

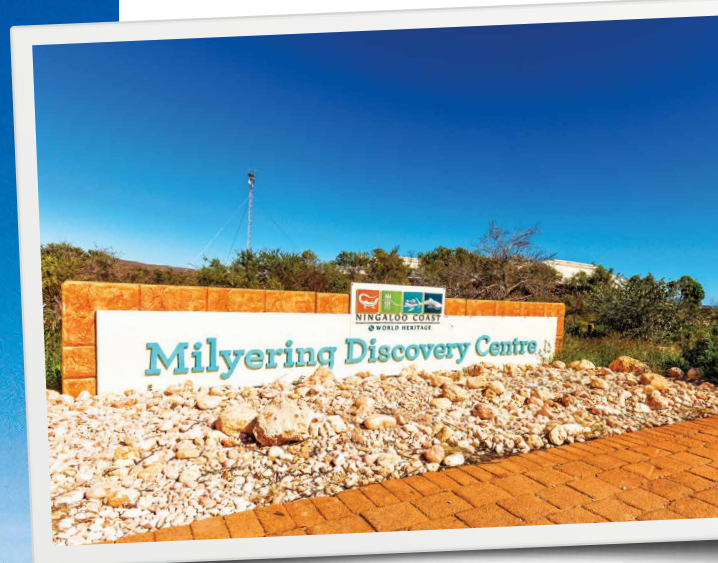
Lemons to Lemonade

When savage winds blew the one chance that Glenn Marshall had to fulfil a lifelong dream, he turned disappointment into opportunity and discovered other marvels of WA's Coral Coast

Words and Photos by GLENN MARSHALL



FROM LEFT Glenn Marshall transformed his holiday into a success when disaster struck; Milyering Discovery Centre in the Cape Range National Park was the first totally environmentally friendly building of its type in Australia



Imagine this scenario: You've arrived on Western Australia's Coral Coast with one objective in mind – to head out into the beautiful waters near Exmouth and swim with the biggest fish in the ocean: whale sharks. The tour has been booked months in advance and excitement builds as you close in on the bustling seaside town.

Then you receive the worst phone call of all. Wild winds have caused the ocean swell to rise and your adventure is CANCELLED!

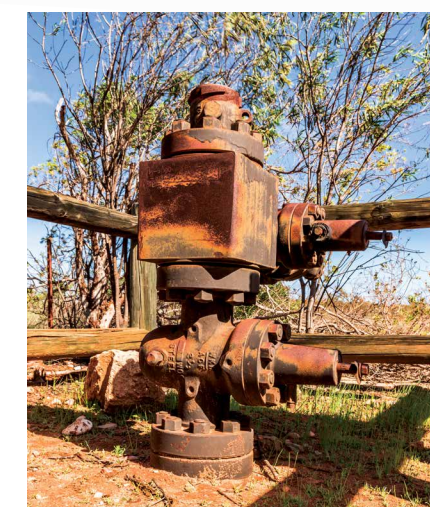
You don't have the time to reschedule and your plans are in turmoil. What are you going to do?

The best idea is to do what I did – turn a negative into some positives and explore the region's lesser known delights.

CAPE RANGE CANYONS

In the 1960s, Exmouth was built to support the Harold E Holt Naval Communications Base, where American soldiers could communicate with its submarines. No wonder the Yanks loved the North West Cape, where Exmouth sits – the range in their backyard reminded them of home. The *Lone Ranger* and *Tonto*, spaghetti westerns and John Wayne would have all fitted right into the canyons that are aplenty in the nearby Cape Range National Park.

“You will be amazed by the colourful rock layers as you traverse the track before it ends at a picture-perfect picnic spot and short walking trail”



FROM LEFT A panoramic view of sunburnt rocks at Cape Range National Park; access to all the canyons is easier in a 4WD but some 2WD vehicles do tackle the terrain; the drift at Ningaloo Reef is a blast

Access to all the canyons is easier in a 4WD but I did see 2WD vehicles tackling the terrain. Charles Knife Road concludes at the Cape Range No. 2 bore after offering jaw-dropping views of the gorges. This oil exploration well was drilled by WAPET in 1955 but was capped after no commercial hydrocarbons were discovered.

Backtrack a few hundred metres for the turnoff to the carpark for the Badjirrajirra walk. This 6.8km loop is a class 4 walk that traverses the top of Cape Range and offers great views of Shothole Canyon and Exmouth Gulf. The Thomas Carter lookout is not far from the carpark for those who prefer shorter walks.

Shothole Canyon Road leads you through the canyon along dry creek beds and the gorge floor. You will be amazed by the colourful rock layers as you traverse the track before it ends at a picture-perfect picnic spot and short walking trail.

SNORKEL NINGALOO REEF

Twelve years – that was the last time my snorkelling gear made an appearance. It had spent the past eight years stored in my garage roof, so I wasn't sure if it would fall apart once out of its bag. My lack of confidence was unfounded, and I enjoyed snorkelling the drift at the stunningly beautiful Turquoise Bay. The hardest part was finding a spot to park – boy, it was busy.

The drift is an absolute blast because you can enter the water further up the beach, and the current will pull you along slowly over the coral (not raked across it). If your kids haven't snorkelled before, take a pool noodle for them to hang on to, then they can float the drift with you.

You will see loads of fish and even the occasional turtle, so don't forget to take a GoPro to capture the beauty below the surface. Oh, and yes, the water really is turquoise.

Great spots to snorkel along the Ningaloo Coast include the Oyster Stacks and Lakeside. The former are best visited at high tide to avoid damaging the coral but is the perfect site for families or inexperienced snorkellers to learn the craft.

