



TRAVEL

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Sun, surf and semillon sauvignon blanc

By Simon Busch

Simon Busch returns to Western Australia, birthplace of his teenage neuroses, to find a sophisticated winegrowing region and stunning beaches. So will a grown-up traveller enjoy his grown-up homeland?



Whether it is cheaper than therapy I don't know, but revisiting your past by aeroplane at least means you can get a ticket out again. I was quite an intellectual child and felt thoroughly deracinated when moved, at the age of 12 or so, from the relatively urbane environment of Sydney, on the east coast of Australia, to Perth, 4,000km away as the kookaburra flies across the flat, arid, lonely interior of the continent to the opposite, western shore.

Perth was not only the most isolated city in the world - as far from its nearest neighbour, Adelaide, as London is from Istanbul - but also, I found, populated by alien-seeming beings. These were perma-tanned, muscular creatures with sun-bleached hair falling over wrap-around, reflective sunglasses, who seemed to be almost evolutionarily adapted to the fortnight-long stretches of 40-degree heat and, by their slightly bow-legged stance, poised on their surfboards even when they weren't. What they apparently lacked was an affinity for literature; what they evidently lacked - they told me so, with a characteristic raucous obscenity - was an affinity for the socks and sandals that I, at first, unselfconsciously wore.

But, some years after going west, I discovered a wonderful retreat in the form of the shire of Margaret River: a hamlet and its surrounds three hours' drive down the coast from Perth in the cooler clime of the south-west. Now, making that drive again 15 years on, having since left Perth for Melbourne and then London, but returned to Western Australia for a week, the sharp, sulphurous smell of the eucalypts by the side of the road sent me, as smells will, spiraling into a disquieting zone of temporal uncertainty.

This time we were heading south to cover the annual Margaret River wine festival, but I recall that my teenage travels to the region were partly motivated by the presence of another abundant, sweet-smelling and mellow local crop. Bohemians had colonised the shire in the early '70s. There were hordes of alternative-lifestylers, who had built



more-or-less rough-and-ready shelters in the parcels of pristine jarrah and karri forest they had bought for next to nothing. There were also surfies, drawn to breaks that pounded out perilous waves with the regularity of a fusillade, but they were of the dreadlocked variety, leaning towards tie-dye and apt to settle - after a morning's board-riding - into a spent, dopey geniality. Nude bathing was almost (I say almost) de rigeur at the dams and billabongs among the trees, and the culinary highlight of Margaret River town itself was a uniquely delicious lentil burger, dressed in peanut sauce.

Now we were sharing the road "down south", as everyone calls the region, with an unfamiliar cavalcade of European family sedans where once beaten-up Kombi-vans and old Holden's had ruled the route. It was a hint at what I would soon discover: wine, as if some potent historical catalyst that would have repaid Marx's attention, had led to the embourgeoisification of Margaret River. But, as Marx might have recognised, this was a complex, dialectical process - a kind of socio-historical fermentation - that was not merely to be decried. For what might have been lost in terms of hidden-away, bohemian appeal has been replaced by the undeniably tempting hedonism of the wine-loving bourgeoisie - a sybaritism lent local flavour by the toasty climate, the abundance of uncultivated beaches and bush and a certain, trademark ironic laconicism on the part of the home-grown winemakers and drinkers.

It must have been a Eureka moment when, 40 years ago, a Dr John Gladstone, sent by the West Australian government to investigate the agricultural potential of the Margaret River region, discovered that its climate and terroir almost exactly mirrored those of Bordeaux. (One imagines him tapping at the dry, ochre earth with a pickaxe and a plume of well-balanced red surging forth.) Since then, the ground having been laid by pioneering wineries such as Vasse Felix (still one of the best known labels from the region internationally), Margaret River vineyards have spread like grapes on the vine to number, now, more than 70.

As if in a kind of speeded-up industrial revolution of wine, the past decade has seen intensified professionalisation and consolidation, with some small, artisan wineries squeezed out, and the tourist potential of the region becoming ever more developed. The best of the wines have a fresh, assertive character that is becoming steadily more recognised in the European export market (where, it must be said, they remain quite expensive). We were treated to an enticing selection at a degustation lunch at the **Clairault winery** (which won a bronze for its 1999 reserve at the International Wine and Spirit Competition, in London). Like many of the vineyards, Clairault has a restaurant on site, making mapping out an eating and drinking tour of the shire child's play - with the proviso that your circuit should include the odd sobering stop.

