

# travel

## BRIGHT START

In the pre-dawn dark, Perth Airport's Terminal 2 is bright with fluoro. The Rio Tinto team are going through health checks at tables outside. The BHP brigade are ushered in to security, to queue through quickly. And then they are on planes and gone to mine sites, which leaves us — WA's army of holiday makers. I look up at the departures information and Regional Express' 7.15am to Carnarvon is ready to board ...

## YES WE CARNARVON

No, it's not Cairo or California, Caracas or Calgary, Cardiff or Cape Town — but aren't we lucky to have somewhere "out of the ordinary" like Carnarvon to fly to in REX's Saab 340 turboprop 34-seater with just over two hours' flying time for the 820km. I'm looking at prices from \$201 each way (which includes all that scenery below) ...

## QUITE A CANVAS

Passengers and crew are all masked up, and I'm watching the country below through the aircraft's window. WA beneath me ... a pastiche of ochre, red dirt, scrub, salt lakes, and then the coast, with its blonde lip and the turquoise ocean beyond, dropping into inky blue. What a joint. Near Carnarvon, it becomes even more dramatic — jigsaw puzzle meets dot painting, with the single, straight grey line of the highway below.

## THIS PLACE HAS AP-PEEL

You might think of stopping overnight in Carnarvon on the way north or south. But you wouldn't think of coming to Carnarvon for a quick break? Really? Carnarvon has good weather, great produce, interesting stuff to learn, surprising beaches, the Blowholes, Quobba Station and Red Bluff to the north, Wooramel Station to the south and the Kennedy Ranges to the east.

And ... it has frozen chocolate coated bananas. They are the good stuff. They are nirvana. They are heaven, in anyone's language. And there they are, in Morel's freezer, just waiting for me and worth every cent of the \$3.50.

And ... for the chickens at Mark and Claire Parry's Gascoyne Organic Farm, there is a different sort of nirvana. A different sort of good stuff. They come bustling out to greet us, and then a couple duck under the vehicle and start pecking dead bugs off. Mark and Claire have had a busy time, like so many others in the Gascoyne. Mango tubs are now limited to two per vehicle "due to unprecedented demand this year". On Fruit Loop Drive, Mark and Claire's produce is beautiful.

Just over 80km north of Carnarvon on the way to Quobba Station, there's a rise on the unsealed road, and a gathering of vehicles that seems out of place. And then I realise people are on their mobile phones, clustered here in a reception spot.



Frozen chocolate coated banana in Carnarvon. Picture: Stephen Scourfield



The hill near Quobba Station where there's mobile phone reception. Picture: Stephen Scourfield

day, particularly for his Shakespearian roles.

## PART OF THE EVENING SET

David Garrick was also a playwright who preferred sunsets. He wrote: "Let others hail the rising sun; I bow to that whose course is run."

## RED DOG HIGHWAY

The red kelpie which was often seen along the Karratha-Tom Price Road was immortalised in a 2011 film — and now in the renaming of the road itself.

The road, used by travellers heading to Millstream Chichester National Park and Karijini National Park, has officially been renamed Manuwarra Red Dog Highway. Manuwarra translates to "heaps" or "masses" and is the Yindjibarndi name for the place known as Red Dog Gorge, in Millstream Chichester National Park. The second part of the name honours the kelpie. The third stage of upgrades to the road is complete, with 48km sealed.

## PETAL POWER

There are still plenty of wildflowers in Australia's Coral Coast — it's been a long season. Western Australia Visitor Centre in Perth has a Wildflower Tracker at [wavisitorcentre.com.au/wildflowers](http://wavisitorcentre.com.au/wildflowers).



Jim Regan on the wheat sacks in Wubin.

## ONE LUMP OR TWO?

Last week I mentioned the loads carried by wheat sack lumpers in Wubin, as explained outside the Wubin Wheatbelt Museum.

It prompted reader Robyn Regan to delve into her family history album. She writes: "My

father-in-law, Jim Regan, worked on the wheat bins at Cadoux (in the north-eastern Wheatbelt) from the age of 15 until he was recruited by the Claremont Football Club. He used to tell us he was paid extra as he was able to carry two bags at a time. He later won a medal for bravery at the mines and a Military Medal during the war. He was an extraordinary man."

Robyn kindly adds: "Keep up the good work encouraging us to visit our wonderful WA."

Yes we will, and yes it is.

**Stephen Scourfield**  
Travel Editor

## CARRY ON CAMPING

At Quobba Station, 80km north of Carnarvon, Tim and Sara Meecham have two camping areas, and at the peak of this year's season in July and August, there were over 100 caravan and camper trailers at Quobba itself and more than that at their other site, Red Bluff.

About 120km south of Carnarvon, Sara's sister, Rachael Steadman, and husband Justin, have steadily welcomed more than 100 a night.

## CATCH 22

... Western Australians are out and about in numbers, and, without the usual backpackers, the local tourism industry is struggling to find staff and service the demand.

What makes this problem worse for accommodation providers is that with so much "booked out", if they do find staff, where will they stay?

