

HOW GREEN WAS THE RIVER

Known for its vines, beaches and giant forests, Margaret River in Western Australia is making its mark as a true eco destination, writes *AMY COOPER*.



Clockwise from main: The Cape to Cape Track; a feast at Olio Bello; wine in the vines at Passel Estate; Glenarty Road; fresh veg at Fair Harvest Permaculture; Boranup karri forest. **Pictures:** Tourism Western Australia; Amy Cooper ON THE COVER: Olio Bello organic olive farm. **Picture:** Tourism Western Australia

IT'S a soft, luminous dawn in the Voyager Estate vineyard. The sun has been kind in recent weeks, burnishing green chardonnay grapes with just the right golden lustre. Now it plants a final kiss on the ripe fruit as the picking crew starts work.

Voyager's vineyard manager Glen Ryan and chief winemaker Tim Shand hover like proud parents, all smiles as the buckets begin to brim with bunches. They're excited by the yield on Block Six, a gravelly little patch known for producing some of the Margaret River Region's finest chardonnay.

It's a special piece of earth, and a special moment, too: the first day of Voyager's first fully certified organic vintage.

Here, in some of the region's oldest vineyards, I'm witnessing the result of a two-decade journey that's seen all 112 hectares of the estate's vines transition to organic. It's been all-consuming, says Ryan. "Organics really pushes your boundaries. Synthetic fertilisers are like eating sugar and carbs and you need to slowly wean the soil off them. It's in recovery."

Without chemical shortcuts, success depends on microbe-level intimacy with your land, from the deepest roots to the loftiest

branches; reading its rhythms, watching, learning, listening. Sometimes just waiting.

Nature, says Ryan, has all the right tools: beneficial bugs to battle unwelcome ones; organic waste for nourishing composts; native plants to build biodiversity and fortify the soil. Voyager's flock of Muscovy ducks are cuter than pesticides and more efficient too, waddling through the vines, devouring bugs and depositing healthy poop. Kitchen scraps and pomace (winemaking's grape waste) return to their source as compost, closing one of many interconnected circles of life constantly turning in the winery's ecosystem.

It's been a white-knuckle ride at times. As the land adapted to its new diet and yields wavered, Ryan and the team had to hold their nerve. But it's been worth it.

"Soils that were stale and lifeless have come bouncing right back," says Ryan. "We see weeds and earthworms; so many more bugs. It's not sterile. There's life everywhere."

Exhibit A: those buckets of promising grapes. There's excited talk around the winery of a "standout vintage". Shand couldn't be more thrilled by his raw materials, and I ask him: does organic production taste better? The answer's in the glass, he says, so

we repair to the Voyager cellar door and taste several recent vintages, including the flagship 2020 MJW chardonnay, a complex and elegant drop with pristine citrus and subtle minerality. It's beautiful - like nature's delicious thank you for all that care.

Shand believes organic wines offer the most eloquent expressions of place. "They're more nuanced, with a lovely savoury complexity. They vary more from site to site."

In the award-winning restaurant next door, Voyager's new head chef Travis Crane is revelling in the estate's other harvests. He's been foraging for coastal greens, seaweeds, lemon myrtle and the flowering WA native Geraldton Wax. And he needs only cross a couple of paddocks for organic cucumbers, golden zucchinis, tomatoes and more cultivated organically on the estate's new Landsmith Home Farm, shrinking food miles to footsteps. His mission: "To source thoughtfully, prepare simply, cook respectfully and present beautifully."

Voyager's eco vision extends beyond its own boundaries: the winery has planted 60,000 indigenous trees in the past 10 years and, along with other businesses, maintains a section of the region's spectacular coastal



Elise Parker, as we perch high on the soaring Wilyabrup Cliffs, horizon-gazing with the Indian Ocean flinging white foam against the red granite far beneath. But there's always something to marvel at.

She grew up here and remembers her dad driving very slowly through forests when she was little so she could absorb the beauty of the ancient trees - a forest bather decades before

it was a hipster hashtag, and like many Margaret River locals, keen to share his love of home.

Ask anyone, from the pub to the paddock, and they'll tell you with pride that the region sustains one of the world's longest unbroken human habitations.

A relationship of 65,000 years between the land and its traditional custodians, the Wadandi (Saltwater) People, is a priceless knowledge vault, shared generously by the current Wadandi generation.

A strong sense of stewardship unites both

trail, the Cape to Cape Track.

Says Ryan: "We're part of something bigger. It's a commitment to community, to people and to culture."

The Margaret River Region nudges out like a little elbow from Australia's southwest corner, surrounded by ocean on three sides and stretching about 100 kilometres from Cape Naturaliste in the north to Cape Leeuwin in the south. The lighthouses at each end bookend an achingly beautiful landscape of vast ocean vistas, surf beaches, ancient forests and fertile pastures.

