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Western Australia

RUGGED ROMANCE

Words By Carolyn Gerin

One afternoon, while running to the studio at my university, I was stopped dead in my tracks by a poster: blazing orange sun, rugged, caramel-colored hills, and a headline demanding action: *Australia Needs Designers!*

In that moment, I became bitten and smitten by the idea of Australia. Fast forward to the Eurail Pass years: I consistently found myself falling in with Australians - witty and irreverent travel compatriots with an easy, breezy approach to life. A lifelong aficionado of its independent music and film scene, (Nick Cave, Radio Birdman, *Mad Max*), I was unprepared for the sheer size, scale, isolation, and vast untrammeled frontier that is Australia.

Photography courtesy of Smith Beach Resort, Illustration By: iStockPhoto, © Albert Campbell

"...your new marriage is an adventure, and living it Oz style will ensure it's one that lasts a lifetime..."

Photo by: iStockphoto, Nikontiger

A few years, books, and magazine articles later, the press opportunity came: a romance travel experience from **Perth** to the **Margaret River**. Feeling like a modern-day Dorothy, I fairly skipped to SFO to embark on a 26-hour journey to a modern-day Eden: **Western Australia**.

LAX, Virgin Australia Check In:

"Ms. Gerin, your boarding pass."

Looking down, I realized there must be some mistake. It was issued to Britney Spears for her upcoming tour to Oz (as the locals call it).

"No worries, Ms. Gerin! Here's your pass for the VIP Lounge pre-flight, and your ticket for International Business Class, LA to Perth. Enjoy your stay in Oz, G'day!"

And enjoy it I did, road testing one of the best romantic adventures ever. This is the honeymoon you have been waiting for, mate, so get ready to have a good 'un, because we're going "down under."

Airborne ambiance, 10,000 feet: Welcome to **Virgin Australia International Business Class**. Have a few glasses of Moet in the lounge, some foie gras, a lamb chop, a good film, a brandy, pima-cotton pajamas and don a pair of Bose Noise Cancelling Headphones, snooze on your fully horizontal bed, and awake, fully rested, 1 hour from Brisbane. It's like space travel for hipster astronauts with great food and wine.

G'day Australia! Whatever you've heard about the brutality of travel to this part of the world, you can now banish. It's a hike, but it's your honeymoon, so spend intentionally and reap the rewards of no jet lag and an in-flight vacation.

Fly **Virgin Blue** Brisbane to Perth, crossing the vast, haunting Outback, and head to the **Richardson Hotel and Spa**, a unique boutique: Asian influence, expansive views of the skyline, luxe rooms and an opulent coffee buffet. Enjoy a refreshing swim in the zen-garden pool. Head to **Opus** for some of the best farm to fork offerings, by **Chef Todd Cheavin** - the grilled lamb; with local wine pairings is a stand out.

Later, it's **Freemantle**, a bustling port city with goldrush-era architecture, ghosts of rock stars, and the industrial, edgy **Little Creatures Brewery**. A converted boat shed and working brewery, it's hophead heaven, with kangaroo and fresh seafood served alongside freshly pulled pints right from the conditioning tank. Thursday afternoon, may as well be a Saturday night, the place is as hopping as the brew tanks.

Feeling rebellious and randy we embark on the **AC/DC Highway to Hell** tour, Freemantle Trams winds us through the haunts, history, and final resting place of everyone's favorite head banger, Bon Scott. Channel your inner 16-year-old while belting out "TNT," and "Dirty Deeds, Done Dirt Cheap" at the top of your lungs.

The rules are the tools: when it's pints for lunch, it's either a power nap or a coffee at **Freo's Cappuccino Strip**. A little jolt will do you, before your romantic night at the hippest "regency meets retro" spot in Perth: **Must Winebar and Champagne Lounge**. Champagne bubble walls, flocked wallpaper, vintage mirrors, dark and gothy interiors make date night downright decadent. Sip a divine elixir and gaze into each other's eyes before a bite... at the **Must Bistro** downstairs where **Chef Blaikie** serves up contemporary French cuisine - the short ribs and gnocchi being a sure bet.