## SIMPLY YONDERFUL

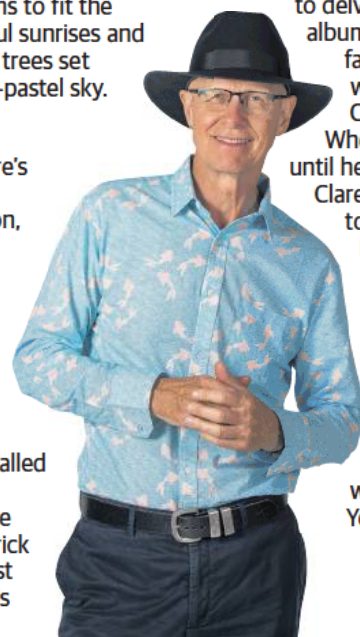
Tourism Western Australia's Wander Out Yonder

advertising campaign has a Shakespearean echo. Yonder is a funny, old-fashioned, unused word these days. I doubt any of us shout out "I'm just going to yonder shop for some milk", but we might remember Romeo's words in Shakespeare's play Romeo and Juliet: "But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?"

And that all seems to fit the Gascoyne's beautiful sunrises and sunsets, with palm trees set against a harlequin-pastel sky.

## MUCH ADO

William Shakespeare's home, Stratford-upon-Avon, in Warwickshire, England, has been on the tourist map since 1769, when the town struggled to cope with all the visitors who came to a three-day festival called David Garrick's Shakespeare Jubilee Festival. David Garrick was one of the most famous actors of his



Gascoyne Organic Farm. Picture: Stephen Scourfield



**GASCOYNE STATIONS**

# Tourism in mix to shape

Diversified station income key, writes **STEPHEN SCOURFIELD**

**C**ountry and cattle. Terroir and tourism. The pastoral industries have surprisingly deep roots in the dust and ranglands of the Gascoyne region of Australia's Coral Coast. George Grey came through here in 1839, naming the Gascoyne River for Capt. John Gascoyne, an important member of the London-based Western Australian Missionary Society. Nearly 20 years later, Francis Gregory travelled here extensively, declaring it highly suitable for pastoralism. The area was being settled through the 1860s, it is recorded that by 1880 there were about

20,000 sheep in the region, and Carnarvon became a town in 1883. Today there are 80 pastoral stations in the Gascoyne, with an average pastoral lease of 149,405ha. But these ranglands are marginal and fragile, and some regions show their history of heavy grazing. Modern pastoralists look at the wear and tear on their land, the impact on the environment and the sustainability of their land, and look for ways to reduce stock levels but maintain income. They look for diversity, and that is leading an increasing number to station stays. Tourism can support the recovery of the land, along with other diversity, to horticulture and inland aquaculture. Despite its history as a wool

producing region, the main production from the pastoral region in the Gascoyne is now beef, sheep and lamb meat. But the productivity per hectare of the ranglands is low compared with that of the southern agricultural regions of WA. The Gascoyne Murchison Strategy encapsulates the move towards diversification to protect this marginal region, and it has just been announced that nearly \$1 million is being put into a 362km dog-proof fence to protect pastoral stock from wild dogs. The Gascoyne Development Commission sums it up: "Pastoral stations represent more than just an industry to the people of the Gascoyne. "It is a way of life that characterises the history and people of the region."



**WOORAMEL STATION**

**R**achael Steadman has shown me Wooramel Station's eco tents, fire pits, artesian bore hot baths, its eight comfortable rooms and the caravan and camper trailer parking area in shade under big trees by the "upside down" Wooramel River, which runs underground and appears on the surface only two or three times a year, after heavy inland rains.

Wooramel River Retreat, as visitors might know it, is 850km north of Perth, just off the North West Coastal Highway in the Gascoyne, 20km before Carnarvon.

It's a popular stopover on the way north (and south), and this extraordinary year there have been up to 100 caravans a night here. Some people stay longer too, for the self-drive tour route around the property and coast, for the birdwatching, or for the big outside dinners – Monday night's 12-hour smoked meats feast or the traditional Australian camp oven dinner on Wednesdays. Just to just spend a bit of time on a station.

For when we sit on the veranda and husband Justin joins us, Wooramel's real story emerges.

This is a family owned, working cattle station, established in the early 1880s, with John Winthrop Hackett an early proprietor.

In the 1920s, the Hall family bought the station and drilled three bores, which turned up so much artesian water that hundreds of kilometres of open drains were made to carry water to the stock, opening up the country.

Wooramel covers 1430sqkm and the Wooramel River provides grassed flood plains, and the station's 60km coastline has grazing on native salt and blue bush pastures.

Justin's grandfather, Tom (who had arrived in Australia on a boat as a 16-year-old), had established Errabiddy Station and his father David had worked Dalgety Downs.

The Steadman family bought Wooramel's lease in 1987, to move closer to the coast from Dalgety Downs, which is inland near Gascoyne Junction.

They both capitalised on and carefully managed the number of feral goats on the property, which then had a strong international market. They moved from merino sheep to the damara meat breed.

But they also began a regenerative process in these ranglands.

Justin takes a modern, informed approach to the landscape, resting it, not grazing sheep, but maintaining a stable herd of black Angus and red Angus crossed with droughtmaster cattle. It keeps animals on the

Justin and Rachael Steadman



land, well managed, ready for the day when it can take more. This crossing of droughtmasters and Angus cattle has also helped to allow the regeneration of fragile country, while still being economic. But the station stay business now produces twice the income of the station's pastoralism – tourism and diversity supporting the changed approach in this fragile landscape.

The artesian waters play a different part today. Natural pressure brings it from 240m down, and maintains a constant temperature of about 33C. It contains iron, salt and magnesium – an ideal, natural mineral bath.



