

Le Grand Tour

Western Australian style

With some of the world's very best beaches you can't miss this coast

Story and photography by GLENYS GELZINIS

'You'll always remember the first time you saw the colour of the water'. This was the confident statement from one of the locals in Esperance when we spoke of our intended stay at Lucky

Bay. They were completely right but little did we know that Lucky Bay is just one of the dazzling beaches in Cape Le Grand National Park around 50 kilometres south east of Esperance.

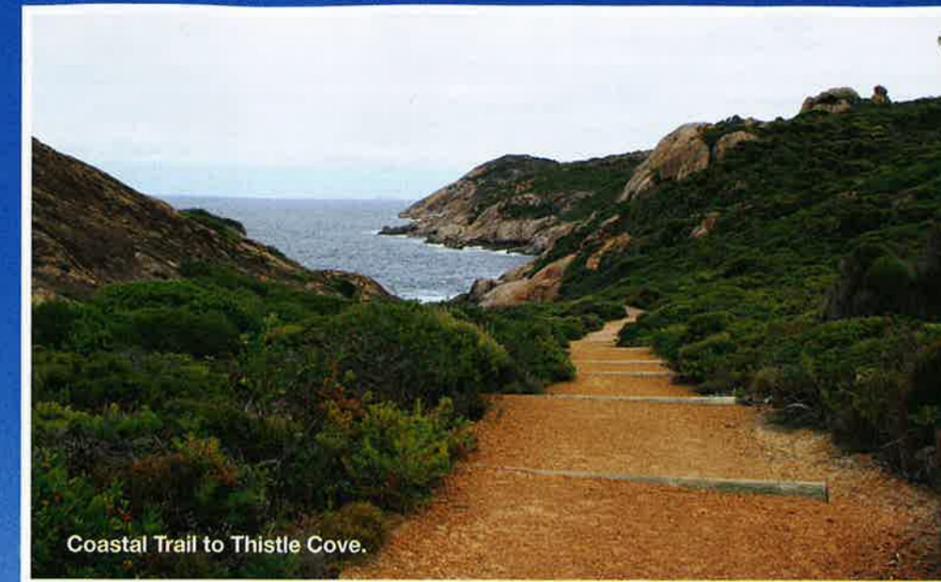
I had seen the photographs of Lucky Bay with Western Grey kangaroos lounging on the perfect paper white sand with aquamarine crystal clear water as a backdrop and thought it too good to be true. An unbelievably quintessential Australian scene which would need all the planets to be aligned to capture a sight like this I thought. Either that or great use of photo editing software and filters. Incredibly though, after catching my

breath from the staggering beauty of the colours, there they were, the resident kangaroos with joeys, posing for photos and relaxing on the sand as perfect as any post-card image I'd seen.

Happily we were staying for a few days in the campground perched above the western end of the beach and would have lots of opportunities to get to know the locals. Sites in the campground cater for everything from swags and small tents to large caravans, but it is on a first in first served basis with no bookings being taken. As you enter the Cape Le Grand National Park the ranger's station has the number of available

sites on display for that day at the Cape Le Grand and Lucky Bay campgrounds. The best option is to get to the park early in the morning, pay the entry fee for the number of days you plan to stay then head to the campground and wait for sites to become available.

When we visited the campground, the hosts had a sign board displaying which sites would be available that day and they advised us to pick a preferred site then 'stake your claim' by setting up a camp chair until the current occupant leaves. Although it does feel a little like vultures circling it is the way it's done unless you find an already vacant spot that you're happy with. Happy with our site, overlooking the bay and with a set of steps next to it leading down to the beach it didn't take long for the kangaroos to stop by for a visit. The inquisitive roos wandered through and around our caravan setup and at one stage even stopped a while so that a joey could nurse from its mother under the shelter of our awning. It came as no surprise to us then to find out that our campground tenting neighbour, a lady from Venezuela, had been paying daily for 'just one more night'. This had been going on for about 2 weeks so far and still looked to be extended. The friendliness of the kangaroos was something we had never witnessed before and felt privileged to experience.



Coastal Trail to Thistle Cove.

Dragging ourselves away we decided to take a drive to see the other beaches in the national park. Driving out of Lucky Bay we went to the furthest beach in the south west corner, Le Grand Beach. Here you will find another small campground with 15 sites, tucked in behind scrub and only a short walk over to the beach. At one end of the beach is the imposing Mount Le Grand and a number of islands that form part of the Recherche Archipelago can also be seen here. It becomes very obvious why Esperance and this part of the

coastline are also known as the Bay of Isles.

With a 4WD it's possible to drive onto Cape Le Grand Beach and you can set yourself up comfortably for a day's fishing and swimming with the beach being wide enough for others to drive by. You can drive along this stretch of sand, around 22 kilometres back in the direction of Esperance until you reach Wylie Bay, but you do need to pay attention to tides so as not to get stranded. We were happy to set up some shade and chairs and try our luck at fishing with only a few others to share the beach



The stunning Lucky Bay.