This is one of Australia's four certified ECO Destinations, and among the world's 36 biodiversity hotspots - defined as the earth's most biologically rich and also most vulnerable environments.

From the world's last remaining tuart forest with its 400-year-old giants, to more than 2500 wildflower and orchid species and endangered endemic wildlife such as the western ringtail possum and red-tailed black cockatoo, this is a land of precious, fragile treasures. Sustainability in the Margaret River Region isn't a nicety - it's a necessity.

Evidence surrounds you on the Cape to Cape Track, which stretches the region's entire coastal length along the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge, winding through karri forests, panoramic cliff-top heaths and immaculate beaches. At any moment, nature might throw a surprise party; the springtime starburst of a pink fairy orchid, a nankeen kestrel riding the breeze overhead, southern right whales breaching out in the blue. Experiences shift with the hour and season, says my guide,

FIVE FOR TOURING AND TASTING

1. Choose from a range of Margaret River private tours taking in wine, produce and nature in supreme comfort in Go In Style's luxury Jaguar and Mercedes vehicles. The Margaret River in Style Tour (\$295 per person) is a fabulous seven-hour taste of the finest in the region, with options to try wine, distilleries, chocolate, cheese, olives and more. goinstyle.com.au

2. Walk Into Luxury offers four-day group experiences of some of the most spectacular sections of the Cape to Cape Track, with gourmet food, upscale accommodation, private tasting experiences, wildlife spotting and informational talks along the way. From \$3150 per person. walkintoluxury.com

3. Experience the terroir at Voyager Estate Tour through the vineyards and winery, learning about organic farming methods and concluding with a wine tasting and delicious lunch. Five hours for \$245 per person. voyagerestate.com.au

4. Support Passel Estate's western ringtail possum conservation programme by taking a Nature and Wine Walk, tasting wines among the vines and bushland and learning about the rare flora and fauna sheltered there. \$158 per person with \$60 going towards the estate's conservation efforts. passelestate.com

5. Glenarty Road's Forage on the Farm is a roaming epicurean adventure through the vines and paddocks, with a four-stage produce feast, wine tasting and encounters with friendly farm animals as you learn about regenerative farming. \$140 per person. glenartyroad.com.au

"We are all custodians of country, and we must know that it is our place that together if we all look after country, country will look after us in return."

Words to live by. And here, people really do. The Saturday morning Margaret River Farmers Market, which turns 21 this year, permits only food and drink stallholders from the region, and they must make or grow their own produce - no reselling. For locals, it's a community hub and food source. For visitors, it's a delicious one-stop shop for the region's organic edible riches, from chocolate made on a traditional stone grinder to traditionally handcrafted goat and sheep cheeses. "Each is a supply chain of one," says Katrina Lombardo, the market's manager, who's handing out "boomerang bags" for shared use as part of the market's no-plastics, low-waste policy.

"People here are genuinely connected to their land and their food sources."

At the region's various farmstays, you can immerse yourself in what that really means. On the McCall family's Burnside Organic Farm, guests in boutique bungalows can embrace their hosts' self-sufficient lifestyle by harvesting fresh veg from the kitchen garden, caper plantation and orchards, and getting acquainted with the animals who all perform vital roles on the farm.

The geese and sheep rotate between paddocks and vineyards, eating the grass and fertilising, the chooks - who love a cuddle - produce eggs and the pigs, although eventually destined for the plate, roam widely and feast royally on acorns dropped by the property's oak trees.

Who knew sheep were expert vine pruners? It's my favourite organic fun fact from a Forage on the Farm tour at Glenarty Road farm and winery in Karridale, Margaret River's southernmost grape-growing region. Ben and Sasha McDonald, fifth-generation farmers, use regenerative practices to tend 98

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Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities here and I see it up close at a Welcome to Country and Smoking Ceremony led by Wadandi Pibulman Elder Dr Wayne Webb and his son Zac, a Wadandi Custodian, to mark the start of the 2023 vintage.

Staff from the region's 200-plus wineries gather with locals and visitors outdoors in the pretty little town of Cowaramup. As everyone passes through the aromatic smoke in this ancient community bonding ritual, the message could not be clearer.

"From the plants to rocks to the ocean and stars, we are all connected to country and country is connected to all of us," says Zac.

Clockwise from main: Nature and Wine Walk at Passel Estate; a Smoking Ceremony to mark the start of the 2023 Margaret River vintage; Tim Shand and Glen Ryan at Voyager Estate; Burnside Organic Farm. **Pictures:** Amy Cooper; Frances Andrijich; Ovis Creative



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picturesque hectares, 1300 sheep, more than 250 fruit trees, 10 grape varieties, vegetable gardens and a hop plantation. Organic growing looks even better when you're wandering through idyllic paddocks and vineyards, stopping to graze at a succession of little rustic timber outdoor bars where fresh produce platters and bottles of chardonnay and shiraz magically materialise.