Hot pools of artesian water at Wooramel Station. Pictures: Stephen Scourfield

**fact file**

- Wooramel Station is open until December 23, then closed for January and February. Next season begins on March 1.
- Wooramel River Retreat's eco tents are \$125 a night, queen rooms \$135, twin single rooms \$135, a self-contained two-bedroom unit is \$230 and camp sites are \$15.
- [wooramel.com.au](http://wooramel.com.au) and 0499 425 888



# pastoral enterprises

## QUOBBA STATION

Quobba Station sits neatly at the heart of the Gascoyne's pastoral history. By 1881, there were at least eight pastoral stations and 1.4 million sheep in the Gascoyne. Quobba Station, 80km north of Carnarvon and along 80km of coastline, was established in 1989. And the following year, Carnarvon was the biggest wool exporting port in the world, from the new One Mile Jetty, which had been built between 1897 and 1899 for a cost of £15,967, two shillings and seven pence. The Meecham family has been on the 750sqkm Quobba for more than 40 years, with Tim, Sara and family here for well over 20 years. The station originally ran merinos but, since that era, has run up to 10,000 damaras – African fat tailed sheep bred for meat, feeding along the salty coast. To get around live export issues, Tim has crossed the damaras with van rooy sheep to develop crossbreeds – they have good meat which sells in Australia but are still tough. And they need to be on Quobba. Tim says: "We have had eight years of below-average rainfall . . . and I mean half and less. "Tourism has got us out of trouble a couple of times now." For though Quobba's longer



Tim, Tess and Sara Meecham at Quobba Station. Pictures: Stephen Scourfield

history is in pastoralism, and its shearing sheds are still used for yarding and loading sheep, its more recent history has been as a spot that's popular with visitors, and that will be inextricably wound into its future. There is space for caravans, camper trailers and tents around the Quobba homestead, next to

the beach. Red Bluff, still on the station and 60km up the coast along an unsealed road, has even more camping space – and the legendary Red Bluff barrels and pipelines of a left-hand surf break.

Quobba Station is also embedded in WA holiday, surfing and fishing tradition. For, alongside those who come to surf are those who know the secrets of its fishing, from its red rock ledges, often straight into water more than 20m deep. They've just had a good fishing season.

Quobba is legendary. Revered. Somewhere treasured. Bring everything, including water and firewood, and hang out here until the wind blows in summer.

But this year has been different, of course. Newcomers have been coming to Carnarvon, venturing on to The Blowholes, on the coast north of the town, and finding Quobba. In

### fact file

■ Quobba Station, call 9948 5098. For Red Bluff, call 9948 5001. They do not accept bookings for camping and caravan sites – "Just come up to the office on arrival and we will help from there" – but send a booking inquiry at [quobba.com.au](http://quobba.com.au).

the peaks of July and August, there have been more than 100 caravans, camper trailers and tents around the homestead and more at Red Bluff, which has a few eco tents with ensuites, and long-drop toilets with a bucket of sawdust for campers.

During lockdown, some were caught here and sat it out, and daughter Tess had finished university and got back in time to be with the family. She's still here.

Sara is the sister of Rachael Steadman, 200km down the coast at Wooramel Station. The place has that family feel. "Yeah. You can even bring the dog and have a fire," says Tim.



Camping at Red Bluff.

## AERIAL MUSTERING

Shadae Boylan has just spent a few days "chasing cows", mustering cattle inland on Mt Augustus station.

A pilot with Coral Coast Helicopter Services, she's originally from a farming background in New Zealand, but from the age of 16 has been jillarooing on remote cattle stations in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

With the injuries that station life brought, she knew she had to change things up, and studied for her helicopter pilot's licence at the Australian Helicopter Academy at Helispirit in Kununurra – "so I could still chase cows".

Now she's using her cow-savvy in aerial mustering. Shadae, 34, is also a bovine breeding technician, qualified to artificially inseminate cattle. But not this morning.

In her dusted-up western boots, jeans with a fancy belt, country cut turquoise shirt, Shadae gently lifts the Robinson R22 helicopter off the tarmac at Carnarvon airport, and we scoot away around the town, past the OTC dish, over

the patchwork quilt of the town's produce growing area and along the dry Gascoyne River before we hit the coast, passing the beach, One Mile Jetty, mangroves and tidal flats. With the doors off, the little two-seater chopper and Shadae, help to put this remote coastal town into perspective, set between the remote ocean and red inland, clinging to the river.

And then Shadae will be back "chasing cows".

She seems to feel aerial mustering doesn't quite deserve its reputation for being very dangerous, though "there's a lot of low-level work". It's about approach, about training.

And, of course, it has to be said that for Shadae it's about being a smooth operator.