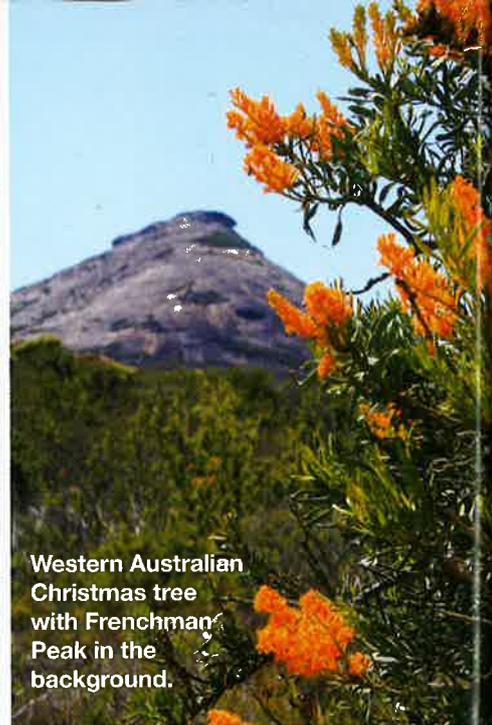
Le Grand Beach.



Kangaroos at Lucky Bay.



Home sweet home overlooking Lucky Bay.



Western Australian Christmas tree with Frenchman Peak in the background.

with and one inquisitive wild brumby in the sand dunes. As the tide began making its way in, we drove off the beach and headed back on the smooth easy driving road and past Frenchman Peak.

This imposing rock is deceptively towering and for the brave there is a 3 kilometre walking trail that can be taken from the eastern slope to the peak. It is rated as very difficult because of the steep gradient and climbers should allow 2 hours for the return trek. Although the views are no doubt spectacular I must admit I was happy to admire its amazing formation from the safety of the ground. The distinctive cut out window in the rock was carved by wind and wave action when sea levels were much higher millions of years ago and makes for interesting photos, as do the tiny ant-like people atop the rock.

Our next destination was Hellfire Bay. The ominous sounding bay is believed to have been named after the weather phenomenon St Elmo's fire where an electric charge from lightning can cause a ship's mast to fluoresce. Far from its frightful name though we hadn't seen anything as heavenly as the vivid blue water. From the car park area there was an easy walk down to the beach, past a couple of toilets, a BBQ and shelter area and onto paradise. More ridiculously white, squeaky sand and the deepest sapphire blue water I'd ever seen. A visitor to the BBQ shelter area was causing quite a stir on our way back, a very large monitor lizard was lumbering through trying to find a sunny spot to soak up the heat from the sun.

Driving on we wound our way around to Thistle Cove which although still having the same stunning blue water edged with whiter than white sand it was also had a

much rockier headland. There are some huge interesting rock formations to discover and photograph but as always you need to be observant to wave action near the rocks. There is a couple of rock fishing anchor points here as well as a safety life ring situated in the rocks. One prominent overshadowing, almost wave shaped rock is called whistling rock which because of its curvature can at times echo the sound of the wind and waves in the cove. You'll also find some interesting interpretive signage which gives the indigenous dreaming story behind the rocks in the bay.

Back at Lucky Bay we had another 'only in Australia' experience by indulging in a 'Kangacino' whilst tucking into damper scones covered in quandong jam. All of this served from the Lucky Bean mobile coffee van on the pristine sand by Robyne and Doc Reynolds who have been running this family business since 2014. The van operates from September through to April and is worth visiting not only for the novelty but for the truly delicious coffee and scones.

There's no need for guilt over this indulgence either as you can work it off by walking a section of the Cape Le Grand coastal trail. There is a number of walks you can take between the surrounding bays varying in time and difficulty. The entire trail from Le Grand Beach to Rossiter Bay extends for 15 kilometres one way and walkers are advised to allow 8-9 hours. The quickest and easiest section is from Lucky Bay to Thistle Cove taking around 1 hour one way and is relatively easy to manage. This walk is one you can take from the Lucky Bay campground giving great views over the bay before passing through dense heath vegetation and rocky headlands, then opens up to the panorama of Thistle Cove.

FACT FILE

Getting there: Cape Le Grand National Park is 50 kilometres south east of Esperance in Western Australia. All roads within the park are sealed other than the spur road to Rossiter Bay which is a graded road. Park entry fee is \$12 per vehicle and camping costs \$10 per adult, per night.

When to go: From September through to April are ideal with the summer months being a stand out to marvel at the incredibly white sand dotted with roos. It is best to avoid the peak times of school holidays and public holidays to have a better chance of getting a site at Lucky Bay and Cape Le Grand campgrounds.

Where to stay: Cape Le Grand campground has 15 campsites and Lucky Bay campground over 60 sites over two levels. Both areas have septic toilets and solar heated showers. There are also camp kitchen areas with barbecues and dish washing areas. Sites are non-powered and phone reception isn't available unless you take a drive to the Frenchman Peak area where you will find people parked and making use of the reception available there.

Must dos: Make friends with the kangaroos at Lucky Bay, they are very obliging models for photographs. Enjoy a Kangacino and damper scones on the beach from the Lucky Bean coffee van. Walk part of the Cape Le Grand Coastal Trail or if you're up to it, scale Frenchman Peak. Drive along Cape Le Grand beach, find a secluded stretch and settle in for a day of fishing.