

The big blue Ningaloo Reef, where visitors can swim with whale sharks, right, has recently joined Unesco's World Heritage List. On the Shore Thing catamaran, far right, guests might spot humpback whales on their migration



THE BIG FISH

It's vast, it's beautiful and it's the richest state in Australia, with more self-made millionaires per capita than anywhere else



In the centre of Kings Park, in Perth, there is a large boab tree which is 750 years old. It wasn't always there, but was transplanted in 2008 from the Kimberley, almost 2,000 miles away, accompanied by a police escort. Local communities applauded the rare tree as it travelled along the highway. Moving it was an ambitious project that carried a considerable risk of failure, but five years later it is growing healthily in its privileged position in the park.

The arrival of the legendary boab is part of the wider reinvention of Perth. Back in the Seventies, it was viewed as a remote, conservative backwater, even though town planners had already begun to rip down heritage buildings that smacked of country towns, and throw up skyscrapers instead. Besides, it seemed too far from anywhere to be taken seriously as a notable world city.

Almost four decades later, all that has changed. Perth is where it's at: closer than either Sydney or Melbourne to the UK and resource-hungry China, and the place where Australia's riches can be found. Last year, the state of Western Australia exported £112 billion's-worth of goods, mainly minerals, from its ports. It also has the highest number, per capita, of self-made millionaires in the world, hence the glamorous buzz of its centre, where new inner-city residents spill out of the hip bars and restaurants.

Food aficionados are picking up on the city's culinary credentials. Co-op Dining, a hot "dego" (the Australian term for degustation) restaurant, joins Amusé as one of the go-to places in east Perth, while El Publico is among a handful of new-wave Mexican restaurants that have opened in the past six months. In the city centre, The Trustee, serving European food, has opened in the former WA Trustees Building, and there is now a branch of the Rockpool Bar & Grill, plus the acclaimed eco-friendly restaurant the Greenhouse.

I visited the Print Hall: a four-storey bar and restaurant complex, serving everything from Asian street food to modern Australian cuisine, carved out of an old printworks. The highlight is Bob's Bar, which pays homage to Bob Hawke, Australia's straight-talking former prime minister who comes from Perth. Under the sign "Bob's Bar" is his quote: "You don't know what you're talking about, you silly old bugger."

The refurbishment of inner-city areas such as Mount

HEAD WEST

the world. Now it is luring well-heeled visitors, too, says **Lydia Bell**

SUPERSTOCK

Lawley and the cultural hub of Northbridge has been accompanied by a wave of hip openings, including speakeasies helped by a relaxation of the licensing laws five years ago. There are ambitious infrastructure projects, too, including a waterfront district, the redevelopment of the Crown casino to include a six-star tower hotel with 500 rooms, a transport link from the city centre to trendy Northbridge and a A\$750-million airport upgrade.

Given the number of tourists now coming to Western Australia, these upgrades are welcome. Last year, 3 per cent more visitors arrived (about 800,000 in total), thanks partly to the launch of new daily flights to Perth from the UK. Historically, there has been a dearth of luxury hotels, but a handful of purveyors of boutique comfort are working on that. For instance, developers have turned St George's House, an 1890s heritage-listed former bishop's residence, into the Terrace Hotel, a contemporary bolthole with a restaurant and bar full to bursting. All these developments signal that Perth has become much more than a gateway to the wilderness.

However, that wilderness is quite something – and not all of it is deserts and gorges. At Ningaloo Reef, the silence of a starlit Indian Ocean and the treasures that lie beneath it are the draw for visitors, some of whom arrive there courtesy of Sail Ningaloo. The company, now in its fourth season, can spirit passengers to unvisited sections of the reef on board the 51ft catamaran Shore Thing. From the boat, at what is called the Green Mile site, guests can dive with turtles and, from May to December, see humpback whales pass by. From other specially licensed vessels, visitors can swim or snorkel with whale sharks – creatures weighing up to 21 tons, which in spite of their size are more interested in plankton than they are in people.

Although Ningaloo Marine Park has just been added to Unesco's World Heritage List (see page 12), boosting its profile, the area has so far escaped mass tourism. Other than the Shore Thing catamaran, Sal Salis, a luxury bush camp, is the canny choice for enjoying this beautiful place in solitude. Its nine tents blend with their surroundings and the low-tech camp espouses a relaxed, barefoot lifestyle: it is all about immersing oneself in the silent, pristine wilderness of the Cape Range. At night, the chef cooks locally harvested seafood flavoured with indigenous herbs, for feasts on a deck overlooking the Indian Ocean.