### fact file

■ Coral Coast Helicopter Services has a five-minute flight from \$55 per guest, 10 minutes from \$90, and four-hour themed adventure flights from \$220 per guest. ■ [coralcoasthelicopters.com.au](http://coralcoasthelicopters.com.au)



Shadae Boylan, pilot with CCHS. Picture: Stephen Scourfield



**CARNARVON**

# Is this the new Broome? It's got



Carnarvon is a top destination, writes **STEPHEN SCOURFIELD**



**C**arnarvon could easily become a new Broome. It has red earth, turquoise ocean and mangroves.

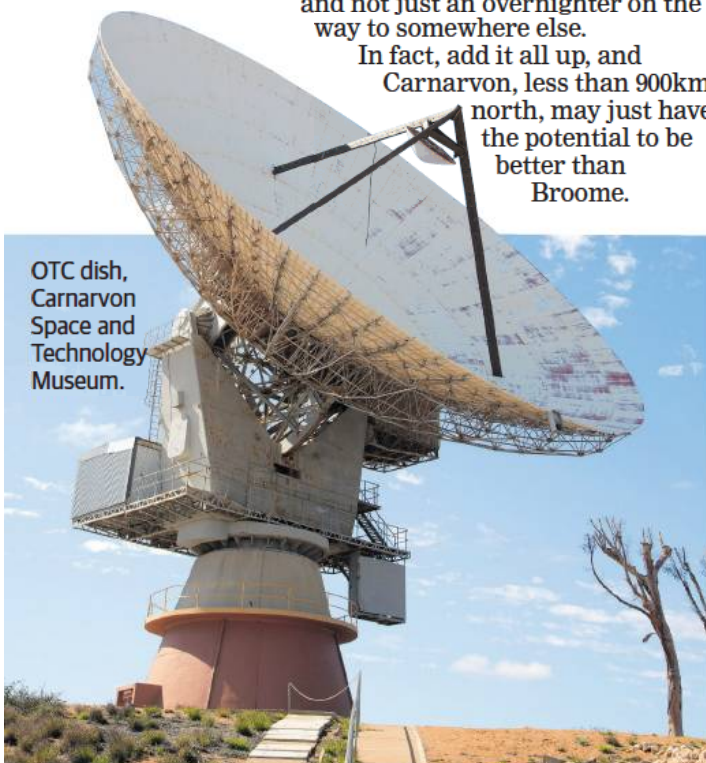
It has good beaches, fishing and surfing, no crocodiles and dramatic natural attractions like the Blowholes.

It is the food bowl of WA, with fruit and vegetable plantations along the Gascoyne River, and a quality seafood industry. There are plantation shops and lots of produce too.

It has strong Indigenous cultures and some top-quality tourist attractions. There is a lot to see and do there. It lacks the resort accommodation Broome has, but for now there's the Hospitality Inn Carnarvon, with a swimming pool and Sails restaurant, and Carnarvon is rightly known for having lots of good caravan parks, with cabins and other facilities. (All it needs is the sort of accommodation investment boom that Broome had). It has station stays within easy distance, like Quobba to the north and Wooramel to the south. It has the Kennedy Ranges, 180km inland.

Carnarvon is a good destination and not just an overnighter on the way to somewhere else.

In fact, add it all up, and Carnarvon, less than 900km north, may just have the potential to be better than Broome.



OTC dish, Carnarvon Space and Technology Museum.



The Fascine and pretty waterfront promenade, Carnarvon. Pictures: Stephen Scourfield

**THE FASCINE & TOWN**

With the global travel trend towards authentic experiences — well, Carnarvon is just that. It's a working town, with thriving horticultural and seafood industries, pastoralism all around, and a history steeped in hard work. The town's focal point is the Fascine, the pretty and protected waterfront with a promenade lined by the coconut and cotton palms.

As the sun sets, some folk are up at the Port Hotel, and others are here at the Carnarvon Hotel for cold beers, "parmy" pub food and plenty of chat.

**CARNARVON SPACE & TECHNOLOGY MUSEUM**

I lie on my back in the Apollo 11 space module (or, at least, a replica the same size), and watch on the video screen above me, the countdown, launch, rocket separations and then see the Earth beneath.

It really is a good little taste of the space race. And there's plenty



Language map with Antoinette "Toni" Roe and Norma Lee at Gwoonwardu Mia.

more of that here, for Carnarvon played a key role in the manned space program, just as it has in Australia's communications story. Run by passionate and knowledgeable volunteers, the

museum focuses on two key aspects of that history. ■ The Carnarvon Tracking Station, which was 10km south of the town, was commissioned in 1964 and for the next 11 years



# the potential



Carnarvon Space and Technology Museum.

supported NASA's Gemini, Apollo and Skylab programs.

■ The OTC Satellite Earth Station, which is now the museum's home, opened in 1966, initially with a 12.8m-wide Casshorn antenna, which on July 21, 1969, relayed Neil Armstrong's first walk on the Moon, having stepped off the Apollo 11 landing module.

That relay was the first live telecast into Western Australia. Later in 1969, the larger 29.6m-wide steerable antenna was built to facilitate better communication between the NASA Tracking Station and the USA.

