

My husband Matt and I woke up on our first morning in Exmouth, Western Australia looking forward to the day of exploring that lay ahead. It seemed a long way from anywhere and driving up the peninsula we had no idea what to expect from the place – everyone we'd met on the road had raved about how Coral Bay – a small coastal resort further down the coast – was the best gateway to the Ningaloo Marine Park, but reading about the gorges, national parks, turquoise lagoons and the marine and wildlife around Exmouth, we'd decided to take the detour in our camper van for a night or two.

With Exmouth as our base, we enlisted the services of Dave, our sightseeing guide for the day. He was local to the area, having recently moved full time to the place after having enjoyed it as a holiday home for many years. We climbed aboard his 4x4 bus and joined the rest of the group.

GROOVY GORGE

Our first stop was Charles Knife Canyon. It was one of those places where you had to get out and about to appreciate the sheer scale of it. Dave dropped us off at the top of the canyon so that we could follow the pathway and drink in the views.

The vast gorge looked like it was made up of stacks

The whole area was under the sea bed millions of years ago and the rocks were once coral

of coloured rocks piled on top of one another. As well as grooves going horizontally across, there were thick channels running down the rock face created by streams of water.

The whole area used to be under the sea bed millions of years ago. The rocks were once coral which fed on sea life, and grew in height as the bones and skeletons of fish were piled on top of one another.

The colours were more muted than Uluru, but it was equally as spectacular. There were ambers and browns, with scatters of green along the floor of the canyon where the land collected the nutrients from the rain water. In places, lumps of rock had fallen out of the canyon face, leaving bright orange bite marks in the cliff. Below, the discarded lumps lay in jumbled heaps.

When we arrived back at the bus we were more than ready for the tea and cake that was waiting for us. Dave pointed out the Turtle Centre to us as we drove past



and suggested we might want to come back later that night to join a guided night tour to watch the turtles coming ashore to lay their eggs. That sounded like a date to us!

FRIENDLY LOCALS

Dave drove us to a local chill-out spot called Osprey Bay – an intimate white sandy beach, framed with rocks on either side. There was a perfect lagoon gently lapping against the shore. It was heaven.

Apart from a couple fishing waist deep in the turquoise water, we were all alone. Dave unpacked the lunch while we all stripped down and headed into the water. I was more than ready to jump straight in, but was horrified to find the water was freezing! It was about 36 degrees air temperature, and the water was around 26 degrees. I never expected 26 degrees to feel cold but after a few minutes spent acclimatising, it felt wonderful. I even saw a green turtle come up for air close by, and then dive back down again. I'm not sure who was more surprised, him or me!

Above A couple fishing waist-deep in the water in Osprey Bay

Right Snorkelling around the aqua lagoons was a joy for Karen

Into the blue

Gorgeous gorges, turquoise lagoons and fascinating wildlife, there's more to Exmouth than the Ningaloo Reef, writes **Karen Bleakley**



The lagoon was surrounded by the Ningaloo Reef – Australia's longest fringing reef – which protected it from the heavy waves and kept the larger animals out, such as big sharks. It also meant that the colour was the kind of divine shade of blue that you only get in shallow lagoons.

This was the first time we'd been in Australia and seen beaches reminiscent of the South Pacific islands. After half an hour in the cool water, it was time to dry off and have some lunch.

SHARK TALE

Our afternoon began with a boat trip down Yardie Creek. The creek wound its way through a gorge that looked like it was made from crumbles of rock. The steep walls were deep red and streaked with black and white markings.

Although it initially looked like a flat face, there were actually lots of little ledges and caves in the rock, providing perfect hiding places for rock wallabies. We managed to spot a few as our boat drifted down stream.



There were massive osprey nests wedged onto the outcrops too. I couldn't believe how big they were – they looked like they were made from branches rather than twigs! We got to see a few Australian kestrels and one even stayed still as we pulled the boat right up alongside and took photographs.

