shark Bay – Kalbarri (4.5 hours)
- Kalbarri – Perth (6 hours)

DAY ONE

PERTH – GERALDTON

It’s a five hour journey up the Brand Highway, which between June and November decorated by a cavalcade of bright wildflowers. They’re also colourfully abundant in Badgingarra National Park, which sits off the highway at your halfway point. Walk the Badgingarra Nature Trail past black and yellow kangaroo paws, banksia, starflower and mottle cash – the world’s largest eucalypt flower. Continue north to the twin coastal towns of Dongara – Denison, where you can fish, sample local wine and fresh seafood or swim from the sheltered white beach. Follow a heritage trail along the Irwin River, which links the two towns, stopping to see the 1860s Russ Cottage and the Old Police Station that is now a museum. See the eucalypts bent in acrobatic shapes and ruins of homes, churches and schools in the heritage town of Greenough Hamlet. Arrive in Geraldton, on Champion Bay, in time for a swim and dinner of local rock lobster.
DAYS TWO TO FOUR

GERALDTON – CARNARVON
Visit the HMAS Sydney Memorial, overlooking the ocean which claimed the lives of 645 sailors. Then begin the five-hour drive north, crossing the Murchison River and passing Kalbarri National Park to your east and Toolonga Nature Reserve to your west. Continue past the dolphin sanctuary of Monkey Mia to Carnarvon, where banana, mango and papaya plantations thrive on the fertile land around the Gascoyne River. Tour a plantation or buy freshly-picked produce from the Carnarvon Growers Market. Stroll along the palm-lined Fascine and picnic with a bucket of local prawns on the beach. Fish from historic One Mile Jetty, part of the town’s heritage precinct. Swim in the nearby waterholes of Rocky Pool and Chinaman’s Pool or drive 70km north to the Carnarvon blowholes, where the ocean jets up to 20m high. Snorkel through the nearby coral-filled lagoon and camp under the stars or head back to Carnarvon for a comfortable bed.

CARNARVON – EXMOUTH
It’s a four-and-a-half hour drive north to Exmouth, which sits between the red cliffs of Cape Range National Park and the turquoise waters of Ningaloo Marine Park. Head to the beach, where you only have to stroll a few metres to find the tropical fish and multi-coloured coral of Ningaloo Reef. Go snorkelling or gaze at the magical, underwater world from a glass-bottomed boat. Between April and June you can swim with the world’s biggest fish, the huge, gentle whale shark. Spot schools of ethereal manta rays from May to November and migrating humpback whales from July to November. After the full moon in March and April you might see a mass coral spawning turn the sea pink. Join a chartered fishing trip or sea kayak past dolphins, turtles and dugongs. In the evening, dine out on the yachting marina, where cafes, restaurants, boutiques and wine bars line the canals.

EXMOUTH – CORAL BAY
Dedicate half a day to hanging on the beach in Exmouth or exploring the craggy, weather-beaten landscapes of Cape Range National Park. Four wheel drive along a twisting road to the precipice of Shothole and Charles Knife canyons, where the views are breathtaking. From Charles Knife canyon, you can see beyond the deep red canyons to green bushland and the deep blue sea of the Exmouth Gulf. Do the 5km hike between the two canyons and explore the hidden network of caves and tunnels beneath the rocky plateaux. Walk to the top of Yardie Creek, looking out for the rare black-footed rock wallaby in the gorge’s red rock walls. Or cruise down the gorge, taking in the sublime outback scenery. Peer at sea birds and waders behind a bird hide at Mangrove Bay or get up close to a huge variety of bird life on the bushwalking trail at Mandu Mandu Gorge. In the afternoon drive south to Coral Bay, where you can swim and snorkel on the southern end of Ningaloo Marine Park.
DAYS FIVE TO SEVEN

CORAL BAY – SHARK BAY
Have a refreshing swim before the seven-hour drive to the Shark Bay World Heritage Area, where you’ll spend three days exploring. Detour off the highway at the entrance to the Peron Peninsula to see Hamelin Pool, one of only two places on earth where living marine stromatolites exist. The rock domes – which look like underwater boulders from the movie Cocoon – were built by living microbes that existed on the earth 3,500 million years ago. Drive a little further to Shell Beach, which is made up of billions of tiny shells instead of sand. The beach stretches for more than 100 kilometres, with shells between seven and ten metres deep. In the past, the shells were compacted and cut into bricks for buildings in nearby Denham, a former pearling port and Shark Bay’s main town. Wash the long drive away with a swim from one of the sheltered swimming beaches, then dine on fresh seafood in a local restaurant.