### GWOONWARDU MIA

Antoinette "Toni" Roe and Norma Lee give us a warm welcome, showing us some of the arts and crafts in Gwoonwardu Mia's gallery shop and then Norma plunges us into her culture. For Gwoonwardu Mia, now part of WA Museum, is the Gascoyne Aboriginal Heritage and Cultural Centre — a multipurpose centre to celebrate and explain the culture of the five Aboriginal language groups of the Gascoyne — the Yinggarda, Bayungu, Malgana, Thadgari and Thalanyji. She

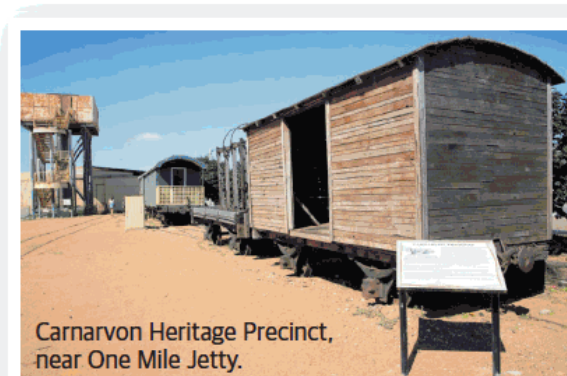
shows us the emu in the sky in the centre's little planetarium, talks about Indigenous life and traditions, Aboriginals involved in the pastoral history, and the stolen generation and mistreatment of Aboriginals, particularly when they were taken out to "Lock Hospitals" off the coast of Carnarvon on Bernier and Dorre Islands.

Entry is \$10 for adults, \$8 for seniors and concession card holders, \$5 for children and \$25 for families (2+2). [gahcc.com.au](http://gahcc.com.au) and 9941 1989.

### ONE MILE JETTY INTERPRETIVE CENTRE

The sight of a jetty in disrepair and closed is a sad thing. Carnarvon's One Mile Jetty surely deserves a better fate than that. The biggest in the North West (you guessed it, at 1.6km long), construction began in 1897, was complete in 1899 and cost £15,967, two shillings and seven pence. The jetty played a crucial role in the early pastoral industry, and in 1900 was the world's biggest wool exporting port.

Today, locals are trying to raise the funds to restore it. But the story of the jetty continues through the recently opened One Mile Jetty Interpretive Centre. The exhibition tells the stories of Carnarvon's past, from whaling (in 1912, Norwegians harvested 200 humpbacks here), to pastoralists and station life and Indigenous culture.



Carnarvon Heritage Precinct, near One Mile Jetty.



**CARNARVON**



Mural in Carnarvon, by Carol Clitheroe and Jich Dixon.

**FROM PAGE 5**

And the centre touches on the story of the sinking of the HMAS Sydney II, but particularly focuses on that of the German raider ship HSK Kormoran.

The entire crew of 645 was lost on Australia's most famous warship, but 318 of the 399 on board Kormoran survived, some recovered at sea, and 46 Germans came ashore north of Carnarvon.

The centre also has a good restaurant, with great views from indoors, and outdoor settings.

■ The centre is part of the Carnarvon Heritage Precinct, which includes the Lighthouse Keepers Cottage and the Shearers Hall of Fame and Railway Museum, which offers visitors plenty to see.

**BEACHES**

There are good beaches around Carnarvon.

■ Town Beach, on the Fascine, is safe and has a pontoon to swim to.

■ There are beaches all along Pelican Point, on Babbage Island.

■ Miaboolya Beach, 22km north of Carnarvon, is popular with locals. It can be cut off from the ocean by a sandbar, creating a coastal lagoon. (Be warned, clothes are optional).

■ The Aquarium, north of Carnarvon at Point Quobba (along sealed roads), is a coral filled lagoon good for snorkelling and safe swimming.

■ New Beach in Bush Bay, 35km south of Carnarvon on North West Coastal Highway.

**THE BLOWHOLES**

The Blowholes are pumping, turquoise ocean swells powering in . . . then a pause . . . and then white spume shooting high in the air.

We'd seen it from a distance, not just one blowhole on the red rock shelf which runs spectacularly along the coast north of Carnarvon, but lots.

The water pushes into caves and up through holes in the rock. And the rock shelf itself is an interesting, strongly coloured conglomerate.

Just south of the point, with its little island, is a completely protected bay, sand beaches and some camping. The Blowholes are 75km north of Carnarvon, along sealed roads.



The Blowholes, north of Carnarvon. Pictures: Stephen Scourfield

**fact file**

- Carnarvon is 865km north of Wanneroo.
- Fly with REX. For example, a 7.15am flight from Perth arrives in Carnarvon at 9.30am. [rex.com.au](http://rex.com.au)

**PLANTATIONS**

When you see a sign like Fruit Loop Drive . . . well, you just have to follow it. There are plantations and producers all along the drive — and there are classics that simply can't be missed — Morel's for tasty treats, Bumbak's with lots of preserves, jams and sauces, Gascoyne Organic Farm for high-quality vegies, just to name a handful. It's all seasonal, of course. Carnarvon Food Council, driven by executive officer Doriana Mangili, is a producer-run group that's passionate about promoting the region's great produce. Their website, [gascoynefood.com.au](http://gascoynefood.com.au), has produce availability, producers, growers market, events and recipes. And you'll see that, fittingly enough, there are bananas all year round — for this was the first place in Australia where they were grown, in the mid 1800s.



Growing area and dry river.

**VISITOR CENTRE**

Stephanie Leca and her team at Carnarvon Visitor Centre have been working flat out to keep up with enquiries as Western Australians have taken to the road. Steph, visitor centre co-ordinator at the Shire of Carnarvon, says that up to 850 people a day have come in, and it has taken the team every bit of time and energy just to staff the desk and help them. They provide a booking service for accommodation, tours and bus trips; tickets for local movies and shows; maps and brochures; a good range of gifts and souvenirs; and, of course, local advice and directions.

[carnarvon.org.au](http://carnarvon.org.au) and 9941 1146

**GALA DINNER**

**Coral Coast served up**

Australia's Coral Coast includes some of Australia's most important food producers, from the ocean to the inland, and the Carnarvon growing area.