As the boat retraced the journey, we were treated to a view of the lagoon melting into the mouth of the creek. Next stop was Turquoise Bay; a beautiful stretch of dazzling white sand with access to the aqua lagoon.

What followed was some of the best snorkelling >>>



A chance encounter with one of Exmouth's local inhabitants

we'd done on the trip so far (and we'd done a lot!) There were so many unusual fish to be found here and the colourful coral was absolutely teeming with life.

At first we ended up paddling off in opposite directions following anything colourful that caught our eye. As I approached a big coral head I realised that lurking behind it was a shark. I swam over to Matt and used my best snorkel language to tell him what I'd seen. Then I looked down and beneath me was an elegant, blue spotted ray. I decided to stick with Matt this time – if there were sharks in the lagoon I wanted someone next to me, even though we'd been told they were harmless! We both turned our heads at the same moment to see a shark coming up on our left. This one was bigger than me (although given that I'm only four foot 11 that's not any great feat). Like the last one, he whizzed past us in seconds. A few metres ahead of us,

There were so many unusual fish and the colourful coral was absolutely teeming with life



The safari bus which showed Karen's tour group the gems surrounding Exmouth



hundreds of fish started jumping out of the water trying to escape the threat of being eaten.

By the time we'd eaten afternoon tea I was starting to flag. It was getting late and we'd been on the go since 7.30am. On the way back to our campsite we had a final stop at the lighthouse. Up on the hill we had a 360 degree view over the ridiculously beautiful national park and the lagoon.

As Dave pulled into the campsite to drop us off we caught sight of the swimming pool and decided to have a quick dip on our way to the van. The day wasn't over yet though, so after the quickest shower and dinner in history we were back on the road again, and headed towards the Turtle Centre.

STOP, ROCK AND DROP

At the information centre, our group gathered together while the staff talked to us about the different turtles living in the lagoon. We were then split into three small groups and set off along the beach.

The moon was just starting to peep over the horizon on the opposite side to where the sun had just dipped. Both spots were bathed in an orangey pink glow making it look as though there were two sunsets. Exmouth is one of the rare places that you can see both the sun set and moon rise at the same time and the fact that it was going to be a full moon made it all the more special. We had to walk slowly along the tide line and be prepared to 'stop, rock and drop' – that is, stop in our tracks, be as still as possible and drop as low as possible. If a turtle came ashore we couldn't allow her to see us as it would put her off laying her eggs. After an hour, one of our group spotted a turtle coming out



Left Karen enjoyed wildlife spotting on a boat trip through Yardie Creek



A stretch of dazzling white sands border the Turquoise Bay lagoon



Above Charles Knife Canyon looked like it was made up of stacks of coloured rocks

Above right Karen and her husband Matt came away with fond memories of Exmouth



of the water about 10 metres away. We stayed quiet as it slowly braved the waves and emerged onto the sand. It was big – almost one metre in length – and it moved desperately slowly. Once it crawled a little way up the beach it turned and started walking parallel to the water away from us. We all waited as it blended into the darkness and eventually stopped.

While she was gone, someone in our group spotted a glint of moonlight from another turtle shell in the water. This one was struggling against the waves on the opposite side of us. A few minutes later we could

see the dark shape pull itself up onto the beach and then it started to move much faster as it took a look around. Things obviously didn't feel right for her and she quickly turned around, vanishing from sight.

It was getting late and we knew we were only allowed on the beach until 11pm. When our guide arrived back to join us, she had a big smile on her face. The first turtle was laying her eggs and we could all go and have a look. At this stage in the laying process we were told she would be in a trance and wouldn't be aware that we were watching.

We all trailed up the beach in the darkness and under the beam of our guides torch we were able to see the turtle dropping ping pong ball-sized eggs into a sandy hole. We stood watching her for a while until it was time to leave the beach.

On the drive back to our campsite we spotted a few kangaroos lurking in the bushes but luckily none jumped out in front of us. We went back to the campsite dreaming of the ways we could make a living in Exmouth so that we never had to leave. It truly was a special place. 🇦🇺