The next morning, hop on the **Rottnest Express** to Rottnest Island and tool around on mountain bikes by **Wadejemup Lighthouse** and interact with the locals: Quokas, marsupials resembling miniature kangaroos. Stop into **Aristo's** for a freshly caught seafood lunch and a glass of chilled Sauvignon while you ponder pure bliss.

Rockingham Wild Encounters, Causeway Bay offers a life altering experience -interacting with wild dolphins in their natural habitat. Snorkel, and observe in close proximity, these wild, majestic creatures in their idyllic underwater community. This relationship between RWE and the dolphins has been lovingly fostered for 17-years and the awestruck sense of wonderment will pervade you.

Lose the wetsuits and head for the **Margaret River**, pro surfer haunt, West Oz wine mecca, and a coastline perched on cliffs dotted with so many type of flowers, rocks and vegetation, it looks like a Van Gogh painting. The **Injiup Spa Retreat**, Yallingup, a glorious 10-villa seaside resort surrounded by a national park, is where modern meets magnificent minimalism. Whale watch from your private deck and enjoy local wine in your private dipping pool as the sun sets over the Indian Ocean across a deserted beach.

Photography courtesy of Wagstaff Worldwide and Western Australia Tourism

Photography courtesy of Wagstaff Worldwide and Western Australia Tourism (top), Injidup Spa Retreat (bottom left)

Enjoy peaceful pampering with a couples spa treatment and handmade aromatherapy products. Slip into something more comfortable (a glass of bubbly) at **Bouzy The Champagne Bar**. Enjoy modern Australian cuisine at **Bathers Restaurant** – the oysters and seafood are to die for.

Live large with the devilishly stylin' **Nola Gaebler** and her vintage Bentley, as you wind through sun dappled roads and forests on her **Wine Lovers of Margaret River Tour**. You'll be guided through tastings at award winning **Cape Grace Wines**, bio-dynamic **Cullen Wines**, and culminating in the Margaret River's first commercial vineyard **Vasse Felix Winery** for a Bacchus-worthy gourmet lunch overlooking pastoral vineyards.

Absolve your culinary sins with a vigorous private surf session at **Josh Palmateers Surf Academy**. A former pro, he's an intuitive instructor who can get you riding down the face of a wave you might not believe you can handle. He's funny, he's good, and he's rad. Kelly Slater and you have now surfed River Mouth, Margaret River...

Everything looks shiny, bright and fresh: blue skies, carpets of flowers, glorious landscapes, an unusually private coastline of staggering beauty, sublime dining and wining experiences.

Photography courtesy of Wagstaff Worldwide and Western Australia Tourism

Get ready for the stunningly stylish **Cape Lodge**, a small, luxury, vineyard hotel located in the heart of Margaret River wine country on 40 acres of lush forest. Voted best boutique hotel in Oz, 2009, and Worlds Best 100 Hotels, 2010, it's a visual and victual experience - a new generation in gourmet establishments. Attend cooking school with surfing chef **Tony Howell**, and later consume your handiwork with wine pairings. Luxuriate in your bucolic balcony overlooking a lazy creek. We almost expect Helena Bonham Carter to come bounding out of the woods in crinolines and corset on a stallion.

Head inland, to the **Wine and Truffle Company** in Manjimup between the Jarrah and Karri forest. The largest trufferie in the southern hemisphere, they also produce fabulous wine. Enjoy a tremendous truffle-inspired lunch with a flight of wines overlooking the vineyards, and sigh...

Reluctantly, your journey comes to a close. Relax in your spacious executive suite club room at the **Sheraton, Perth** and enjoy modern Australian cuisine at **Origins**.

More than a honeymoon, this is a lifetime adventure. Yes, it's a hike to get here, but the rewards are magnificent: a little slice of paradise that hasn't been overrun or over developed. Everything looks shiny, bright and fresh: blue skies, carpets of flowers, glorious landscapes, an unusually private coastline of staggering beauty, sublime dining and wining experiences. The highlight? Western Australians – who seem to have perfected the fine art of living – are only too happy to share a libation, a joke, and a hug after meeting you once. Take a little page from their book back home – your new marriage is also an adventure, and living it Oz style will ensure it's one that lasts a lifetime, like the memory of your perfect honeymoon...

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