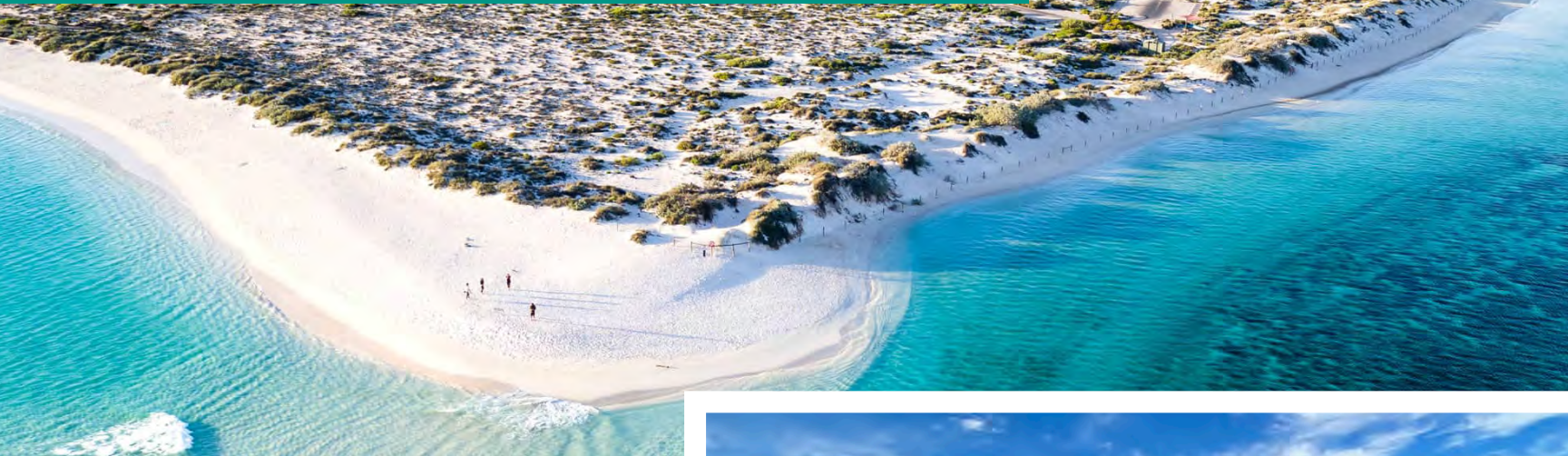


# The Wild, Wild West



## Western Australia's Ningaloo Coast reveals coral reefs and white-sand beaches, wallabies and whale sharks

BY DOUG WALLACE

**T**he Perth airport is a sea of orange and yellow safety vests at five in the morning—dozens of miners with hardhats heading to work in the iron ore, copper and nickel mines in the north country. After a few days of getting to know Western Australia's capital city, I'm flying north, too, to Exmouth, a tiny town on the tip of Australia's North West Cape.

Like most who visit, I've come to hike the red rocks of Cape Range National Park, to snorkel the coral gardens of Ningaloo Marine Park and to swim with the majestic whale sharks, the world's largest fish. Happily, the whole region is a safe haven for several threatened animal species—humpback whales, manta rays, dugongs, rock wallabies—with many conservation groups working toward their protection.

The 260-metre-long World Heritage-listed Ningaloo Reef is Australia's largest fringing coral reef—as opposed to a barrier reef like the big one on the other side of the continent. The whale sharks, which average around 10 metres in size, call this part of the world home from March through September. As I head out with a dozen or so other people on a boat tour to find this slow-moving, gentle fish, I notice a plane circling overhead—learning later that it spots the shark shadows in the water and alerts the boat captains to let them know where to head.





The adventure team draws us in for a briefing on how we're going to successfully swim alongside the whale shark without bumping into each other or the giant fish itself. It's a strategy that seems complicated at first, yet rolls out like a charm when we reach our first one. We jump into the water in groups of four, get in line with our snorkel guide, and then dip our heads in the water when prompted. I am instantly stunned by the beauty of this graceful creature. The gentle giant swims past us as we watch in a tidy row, its blue-grey spotted skin shimmering in the sunlight just below the surface. Keeping three metres back, we are then allowed to swim along with it. By the time we connect with our third whale shark, I am scooting behind it to swim on its other side where there are fewer snorkelers, and, using my fins with as straight legs as possible, I can keep up—but it doesn't take long to tucker out.

We cap our time in the water with a more relaxed snorkel at a different part of the Ningaloo Reef, watching an octopus change colour seemingly on a whim and having our pictures taken with a little ray who is pretending to sleep in the sand.

The natural attractions on land are equally as beautiful. This includes the 48,000-hectare Cape Range National Park about an hour outside of Exmouth. Our guide relates the natural and human history of the region as we hike along the spectacular red cliffs of the Yardie Creek Gorge. This is definitely off the beaten track—a rocky plateau of rugged limestone and deep canyons. As we amble along, little black-flanked rock wallabies pop out of the sharp rock crevasses to skip past us and small colonies of fruit bats squabble in the trees.

Just when the heat of the day starts to wear me down, it's time for a swim at nearby Turquoise Bay, one of Western Australia's most famous beaches. And as we drift along over the kaleidoscope of coral gardens, my mind wanders, too—to when I'll be planning my return visit.



## When You Go

- Exmouth Dive & Whalesharks Ningaloo is one of the leading tour operators for swimming with whale sharks. Services also include scuba diving, snorkeling and whale-watching tours. [EXMOUTHDIVING.COM.AU](http://EXMOUTHDIVING.COM.AU)
- Exmouth Adventure Company is a small-group ecoadventure outfit offering sea kayaking, snorkeling and hiking, plus beach camping tours and wilderness treks of various lengths. [EXMOUTHADVENTURECO.COM.AU](http://EXMOUTHADVENTURECO.COM.AU)
- Exmouth Escape Resort is a little oasis of self-contained apartments surrounding a large pool and a casual seafood restaurant. Tour packages offer a range of regional experiences. [EXMOUTHESCAPERESORT.COM.AU](http://EXMOUTHESCAPERESORT.COM.AU)
- Whalebone Brewing Co. is Exmouth's top watering hole, brewing inventive craft beers, while a busy kitchen throws together generously portioned pizzas. [WHALEBONEBREWING.COM.AU](http://WHALEBONEBREWING.COM.AU)