And our Coral Coast Gala Dinner, complete with spoken word and live music performances, will showcase the region over four courses.

Before each of the courses, the stories of Australia's Coral Coast will be told by Stephen Scourfield, accompanied by the music that composer Steve Richter will write and perform just for this event.

Chef Costa Simatos will draw from across the region for each dish.

**DETAILS**

**Venue:** The University Club of Western Australia, Hackett Drive, Crawley.  
**Date:** Friday, November 27, 2020  
*Presented by Australia's Coral Coast*

**HOW TO BE THERE**

**Where:** The University Club of Western Australia, Hackett Drive, Crawley.  
**When:** Friday, November 27, 2020; 6.45pm for 7pm start. Finish at 10pm.  
**Cost:** \$115 for Gold members, \$145 for registered members. (Becoming a registered member is free; Gold membership is \$49. Gold membership saves \$60 for two bookings for this event).  
**How:** [westtravelclub.com.au/events](http://westtravelclub.com.au/events) or phone 1800 429 000 during office hours.



Visitor centre staff have been flat out with the influx of tourists.



Front of Bumbak's plantation.



**DAWSON'S BURROWING BEES**



Pictures:  
Stephen  
Scourfield

# Island's bees are all the buzz



**STEPHEN  
SCOURFIELD**

finds a natural wonder  
in the Gascoyne

**B**ig, furry and brightly coloured, Dawson's burrowing bees circle low over the red earth, land with precision and immediately vanish into a small hole.

They are among the world's biggest bees, pictured above, and found only in Western Australia.

David Attenborough's film crew filmed them, complete with their mating frenzy and the subsequent death of the males, and it became an international film hit — and yet here they are on Babbage Island, between the town of Carnarvon and Pelican Point Road, on a

slight rise, in dry but firm soil.

There's a patch of the holes — but an active nesting colony of *Amegilla dawsoni* can contain up to 10,000 burrows. They are between 15 and 30cm deep, the female bee making an urn-shaped brood cell at the bottom.

She waterproofs the walls with wax.

She then half-fills the brood cell with nectar and pollen (which sinks) before laying a single egg on the surface of the nectar. Then she caps the cell.

From October to June, the species survives as dormant larvae in the underground brood cells, with adults emerging and flying from July to September.

Here in Carnarvon, Yingarrda Aboriginals have traditionally dug up the cells to eat the grub of what they call the mungurrurra burrowing bee.



GOLDFIELDS, GASCOYNE, PILBARA & MORE

# Family road trip a big slice of adventure



An outback escape was an eye-opener for STEVE BUTLER who battled cold, heat and mud and met eccentric bush characters

**S**hacked up with the family in a wind-up old Jayco in a carpark at the Newman Visitor Centre was not quite the type of serenity I had in mind for a month-long escape from the city back out into the WA bush.

But with the Pilbara town's caravan parks turned into strict FIFO hubs because of the coronavirus outbreak and the local footy oval filling up with vans with each passing minute, suddenly here we were.

The visitor centre staff seemed a little miffed that their precious tourist resources had been locked up by the mining companies. But not as much as me at 4.30am the next morning when the still air just outside my camper was filled with roaring V8 shift arrivals and that unmistakable beeping of reversing work vehicles.

Then, after some helpful service from the Newman Home Hardware store attendant, I got myself the last power converter on the shelf, plugged the van into the visitor centre and rebooted the trip.

By design, we had started the first fortnight of the journey travelling first through the Wheatbelt and Goldfields to miss the mayhem of school holidaymakers down the WA coast. That decision provided some decent quiet and space to move but it also coincided with some serious cold — like the 1C morning in Menzies.

We were pleasantly surprised, on our first of 13 stops, when we



Annabel Butler meets an alien friend at the Carnarvon Space and Technology Museum. Pictures: Steve Butler



Tourists climbing out of Kalamina Gorge at Karijini.

got to the nicely manicured Merredin Tourist Park. They have clearly done the right thing to try to bounce out of the COVID catastrophe and the nearby Merredin Military Museum, while quaintly under-sung, was also an unexpected bonus.

It is a world away from Melbourne's famous Lygon Street and the ocker bloke behind the desk inside was definitely no tout trying to lure you in. But it does have an extensive, albeit modestly arranged, collection of war artefacts well worth seeing.

Then it was off to Kalgoorlie — still home of the skimpies and, of course, the aptly named Super Pit. There needs to be little said about the former but one passing comment about the latter would be that if you're going to bother to inform local accommodation outlets that the daily mine blast is going to be at 2pm, please don't detonate it 10 to 15 minutes earlier.

The blue language permeating through the final puffs of the blast's smoke from those who had run from their cars only to find out they had missed the main event, were not overly palatable for the many young children at the scene.

And just a footnote, Boulder rarely gets much of a mention but it is a beautifully cared-for part of the Goldfields and deserves some exploration during any Kalgoorlie trip.

The main issue with travelling through this part of WA in July is the cold, if you are not used to it, and a 1C morning makes you realise you are alive. But there had been some heat the previous day when we entered the sparsely populated caravan park only to be berated by a local resident for driving too close to a witch's hat.

The bee-lining from old mate to impart the said unhappiness reminded me of late American actor Vincent Schiavelli from his role as the subway ghost in the movie *Ghost*. It was not quite, "Get off my train", but it was in the vicinity.

