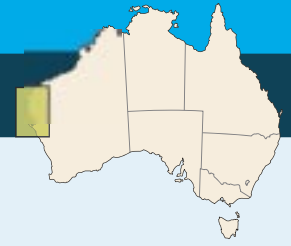


Your great Australian journey starts here

NINGALOO REEF AND SHARK BAY



Length: 5–7 days Fly/drive option: Exmouth

Drive from marine marvel to marine marvel, exploring the remote west coast in the company of whale sharks, dugong, manta rays and bottlenose dolphins. Beginning in Exmouth, you'll spend time alongside Australia's other great barrier reef, with the Ningaloo Reef at times within a few hundred metres of shore. South along the treeless coast, the little-driven highway offers vast outback views before you turn towards Monkey Mia and one of the country's great interactive wildlife encounters.

Travel tips

Make sure you throw a snorkel and mask into your bag. There's often good snorkelling to be had just offshore.

April–September is the peak of the tourist season, with temperatures ranging from 17°C to 31°C. The townships of Exmouth, Coral Bay, Carnarvon, Monkey Mia and Denham all get extremely busy in the winter months, so bookings are essential.

Summers can be fiercely hot, but these months are often when the marine wildlife is at its most spectacular.

Websites

- www.westernaustralia.com
- www.australiascoralcoast.com
- www.sharkbay.asn.au
- www.dec.wa.gov.au
- www.exmouthwa.com.au

| Route | Distance | Duration |
|----------------------|----------|-------------|
| Exmouth – Minalya | 220 km | 3hrs |
| Minalya – Carnarvon | 155 km | 2hrs |
| Carnarvon – Overland | 194 km | 2hrs 30mins |
| Overland – Denham | 130 km | 1hr 40mins |



A to B Exmouth to Cape Range National Park

Though this drive ultimately heads south from Exmouth, begin by detouring to explore the delights of Cape Range National Park and the beaches that front Ningaloo Reef. If travelling through the park near dawn or dusk, drive cautiously, because the road will almost certainly be crowded with euros and red kangaroos.

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For a different sort of wildlife experience along the way, stop at the Jurabi Turtle Centre, just south of Vlamingh Head Lighthouse. From December to March, green and loggerhead **turtles** lay their eggs in the nearby beaches, and the centre operates **night tours** to view the egg laying and the hatchlings' mad scramble to the sea. Also check out the Heritage-listed lighthouse, Australia's only kerosene-burning light station.

Inside the national park, past the excellent Milyering visitor centre, a **walking track** leads along the bed of Mandu Mandu Creek (3 km return) or you can simply lay out a towel on the quintessential **beach paradise** of Turquoise Bay. Step from the beach into the ocean and there's great **snorkelling** among coral bommies.

2WD vehicles can travel as far as Yardie Creek, around 90 km from Exmouth, where **boat cruises** head into the gorge. Watch the cliffs and you may spot a black-footed rock-wallaby.

In the national park there are **campgrounds** dotted along the coast, or you can stay in a **wilderness tent** at Ningaloo Reef Retreat (www.ningaloo reefretreat.com) or Ningaloo Chase (www.ningaloochase.com.au).

A to C Exmouth to Coral Bay

Returning to Exmouth, you needn't leave Ningaloo Reef behind. A variety of tours operate out to and beyond the reef, including the chance to **swim** beside the world's largest fish, the **whale shark**. Growing to 18 m, whale sharks visit Ningaloo Reef to feed from around April to July. Other tour activities include swimming with **manta rays** (July–November), cruising to see **humpback whales** (July–November) or **diving** to witness the incredible mass coral spawning that takes place about 7–10 nights after the March full moon. Tour bookings can be made at the Exmouth Visitor Centre (www.exmouthwa.com.au).

Heading south from Exmouth there are a couple of opportunities to dip back into Cape Range National Park. Shothole Canyon Road leads to a short, steep walk to the lip of Shothole Canyon, while Charles Knife Road follows a narrow ridge between two canyons for fantastic views over both the Indian Ocean and Exmouth Gulf.



Charles Knife Gorge



Turquoise Bay

Whale shark



C to D Coral Bay to Cape Cuvier

Further south, take the turning into Coral Bay – a hamlet as laid-back as its coast is beautiful – and acquaint yourself with Ningaloo Reef. Here, towards its southern end, the reef almost touches the shore, and you can hire a **snorkel** and float through a marine kaleidoscope just a few metres from the long beach. Whale shark and manta ray swims can also be arranged from Coral Bay, as can **kayak tours** (www.ningalookayakadventures.com) and **reef-viewing** on the semi-submersible Sun Sea Explorer (www.coralbayadventures.com.au). Terrestrial types can zip about on **quad bike** excursions (www.coralbaytours.com.au).

