



It's raining a little in the Margaret River wine region and frankly I'm quite pleased.

I have been seriously contemplating how to juggle a winery hop around 120 vineyards, find time for a dip at some of Western Australia's best beaches, dine at award-winning restaurants, walk along the famed Cape to Cape track, check out the caves and forests and drop in at some art galleries – all in a three-day driving trip.

Luckily the rain provides the perfect solution – it's definitely an indoor type of day, so wineries, restaurants and galleries win hands down and swimming and walking are put on hold.

Very few places in the world boast such an impressive list of attributes as the Margaret River region that stretches 100 kilometres from north to south.

Surprisingly only 54 of the 3000 square kilometres are under vine, but size doesn't matter here. Margaret River accounts for more than 30 percent of the country's world class wine.

In a relatively short time, the area has evolved into a food and wine haven gaining an international reputation for exceptional wines and attracting some of Australia's best chefs – often with a surf board tucked under their arm.

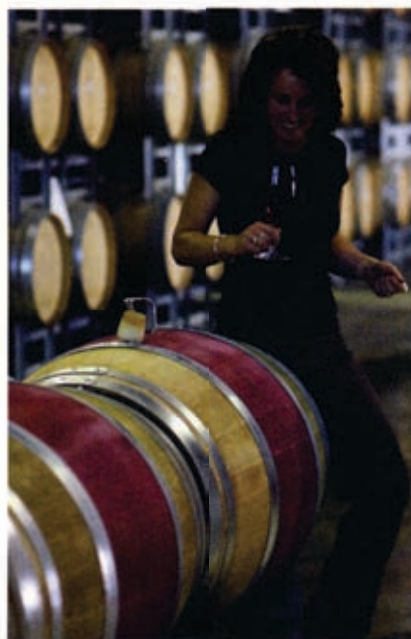
After a night at the new luxurious Crown Metropol Perth, a French inspired dinner at Bistro Guillaume and an indulgent hot rock massage at the Isika Spa, we head to Margaret River township in our Audi TT Coupe.

Known as Margs to the locals, first stop is the wine showroom at the Margaret River Visitor Centre where we devise an ambitious 'to do' list.

Leeuwin Estate, Cullen, Credaro, Cape Mentelle, Howard Park, Devil's Lair, Moss Wood, Pierro, Stella Bella, Brookland Valley, Xanadu and newcomer House of Cards as well as Cheeky Monkey's brewery fill our bucket list.

For lunch we head to the impressive Voyager Estate with its stunning Cape Dutch designed cellar door and award-winning restaurant, beautiful rose gardens and manicured lawns.

The elegant dining room with soaring ceilings



(Previous page) From the signature pool to the subtle elegance of the rooms, Cape Lodge is an experience – and the food!

(Previous page, bottom) Nationally acclaimed Vasse Felix wines.

(This page) The Cape Dutch cellar door of Voyager Estate and the award-winning food served in its restaurant.



Europcar

Getting there:

The Margaret River Region is in the south west corner of Western Australia, 270kms south of Perth.

Drive: Book an Audi with Europcar Tel: 1300 131390, www.europcar.com.au

Stay:

Margaret River

Cape Lodge, 3341 Caves Road, Yallingup
Tel: (08) 97556311. www.capelodge.com.au

Smiths Beach Resort, 1 Smiths Beach Road, Yallingup
Tel: (08) 97501200.
www.smithsbeachresort.com.au

Injidup Spa Retreat, 32 Cape Clairault and Wyadup Road, Injidup, Tel (08) 97501300.
www.injidupsparetreat.com.au

Perth

Crown Metropol, Great eastern Highway,
Perth Tel (08) 9362 8888.
www.crownmetropolperth.com

Dine and Wine:

Voyager Estate Tel (08) 9757 6494
www.voyagerestate.com.au

Vasse Felix Tel: (08) 97565050
www.vassefelix.com.au

Cape Lodge Margaret River restaurant
Tel: (08) 9755 6311 www.capelodge.com.au

More information: www.westernaustralia.com
www.margaretriver.com

is the domain of executive chef, Nigel Harvey who creates innovative menus with wine pairings.

Green pea soufflé with herb crème fraîche and roasted macadamia nuts, grilled Harvey beef fillet with potato crush, pancetta, braised leek and mushroom butter and a decadent finale of passionfruit tart with honeycomb crumbs and raspberry granita, showcase the rich bounty of the area.

Home for the night is the much awarded Cape Lodge that sits elegantly on 20 hectares of manicured grounds amid roses and lavender with a shimmering lake taking centre stage.

Its Cape Dutch style reflects the first owner's origins and the landscape similarities between Western Australia and the Stellenbosch region of South Africa.

There are 22 secluded rooms, a vineyard cottage and a five-bedroom luxury private residence – a favourite haunt of singer, Sting.

The famed Cape Lodge restaurant that showcases executive chef's Tony Howell's much lauded cuisine. Howell, who changes the menu daily, describes his offerings as 'uncomplicated' but it's the subtleties of the flavours that command attention and earn accolades.

Seared scallops with avocado and wakame, nori salt, tempura flathead, miso jelly and horseradish foam, a main of mud crab with homemade fettuccine capers, dill, garlic, chili, and beurre blanc and a chocolate trio of mousse, ice cream and fondant, exceed expectations.

And when it comes to wines there's a choice of 14,000 bottles in the cellar. Not a place for the indecisive!

Next on the bucket list is the nationally acclaimed Vasse Felix, where the first commercial vineyard was planted in 1967. Owned and operated by the Holmes a Court family, the cellar door, restaurant and art gallery offer beautiful views over the vineyards and lake while winemaker Virginia Willcock makes stunning wines.

Executive chef Aaron Carr teases the tastebuds with wonderful combinations such as duck, asparagus, raspberries and cocoa for an entrée that looks too good to eat and tastes even better. Barramundi, pumpkin, sea urchin and brown butter feature in a main course and – chocolate, coconut and violets are used to create a stunning finale, served with excellent wines.

For art lovers there are more than 40 studios and galleries in the Margaret River area each showcasing talented local artists including The Studio Gallery, Boranup Gallery, Gunyulgup Galleries and Yallingup Galleries.

As well as wine, stock up on delicious oils, tapenades and olives at award-winning Olio Bello and chocoholics will be in heaven at the new Gabriel Chocolate, where chocolate is made from scratch from some of the world's finest cacao beans.

Three days is far too short and that bucket list is expanding, but as the sun sets over the Indian Ocean, glass of Australia's best chardonnay in hand, I can well understand why so many have made a seachange to the Margaret River – it's the type of place that gets under your skin. //