The farm's lead hand, William Mackintosh, shows me rows of vine leaves trimmed with surgical precision, as if by a fastidious barber. "Sheep," he says. "When we let them in here we wondered if they'd just smash the grapes. But they're actually really delicate."

I pour a glass of cabernet merlot, take my bread and oil, sink into a hammock beside the lake.

At these farms, with their contented creatures and lush crops, everything has a reason and a role. There's a gentle logic in the symbiosis of soil and sky, plant and reap, give and take. It makes you want to learn more.

Many do just that in the storybook surroundings of Fair Harvest Permaculture's verdant 160-hectare property, with its colourful handpainted timber signs, woodlands, flowers and friendly ponies. Jodie Lane and Dorothee Peraz are permaculture experts and

devoted environmentalists who teach regenerative growing practices at their day and residential workshops. Many of the growers across the region learned their craft here, and many more find a passion for it accidentally while camping, teepee glamping, taking a yoga retreat or dropping in for a rainbow-hued homegrown organic meal or cooking workshop at the Fair Harvest cafe.

This haven from city noise makes eco-living fun, comfortable and simple. Your footstep becomes practically invisible, with all waste - toilet stuff too - composted on site, drinking water from the clouds and with food and firewood growing all around. Around the campfire or among the orchards, content-



ment comes easily here - not just from the tranquillity of time spent in this soothing place, but also in knowing you've caused it no harm.

At Passel Estate you can be a force for good by simply raising a glass. When you book an al fresco wine tasting among the vines, amid some of the area's oldest peppermint trees, you're supporting one of the Margaret River region's most vulnerable residents.

This pristine old native bushland is prime habitat for western ringtail possums, an endemic species reduced to a tiny local population of no more than 8000. Passel Estate owners Wendy and Barry Stimpson have been providing sanctuary for ringtails since they rehabilitated a family (passel) displaced by the 2011 bushfires. Amy, the original matriarch, has since produced three babies, the third generation is thriving, and their possum paradise shelters additional rare and threatened native species such as the red-tailed black cockatoo, whose mournful cries echo through the eucalypts while we sip organic shiraz beside 400-year-old grass trees.

Barry, with a detailed affection for his land that typifies everyone I've met here, shows me the overhead arboreal "freeways" planted so possums can roam beyond reach of predators, and points to the ground-level hidey-holes where tiny nocturnal creatures shelter by day.

My final farmstay is at Olio Bello, a 130-hectare working organic olive farm between Margaret River and Cowaramup where you can glamp among the serene olive groves in safari-style, canvas-walled bungalows overlooking the property's heart-shaped reservoir.

Olio Bello, meaning "beautiful oil", has at its heart a 10-tonne olive mill and around it, the team complete every task by hand, from mixing, bottling and labelling the oils to crafting the organic beauty products, leaf tea and the restaurant's delicious olive-centric menu.

Just like grapes, olives love Margaret River's loamy soils and Mediterranean climate, and the farm's 8000-plus trees reward their guardians with lush, eclectic flavours from 14 varieties. Each lends its name to one of the luxury eco-bungalows, and mine is Arbequina, a smooth, aromatic variety. A little bottle with a fresh baguette greets me on arrival, another reminder that every time you explore a new corner of this generous land, it offers you a gift.

I pour a glass of cabernet merlot - I've accumulated my own personal harvest of bottles along the way - take my bread and oil, sink into a hammock beside the lake and watch the sunset turn the water to peach, then ochre, then navy.

As nature's day shift ends and nations of nocturnal creatures awake, the evening comes alive with new sounds. There are stories unfolding all around me in the trees, sky, water and soil; countless threads intertwined, endless layers of life.

My senses are alive too as I savour the food, the wine, the surroundings, the soft evening air.

Time melts into a deep sense of belonging. I'm wrapped in the landscape's gentle embrace, and the words of the Wadandi Custodians, which have echoed in every moment of my visit to their remarkable home, ring truer than ever: "We are all connected to country, and country is connected to all of us."

The writer was a guest of Tourism Western Australia and Voyager Estate

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE: Jetstar launched the first direct commercial flights from the east coast to Margaret River last year, between Melbourne and Busselton. Drive time from Perth to Margaret River is around 3.5 hours.

STAYING THERE: Olio Bello's luxe lakeside glamping in tent-bungalows with full bathrooms and kitchens and bespoke furniture starts at \$309 a night. oliobello.com

Burnside Organic Farm has bungalows with luxury fixtures and gorgeous farmland views for couples and for groups of two to five, from \$450 a night. burnsideorganicfarm.com.au

Fair Harvest Permaculture has various camping/glamping options in its idyllic grounds, as well as year-round residential yoga retreats and permaculture workshops. For a little extra comfort, hire a four-metre canvas bell tent from \$180 a night. fairharvest.com.au

