



By sea to a remote corner

Shirley Sinclair can't get enough of Esperance beaches on a trip to Western Australia's outback

AS the four-wheel-drive connects the dots on the map, the burnt-orange gravel road melts into the green coastal heathland.

Dotted along the route are eye-catching Western Australia Christmas bushes, purple wildflowers and yellow banksia brushes.

In the distance, climbers look like brown ants scurrying up the streaky charcoal surface of the 262m Frenchman's Peak as the cone-like mountain pierces the cornflour-blue sky.

But the colour explosion in this part of Australia's outback is nothing compared to what caresses the eye just over the hill in any direction – the stark white sand on the jaw-dropping beaches of Cape Le Grand National Park.

This is what I see when my mind drifts back to a magical summer's day in Esperance in Western Australia's remote south.

My husband and I had arrived in Esperance the civilised way, aboard Classic International Cruises' MV Athena on a very leisurely five-night cruise from Fremantle.

I had heard about Esperance's famed beaches, but as a born-and-bred Queenslander, I knew we owned bragging rights to Australia's best.

And if you were giving points for beach variety, access, beauty, consistent surf, soft sand texture and the big one – proximity to a café – we probably do.

But in a 180km round trip over bitumen, gravel and sand, I was introduced to close to a dozen beaches ranging from sheltered

bays and picturesque pockets to rocky headlands and open stretches extending as far as the eye could see.

Even under overcast skies, all were spectacular in their own right. Many were deserted.

And the surf ranged from body-surfing size to a respectable half-metre on a "flat" day.

Esperance Regional Tourism Association chairman Milton Valli and his partner Helen Fenemor, who run the Bay of Islands B&B in town, volunteered to play tour guides for the day.

And they couldn't help but rub it in that scientific tests had proven the area's famed Lucky Bay had sand whiter than Queensland's world-renowned Whitehaven Beach.

Another Cape Le Grand National Park beach, Hellfire Bay, was third.

But I was yet to be convinced. That was until morning tea at Hellfire Bay, where the sun was glistening on sand so white and blinding that even the video camera's focus couldn't cope.

The eye-catching teal-coloured water was the same hue as my swimming pool at home.

With temperatures hovering around 30C in the shade, the cool clean waters were calling us in.

Later, the wheels of the 4WD squeaking in Lucky Bay talcum-powder sand wiped the smile from my face.

That and the fact you can reach this beach by sealed road ensured my home-state allegiances were wavering.

Sorry, Whitehaven.

But Milton and Helen saved one of the best for last. Twilight Beach is among their favourites, right in town, at the end of the 10km coastal walk, which also boasts Bluehaven and West Beach.

We didn't have time to see Dolphin Cove to the right of Twilight or Salmon Beach just out of town on the Great Ocean Drive, but I was assured they were just as spectacular.

OK, Esperance. You've got me. But that's only because your wildlife is pretty cool, too.

Sammy the sea lion acted as the "welcoming committee" at our first stop at Tanker Jetty.

Milton said Sammy and his lady friend were thought to have been part of the sea lion colonies of nearby Recherche Archipelago, made up of 150 islands and 1500 islets spread across 270km.

The steep and rocky nature of the islands provides sheltered breeding grounds for sea lions, seals, penguins, and the endangered black-footed rock wallaby, while its bays are an aquatic playground for southern right and humpback whales.

Once Sammy realised food from the local fishermen was easy pickings, he decided to stay in town and chased any other curious sea lions away.

Now he even has a small statue in his honour at the entrance to the jetty.

But the 10-year-old's attention-seeking antics for the crowd lining Tanker Jetty was only our first close encounter with the Esperance wildlife.



ABOVE: A spot of fishing off the rocks is always a good idea. ABOVE RIGHT: Frenchman's Peak.

PHOTOS: SHIRLEY SINCLAIR



No sooner had we hit the sand, 20km out of Esperance on Cape Le Grand Beach, than we saw a pod of dolphins surfing the waves.

And late in the afternoon, we were amused by two emus fossicking in a sand dune only metres away at Wharton Beach.

Southern right and humpback whales enjoy frolicking in Esperance Bay in a season often lasting from June to October, while horse-riding along Cape Le Grand National Park's 25km of sand is a common sight.

And kangaroos are regularly spotted lolling in the water or basking in the sun at various beaches.

Another way to meet the "wil-

dlife" is at the Condingup Tavern – a favourite with the 400 local families, farmers, tradies and touring caravanners and campers.

Pop in and say hello to Rachel Davey – the third generation of her family to run the pub her grandparents, Charlie and Cathryn Johnston, built 21 years ago to complement their general store.

Only outdoor areas have been added to the original design that has created an oasis of timber, granite and polished driftwood furniture in the bush setting.

Espresso coffee and homemade cakes and biscuits are available all day, the wine list would do a metro hotel proud, and from 120 to 250 hearty lunches are served daily in

the peak summer season.

In peak tourist times of Christmas-New Year and Easter, this small rural region of 14,500 swells by 5000 and most of those (60%) come from WA, with the majority of the remainder (30%) from the eastern states.

But once word gets out about those beaches, East Coast Doubting Thomases will surely push those numbers higher.

After all, seeing is believing.

■ *The writer was a guest of Classic International Cruises and Esperance Region Tourism Association.*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Spot the emus; Sammy the sea lion; beautiful beaches are everywhere; Rachel Davey at the Condingup Tavern; wildflowers abound in the bush behind the beach.



GOOD TO KNOW ABOUT ESPERANCE

Road distance from Perth to Esperance: 740km or just on nine hours drive.

■ Athena cruises from Perth and Adelaide next summer from \$450 pp for two nights. A five-night cruise next summer from Perth to Albany and Esperance is priced from \$1095 per person, twin-share. Children under 18 travel free on several cruises, paying only taxes.

Book through travel agents. For more information, see www.classicintcruises.com

■ The Esperance Visitor Centre is on the corner of Dempster and Kemp Sts in the Historic Museum Village.

Phone (08) 9083 1555 or 1300 66 44 55.

Bookings: bookings@visitesperance.com

Information: info@visitesperance.com

Visit www.visitesperance.com

■ A helicopter flight from town is a good way to take in the beaches in all their splendour.

Others prefer to do the Great Bay to Bay Walk from Cape Le Grand to Israelite Bay.

Some like the laid-back approach and camp at Lucky Bay or Cape Le Grand Beach.

Two four-wheel-drive companies also are based in Esperance, offering a range of tours.

■ Condingup Tavern is on the corner of Eyre and Parish Sts, Condingup. Phone (08) 9076 6024.