The place that draws most visitors to the area, though, is the Bungle Bungles Range, with its orange and black domes, sculpted by nature. The place to stay is the Bungle Bungles Safari Camp – the first to open under Western Australia's government-run Naturebank programme, designed to develop eco-friendly camps in protected beauty spots. Run by Kimberley Wild Expeditions, it is the only private camp in the park with views of the Bungles massif itself, so sundowners are the main event of the day, when the mountains glow red. Currently, guests can only stay as part of an expedition from Broome (the shortest lasts five days); next season, though, a new overland tour from Broome to Darwin will be launched, for those who prefer not to drive the Australia Way in a 4x4 themselves.

This year is the 30th anniversary of the "discovery" of the Bungle Bungles, when a film crew stumbled upon their beehive domes, towering arches and natural

THE REAL LUXURY HERE IS NOT THE SUITES BUT THE TRANQUILLITY OF THE SURROUNDINGS

amphitheatres, including Cathedral Gorge. Seeing it is akin to a spiritual experience. A "flightseeing" tour is de rigueur; heli-tours are the best way to get close.

True luxury can be found at Berkeley River Lodge, flanked by escarpments and waterfalls and accessed on a floatplane from Kununurra, an hour away. Twenty smart metallic "shacks" with ocean views sit on top of a coastal dune, with views over the Timor Sea and the Berkeley River; the luxury is not so much in the relaxed simplicity of the suites (louvred windows, floors of pressed bamboo, whitewashed clapboard walls and outside bathrooms) but in the tranquillity and other-worldliness of the surroundings. Staying in this ancient landscape, glimpsed by most people only from a scenic flight above, feels like a privilege. Days can be spent taking boat cruises, helicopter flights, bush and beach walks, and going fishing; nights are for feasting on the modern Australian

food prepared by James Ward, who trained under Rick Stein. Before dinner, it is worth turning up for the star-gazing session: feeling like an insignificant speck in the universe is by far the best way to get life in perspective.

The mere existence of this lodge speaks of the Kimberley "can-do" spirit. Everything came by barge from Wyndham, 30 hours away. To create this remote Eden, owners Martin and Kim Peirson-Jones left their home in Broome and spent two years sleeping in rough conditions while the project went up. The costs and complexities of maintaining such a place are phenomenal.

While Berkeley River Lodge is certainly comfortable, the best example of real outback luxury is El Questro, the original stylish oasis in the harsh landscape of the Kimberley. Set on the sandstone banks of a river bend, the Homestead (just one element of the million-acre estate, which also has a tented resort, bungalows and a campsite) has been delivering a particularly Australian brand of luxury since 1991.

Last year, the owners added three Cliff Side Retreats – glass-fronted cubby holes with outside tubs – that blend in seamlessly with the rugged terrain surrounding them. Staying in one of them is a meditative experience, though guests can always drift over to the Homestead for drinks and conversation if they wish.

My outback thrills, like most people's, ended with a dose of tropical luxury in Broome, which clings to the perimeter of the Great Sandy Desert. Here, a new resort, The Billi, provides tented luxury for fly-and-floppers (or villas for those who don't like canvas). The intimate little resort is characterised by a solipsistic tranquillity. Although the famous white sands and camels of Cable Beach are just down the road, most guests choose to spend time in the calm oasis of the gardens. With its private decks under towering trees echoing with birdsong, and its outside bathrooms with rainforest showers that bring new meaning to the phrase, The Billi is a reminder that Western Australia can provide not just beautiful bush, but creature comforts, too – and do both with consummate ease.

Fly to Perth with British Airways and its codeshare partners, with return fares from £899. Book at ba.com. For more information, see australia.com.



Town and country Tented luxury, below and right, at Sal Salis camp at Ningaloo Reef, and the new Billi Resort, bottom right, in Broome



THE DETAILS

The Terrace Hotel Perth (0061 8 9214 4444, terracehotelperth.com.au) has rooms from A\$450/E264.

Kimberley Wild Expeditions (0061 8 9193 7778, kimberleywild.com.au) offers a five-day tour through the Kimberley, with two nights at the

Bungle Bungles Safari Camp, from A\$1,595, including guides, transport and most meals. **Berkeley River Lodge** (0061 8 9169 1330, berkeleyriver.com.au) costs A\$825 per person, including activities, meals and drinks. Rooms at **El Questro**

Homestead's Cliff Side Retreats (0061 3 9426 7590, elquestro.com.au) cost A\$2,649, including tours, food and drink. A three-day, three-night tour of Ningaloo Reef with **Sail Ningaloo**

(0061 4 0211 0427, sailningaloo.com.au) starts at A\$1,700 per person, including meals, soft drinks, activities and guides. **Sal Salis** (0061 2 9571 6399, salsalis.com.au) costs A\$725 per person including activities, tours, food and wine. A tent at **The Billi** (0061 8 9192 1711, thebilli.com.au) starts at A\$265, villas at about A\$325.