Lakeside has several coral bommies where turtles and the occasional reef shark like to hang out.

TACKLE THE SANDY BAY TRAIL

The Sandy Bay Trail is only 43km long and is a shortcut across the hills to reach Cape Range National Park. Surely it won't take me long? Four hours later, I reached the Yardie Creek Road. Is this a track that anyone can tackle? Unfortunately not, it's suitable for experienced four-wheel drivers only and high clearance is necessary.

The track begins on the Minilya – Exmouth Road just north of Learmonth. My Hema HX-1 worked beautifully here for

two reasons. Firstly, it showed me where the turnoff was to the unmarked track and secondly, it kept me heading in the right direction, as several station tracks criss-cross the dirt trail through the Mallee scrub until you climb up the escarpment.

You will cross a few creeks, one of which is a real doozy, before climbing up onto the range, following the ridge line for a while. This offers great views across Learmonth and stunning canyons on both sides. Cape Range was once part of a deep-sea reef and the tooth of a prehistoric shark that used to haunt these waters was found nearby.

The track has a hard base of limestone so dropping your tyre pressures will help the ride. Skirting Trealla Hill you will pass what looks like ancient rock holes, but some look as though they've been drilled. Some of the holes are extremely deep, so keep an eye on the tin lids.

You will also come across what appear to be weird track markers, but are in fact cameras set up by DPAW to monitor for feral cats, so please do not disturb them.

Once you enter the National Park you hit desert sand country, complete with corrugations, scalloped track and pin-striping bushes as you cross a few sand dunes. Then, as you bump your way across a rocky section, you clear the rise and see Ningaloo Reef stretched out before you.

The last challenge is crawling down the final rough section of limestone before you pop out just near Sandy Bay.





CRUISE YARDIE CREEK

Jump on a tour with Yardie Creek Boat Tours and be entertained by Peter 'Boxy' Maier, an amazing, funny man who is full of information. 'Boxy' knows his job and does it very well. If you walk away without having learnt something on this cruise, you just weren't listening.

The kids are kept occupied spotting and keeping count of the rare black-footed rock wallabies that call the gorge home.

The one-hour cruise takes you up to the rock bar that naturally separates the fresh water from the salt water. Here, you'll also see ospreys and egrets and a variety of marine life.

You can either use the YCBT bus service to pick you up from the town centre and drive you to Yardie Creek or make your own way there. If you choose the self-drive option, you will need a park pass to enter the Cape Range National Park. Cruise bookings are advisable, especially during peak times as the cruises are well patronised.

Another option is to paddleboard, canoe or kayak up the gorge at your own pace while enjoying the magnificent scenery.

"The kids are kept occupied spotting and keeping count of the rare black-footed rock wallabies that call the gorge home"



ABOVE Paddleboard, canoe or kayak up the gorge at your own pace; jump on a tour with Yardie Creek Boat Tours



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ABOVE Be blown away by the three engaging exhibition areas at the Ningaloo Visitor Centre

NINGALOO VISITOR CENTRE

You will be blown away by these three engaging exhibition areas at the Ningaloo Visitor Centre.

'En Route to Exmouth' showcases the history of Exmouth after the Americans landed in the 1960s. The base was a hive of activity with ten pin bowling and the latest movies flown directly from the US.

Did you know Exmouth was bombed by the Japanese during WWII? And that we exacted revenge when Z Force commandos snuck into the Singapore bay and blew up four Japanese warships?

You can also experience what it was like when Cyclone Vance smashed Exmouth in 1999. The noise of the howling winds, the pelting rain and the destructive force of nature that tore buildings apart. You will almost feel like you were there.

Then there's 'Reef to Range' exhibit that highlights the richly diverse flora and fauna that exists between Ningaloo Reef and Cape Range. The 'Terrestrial' exhibition checks out the ancient landscapes including what lives among the caves, canyons, dunes that are native to the National Park. 

fast FACTS

Exmouth is located 1270km north of Perth on the North West Cape. Exmouth is one of the few places in the world that you can get up close and personal with the elusive whale shark, but also humpback whales.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

The cooler months are best. However, Exmouth doesn't experience a wet season so the climate is dry with hot summers and mild winters.

WHERE TO STAY

➔ **RAC Exmouth Cape Holiday Park** – a range of accommodation options including cabins, chalets, powered and unpowered caravan sites, backpackers and camp facilities. Pet-friendly on caravan and camping sites. More info: parksandresorts.rac.com.au/exmouth

➔ **Ningaloo Caravan & Holiday Resort** – facilities include cabins, chalets, powered and unpowered caravan sites, backpackers and camping sites. Limited dog-friendly sites. More info: exmouthresort.com

➔ **Ningaloo Lighthouse Holiday Park** – a range of accommodation options including cabins, bungalows, chalets, powered and unpowered caravan sites, cafe/bistro. Pet-friendly. More info: www.ningaloolighthouse.com



➔ **Ningaloo Lodge** – 36 Rooms with ensuites, air-conditioning, pool, BBQ and shared kitchen facilities. No pets allowed. More info: www.ningaloolodge.com.au

➔ **Yardie Homestead Caravan Park** – Facilities include cabins, chalets, shearers' quarters, powered and unpowered caravan sites,

seasonal restaurant. Pet-friendly and pet minding facilities. More info: yardie.com.au

➔ **Cape Range National Park** – Unpowered camping sites, drop toilets, bookings essential. No pets allowed. More info: parks.dpaw.wa.gov.au/park/cape-range

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