And while the pub was closed and the service station vacated, requiring a trip to the famous hotel with the cranky old



Leo Butler at historic Gwalia.

standardbred horse in Kookynie for the nearest petrol, a walk around Lake Ballard on a sunny winter's day was a treat. Although, my son and the back of his pants may not agree after not realising how slippery the mud was as he bullishly tried to kick his footy a little too hard.

Leonora is known mainly for its annual Golden Gift running race, which was cancelled this year because of the coronavirus outbreak. But Hoover House, commissioned by former United States president Herbert Hoover, and the Gwalia ghost town give stunning nods to yesterday.

After a day of exploring them, it did not even matter that the local pub served me a Gage Roads beer from the tap in a James Squire glass.

The town is also the home of what I judge to be WA's best sausage roll, homemade by an effervescent — and sometimes rainbow-haired lass known as Fiona Gahan. Check out her literally colourful The Food Van Cafe and tell me I'm wrong . . .

With all this outback travelling, a bloke gets thirsty and after developing an almost exclusive taste for craft beer, I'm happy to

publicly thank the National Hotel in Sandstone for reminding me of my university days hankering for Emu Bitter. It was a frosty number, matched in some ways by stony-faced delivery from behind the bar. But the pub is a cracker and the rocky London Bridge tourist attraction just down the road, which I had never heard about, is worth a look.

Through Mt Magnet to Meekatharra is a robust experience, particularly when finally parking the camper and realising you are hooked up next to the refuelling spot for a great number of road trains. For the blariness of head that ensued the next morning, at least there was a van near the local cop shop that provided a more-than-decent coffee the next morning.

That, along with a time-milking game of car cricket — provided to us by the principal of our kids' primary school — helped soften the blow of the long hook to the Newman stopover on the way to Karijini.

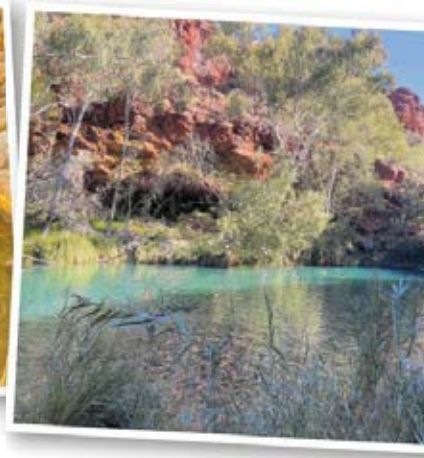
I had been to Karijini once but only for a night and this time, a five-night stay was perfect in terms of allowing visits to all the local gorge treats. Staying in the camper caused some mild jealousy when peering over to the glamping tents at the Eco Resort, but that was tempered in equal measures by the gorge views and the cold beers at the bar.

Fern Pool at Dales Gorge is ridiculously impressive, even if you have to scuttle through the hundreds of bats lurking in the trees above. And it all would have been perfect had I not feared missteps from my children while trudging up and down the spectacular rocky climbs.

Turns out though, I had little to worry about when applying some liberal respect to each venture. Howling dogs or dingoes during the night were an interesting sidelight and it is difficult to not recommend Karijini as a







Steve and Annabel finish the day at Wooramel Station's hot artesian bore spa.

bucket-list trip must for all West Australians.

I would also say the same about Cheela Plains, a brilliant station stay on a more boutique level. Evan and Robin Pensini have done a magnificent job with this place and its amenities in the four years since I was there last and the communal lasagne and burger nights for campers add a personal touch.

The gorges and swimming holes here are nothing short of epic, causing more than a small palpitation when the serenity was broken by the sound and sight of a mining company plane flying overhead. It will be tragic when mining requirements take some of these irreplaceable beauties away.

Mrs Pensini, originally from Texas, said keeping the experience for visitors personal remained a high priority.

"People come in and say how fantastic it is and how great it is and we're like, 'It's just our home'," Mrs Pensini said.

"You're just blown away that it is such an amazing place for people to see.

"You want to give people the chance to experience what

Australia is and it's really nice to be able to share that experience with people. Australians own the outback and even if you're in Sydney or Melbourne you can still get around in an Akubra hat or R.M. Williams boots.

"But until you actually get out here and drive over the hill and stay here . . . then you really feel everything."

Cheela's astronomy tours also come with a night-time view of the sky superior to anything I have seen, especially the clear view of the fabled "Emu in the Sky".

Once back on the coast in places such as Exmouth and Coral Bay, the dense living arrangements at the respective Ningaloo Lighthouse Holiday Park and the Bayview were so tight I knew what my neighbouring campers were having for breakfast before they did.

But despite fears of dying reefs, the snorkelling remains spectacular at Exmouth's Oyster Stacks and timeless Turquoise Bay and just around the corner at Coral Bay's main water frontage.

And at the latter, getting underwater with the spangled emperor on an organised tour at a

spot known as "The Aquarium" is really something.

Although, the back of my boardies became a similar shade of colour to my son's muddy pants at Lake Ballard when two giant trevally suddenly stormed through a baitfish ball where I was swimming.

The long trip home back to the city is not an overly palatable thought after such an enjoyably diverse journey, but there are ways to make the tedium a little bit more bearable. They include suiting up and pretending you are Neil Armstrong in the makeshift Apollo spacecraft at the impressive Carnarvon Space and Technology Museum, followed by a choc-dipped banana at Morel's.