MONKEY MIA
Visit Denham’s dolphin centre before doing the 30 minute drive to Monkey Mia to meet them. The area is famous for wild bottlenose dolphins that, after years of being fed by local fishermen, swim to shore to interact with humans. Feed them or swim with them in the clear, aquamarine water. Along with dolphins, Shark Bay is home to whales, manta rays, turtles, sharks, a huge array of fish and a tenth of the world’s dugongs. Get up close to some of the marine life from a kayak or glass-bottomed boat. Snorkel, learn to scuba dive or ride a camel along Dolphin Beach. Watch the seasonal shark tagging or the daily pelican feeding on a cruise. Fish for whiting, cod, snapper, mackerel and tuna and learn about bush tucker with a local Malgana guide. In the evening, listen to a talk by a resident animal research scientist or take a sunset sailing trip.

SHARK BAY
Drive to the huge marine park south of Denham, which showcases the area’s technicolour diversity of marine life. Watch sharks being fed, peer at slithering sea snakes and get up close to baby sea turtles. Afterwards, join a four wheel drive tour through Francois Peron National Park, where the red sand dunes contrast with blinding white beaches and crystal blue ocean. Spot manta rays, turtles and sharks at Skipjack Point, fish at Bottle Bay and kayak or canoe across Big Lagoon. Relax in the artesian hot tub or do the historic ‘Station Life’ walk at Peron Homestead. Take in the size and beauty of the area on a scenic flight or quad bike across the sand dunes and scrublands. Drive further south to the dugong breeding area of Eagle Bluff, named after the sea eagles which nest on the rock island just offshore. Catch some whiting or mullet for dinner or head back to Denham for a plate of local squid.
DAYS EIGHT TO TEN

SHARK BAY – KALBARRI
If you have a four wheel drive, detour to Steep Point, Australia’s most westerly point. This is a great vantage point for the spectacular Zuytdorp Cliff, which tower 170m above the sea and stretch along the coast to Kalbarri. From here, you can take a boat to Dirk Hartog Island, home to rugged sea cliffs, secluded white beaches and world-class fishing waters. Once you’re back on the highway, it’s a four and a half hour drive to Kalbarri, on the junction of the Indian Ocean and winding Murchison River. Swim or surf from Chinaman’s Beach or relax and watch the pelicans being fed on the foreshore. See dolphins playing in the bay and whales and their calves migrating during the winter months. Visit the parrot breeding centre, water ski or canoe on the river or ride a horse along the beach at sunset. Have dinner in a cute café or beach bar before retiring to the mingled song of ocean and bush.

KALBARRI
Spend your day bushwalking the breathtaking landscapes of Kalbarri National Park. Hike the rugged ranges and canoe past the rust-red rock gorges on the Murchison River which carved them. Between July and October, the landscape comes alive with the colours of 800 wildflower species. See banksias, grevilleas, kangaroo paws and red-blossomed eucalypts scattered across the landscape. Look over the scenery from the rock frame of Natures Window or from Z Bend, Hawkes Head Lookout or Ross Graham Lookout. Watch the Murchison River form enormous circles at The Loop, another great vantage point. Spot rich bird life and western grey kangaroos and emus during the day. Look out for sea lions, dolphins and migratory whales from coastal cliffs such as Red Bluff and Pot Alley. For a bird’s eye view, take a scenic helicopter flight over the park, coastline and the diving treasures of the Abrolhos Islands – more than 120 unspoilt islands over 100 km of ocean.

KALBARRI – PERTH
Drive south past Geraldton to the crayfishing town of Leeman, where you can follow a vivid wildflower trail between the Brand Highway and Indian Ocean Drive. Nearby, explore the flora-rich bushland of Lesueur National Park and the large cave system of Stockyard Gully National Park. Travel through Greenhead and the beach paradise of Sandy Cape Recreational Park to Jurien Bay, home to more white beaches and coral reefs. Watch whales migrating along the coast before driving back through Cervantes. Take a scenic drive through Nambung National Park past The Pinnacles – thousands of ancient rock pillars rising from the desert like weathered tombstones. They are made up of shells, from a long-gone epoch when the sand here was beneath the sea. You might catch them at sunset – one of the most spectacular viewing times – before beginning the three-hour journey back to Perth.