Return to the main road and continue south through a land of spinifex and termite mounds, joining the North West Coastal Highway near Minilya Roadhouse. From here it's about a 90-minute drive to Carnarvon, though it's worth detouring west onto Blowholes Road shortly before you reach the town to visit a rugged slice of coast.



Blowholes located north of Carnarvon

Past the eponymous blowholes, where heavy seas can shoot water up to 20 m into the air, the road continues to Cape Cuvier, where the skeleton of the *Korean Star*, a bulk carrier wrecked by a cyclone in 1988, is visible. There's also the chance at Cape Cuvier to witness a remarkable winter feeding frenzy, with whales and sharks forcing shoals of fish against the cliff-lined coast. For **surfers**, this detour is most noteworthy for the consistent breaks at Red Bluff. **Accommodation** is available at Quobba Station (www.quobba.com.au), where you can pitch your own tent or enjoy the luxury of an eco-safari tent overlooking the Indian Ocean.

E to **F** Carnarvon to Steep Point

Return to the highway and into Carnarvon, where you can ride the Coffee Pot train to the end of One Mile Jetty, or savour the literal fruits of Carnarvon's labour. There are around 160 fruit-growers around the town, making it one of WA's major fruit bowls. At the edge of town is the OTC satellite dish, the country's first earth station for satellite communications, which was closed in 1987. Visitors can climb to the dish's first landing.

Out of Carnarvon the North West Coastal Highway heads south through a treeless landscape, passing Wooramel Roadhouse, to a road junction at Overlander Roadhouse. Turn west, towards World Heritage-listed Shark Bay and Monkey Mia.

About 30 km along this road is the turn-off to Hamelin Pool, and while the old telegraph station, built in 1884, is Hamelin Pool's most striking visual feature, it's the stromatolites in the highly saline water that are the real standout attraction. Resembling lumpy rocks, they're the earth's oldest existing life form.

Twelve kilometres on, keen **4WDers** can turn west, bumping overland to the cliffs at Steep Point, which is both Australia's most westerly mainland point and a revered **game-fishing** location.

Immediately around the point is Shelter Bay where, between March and October, a barge departs for the 20-minute crossing to Dirk Hartog Island (www.dirkhartogisland.com). **Charter boats** to the island can also be arranged from Denham. Loggerhead turtles nest at Turtle Bay in the island's north, with hatchlings emerging around March. **Accommodation** is available at Dirk Hartog Island Homestead or at six campsites around the island.



One Mile Jetty

G to H Hamelin Pool to Monkey Mia

The main road from Hamelin Pool continues north from the Steep Point turn-off, passing Nanga Bay Resort (www.nangabayresort.com.au) and Shell Beach. Stretching for about 60 km, Shell Beach is composed of billions of tiny coquina shells, forming a layer up to 4 m deep. At nearby Denham, you can see several buildings that have been constructed from blocks of coquina shells – of particular note are the Old Pearler Restaurant and St Andrew’s Church.

The road rises to Eagle Bluff, a headland with great views across Henri Freycinet Harbour. Turtles are often seen in the waters immediately below the bluff.

If you’ve been lured to Shark Bay by its name you might want to watch the **shark feeding** at Ocean Park (www.oceanpark.com.au) in Denham.

It’s now just a short drive to both François Peron National Park and Monkey Mia. At the former, you can soak in the 35°C warmth of a hot tub in the Peron Homestead area, or camp and explore the beaches and cliffs in the wilderness beyond – 4WD access only. The latter might better be named Dolphin Mia, for it offers the most famous **dolphin encounters** in the country. Each morning, wild dolphins cruise into Monkey Mia’s shores, where four dolphins are carefully hand-fed a small portion of their diet.

Marine encounters don’t end in the shallows at Monkey Mia. Take a **cruise** into Shark Bay aboard the *Shotover* (www.monkeymiawildsights.com.au) or *Aristocrat 2* (www.monkey-mia.net) to see one of the world’s largest dugong populations, drawn here by 4000 sq. km of seagrass beds. Dolphins are also readily sighted on these tours, as are turtles and sharks.

Accommodation and camping is available at the Monkey Mia Dolphin Resort (www.monkeymia.com.au/accommodation.htm).

Return to Exmouth along the same spectacular touring route, catching the bits you missed or going back to your favourite spots. ■



Monkey Mia

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Monkey Mia



Hamelin pool