A dip in the hot artesian bore spas at Wooramel Station is a must on an overnight stay.

But wear the old boardies as they, too, end up looking as if you may have had a slip at Lake Ballard.

A cold brew and a feed at Port Denison's Southerlys pub while overlooking a perfect sunset over the marina then provided a relaxing end point to an outstanding trip.

Fern  
at Ka



**GALA DINNER WRAP**

# Coral Coast feast in every sense

Night to remember at West Travel Club's gala dinner event

**T**uesday. The borders opened, summer came scorching in, a vaccine was administered, and we prepared to welcome 165 guests to our Australia's Coral Coast Gala Dinner.

The day felt edgy – extraordinary. The looming evening felt important, as it has been the result of months of work, and a shift of date, due to my self-isolation.

It felt important as we were to explore one of WA's best regions – the Coral Coast, from the Pinnacles to Dongara and Geraldton, Kalbarri to Shark Bay and Carnarvon, Ningaloo Reef to Exmouth, dipping into its inland, rangelands and station country too.

We would do all that through produce, an extraordinary menu by chef Costa Simatos, and words and music from the

"catwalk stage" jutting into the fully laid and glistening banquet hall at the University Club of Western Australia.

We would welcome 165 guests for this gala evening which still felt personal and warm, like being with family in a huge lounge room.

It was presented in partnership with our great friends at Australia's Coral Coast tourism region, chief executive David O'Malley joining me on stage to explain what a gem this slice of WA is.

The university club's Chef Costa and operations manager Myles Harrison had

been dealing for weeks with local producers, to bring the Coral Coast to the table.

Composer and musician Steve Richter had written music specifically for my stories set in the Coral Coast, and played vibraphone, didgeridoo, jaw harp and drums, adding them to keyboard sounds and loops created on stage, conjuring up land and seascapes.

One minute we were underwater with a whale shark, in the next, with wind blowing off the inland, or "travelling alongside" Chris Hemsworth, with the Thor tune.

Steve taught eight "volunteers" to play Harmonic Whirlies – tubes of various diameters and lengths which were swirled to produce harmonising Aeolian wind sounds, as I read an inland piece.

And so it was that our edgy evening came together, thanks to friendships – with the team at Australia's Coral Coast, our friends at the University of WA Club, the friendship that runs through the Travel and West Travel Club team and, most of all, the 165 friends who came along to taste and listen to the country.

**CHEF COSTA's** extraordinary menu, using produce from Australia's Coral Coast.

■ The "gin and tonic on arrival", which Myles had organised, featured gin made by Stableviews Distillery. This bespoke distillery uses rainwater from our clean skies and Australian native botanicals – a juniper forward recipe base intertwined with lemon myrtle, wattleseed and wild hibiscus.

■ First course was beef carpaccio, using superb meat from a producer called Coral Coast Grass Fed Beef, at Home Farm, Dongara. And producer Ken Hetherington joined us at the dinner. It



Far West Scallops & Shark Bay green tiger prawn.



Steve Richter and Stephen Scourfield performing at the Coral Coast Gala Dinner

was served with a salted caper, avocado and ginger dressing.

■ Mottainai Lamb was served for second course, with star anise, olive and apricot tagine, charred garlic and couscous. We were fortunate to have the Mottainai Lamb, raised near Lancelin, as conditions largely caused by the coronavirus pandemic have just put the company on pause for at least 18 months – a reminder of what's actually going on in the world. We hope to see them back and healthy, as 80 per cent of the animals' feed is olive and carrot by-products – particularly carrot pomace (by-product from juicing), unsaleable carrots, green carrot leaf and sedimentary olive oil which otherwise goes to landfill.

■ We tasted the produce of the ocean along Australia's Coral Coast for third course, with grilled Far West Scallops and crunchy kataifi-wrapped Shark Bay green tiger prawn with pumpkin puree, parsley potato and lemon myrtle butter sauce. Far West Scallops has been a family owned and run business for more than 35 years, catching wild in Shark Bay and the Abrolhos Islands. Shark Bay is the biggest prawn fishery in WA. Established in 1962, it is a sophisticated, well managed model of sustainability.

■ Next came Bookara goat's cream cheese, and mango, lime and pandan cake with Illegal Tender Rum Co. spiced infused rum and Gascoyne melon. The fruits are, of course, key Gascoyne produce, and we were delighted to have Doriana Mangili, proprietor of Sweeter Banana Company and representing Carnarvon Growers Association with us. At Bookara Goat Dairy, Cate and Mark Weston's place near Geraldton, cheese is handmade using the milk of their own goats. Illegal Tender distils at Dongara, with a cellar door for tours and tastings.

## fact file

- There will be more West Travel Club performance dinner events in 2021. Sign up to become a free "registered member" at [westtravelclub.com.au](http://westtravelclub.com.au) and hear about them first.
- We have just five double spots left on the Travel Club Tour to the Coral Coast, in partnership with Imagine Holidays. I will lead the group, visiting Geraldton and Kalbarri, and then spending four nights with Eco Abrolhos cruises in the Abrolhos Islands, visiting the Southern, Easter and the Wallabi groups, and the Batavia shipwreck site. [westtravelclub.com.au/tours](http://westtravelclub.com.au/tours) or call 08 6319 0207 during office hours.