We began with a semillon sauvignon blanc to accompany seared West Australian scallops. Judging by its ubiquity, the blend, rapidly abbreviated to "SSB", is the latest local vinocultural craze. (Everything becomes abbreviated in Australia, including names - I used to be "Simmo" - places and probably advanced concepts in positivist philosophy.) It had that characteristic grassiness of sauvignon blanc but with a typical, punchy fruitiness that I found enlivened my day but others might judge too forward on first acquaintance.



Perfectly proportioned and matched with their wines, the rest of the courses ambled past our palates with utmost pleasantness. The other liquid highlight, served with Bruny Island cheddar, was undoubtedly the estate cabernet sauvignon 2001, which sung out its rich notes of molasses and liquorice in unapologetic full-throat. The only let-down (typically, it seemed: do West Australians not believe they deserve good desserts?) was a bland chocolate mousse, although the sophisticated sweetness - like a spy trained in seduction - in the accompanying short glass was ample distraction.

Sipping this, the last of five glasses at lunchtime, on the terrace at Clairault, with the view over the surrounding vines to the tangle of olive-green bush beyond, in the warm spring air with that wild, heady scent of eucalyptus, as pink galah parrots and 28s (boldly painted birds whose name derives from an enumerative-sounding cry) settled occasionally on the trellises, I found myself again giddily dislocated. I kept thinking of the damp, chilly, overcrowded island with its fast-food-wrapper flora from which we had flown only days before and then wondering whether I hadn't been transported to some earthly paradise of middle-class delights.

I wondered why I had ever left. That isolation had given me terribly itchy feet as a teenager but now it had the allure of sequestration from an increasingly barbed world. Even surfing was redeemed for me from the painful associations of my misfit youth. The unpolluted and largely undeveloped beaches breaking up the rocky coastline around Margaret River, with their white sand segueing into hardy, low-lying scrub and their predictable swells suiting all kinds of surfing - by body or board - are some of the finest in the world. Yet they barely know crowds and so are an excellent place to avoid the ignominy the novice surfer might otherwise fear.

Sam and Lizzie of the Yallingup Surf School did not look the types to cast aspersions on my masculinity for my late ascendancy to the board. They were quick and competent tutors and, after a dry run of an hour on the sand, in which we practised paddling and largely failed to execute the tricky twist required to stand up on our L-plate Malibus, we were, they judged, ready to broach the waves. Surfing is much, much harder than it looks, of course, and it was at least another hour before I found myself, albeit only half-standing, suddenly speeding towards the shore. A second before I slid off into the tumultuous swell, I realised that all that anxious teenage baggage had slid off, unnoticed, some time before.

Way to go

The [Margaret River Wine Festival](#) is held each year in November. Most of the wineries hold tastings - as many do throughout the year - or other promotional events. The wine festival incorporates a smaller Fusion Festival, held over one day in Margaret River town itself, with live music, food and tasting stalls set up by around 30 wineries.

Simon flew to Perth with [Thomson](#) holidays, which runs charter flights from November through to February. Prices start from £495pp in economy and from £995pp in premium. Scheduled flights to Perth from London Heathrow start from £555pp with Qantas (including taxes and based on economy). In Perth, Simon stayed at the boutique Outram



hotel (+61 (0)8 9322 4888; www.theoutram.com). One night starts from £76pp on bed and breakfast basis; 5 nights cost from £380 pp and seven nights from £532 pp.

In Margaret River he stayed at the - highly recommended - Forest Rise Eco Retreat (+61 (0)8 9755 7110; www.forestrise.com.au), which consists of chalets situated among carefully conserved jarrah forest. One night starts from £48pp on B&B basis; five nights cost from £192pp and seven nights from £270pp.

In Margaret River he also stayed at the Quay West Resort Bunker Bay (+61 (0)8 9756 9100; www.mirvachotels.com.au). One night starts from £34 per person on a room only basis; 5 nights cost from £170 per person, and seven nights cost from £238 per person.

At the Duxton Hotel (+61 (0)8 9261 8000; www.duxton.com), in Perth, one night starts from £45pp on room-only basis, five nights cost from £225pp, and seven nights, from £315pp.

Further information

For bookings call Thomson Australia & New Zealand on 0870 060 3313 or visit www.thomson.co.uk. For further tourist information visit www.westernaustralia.com.