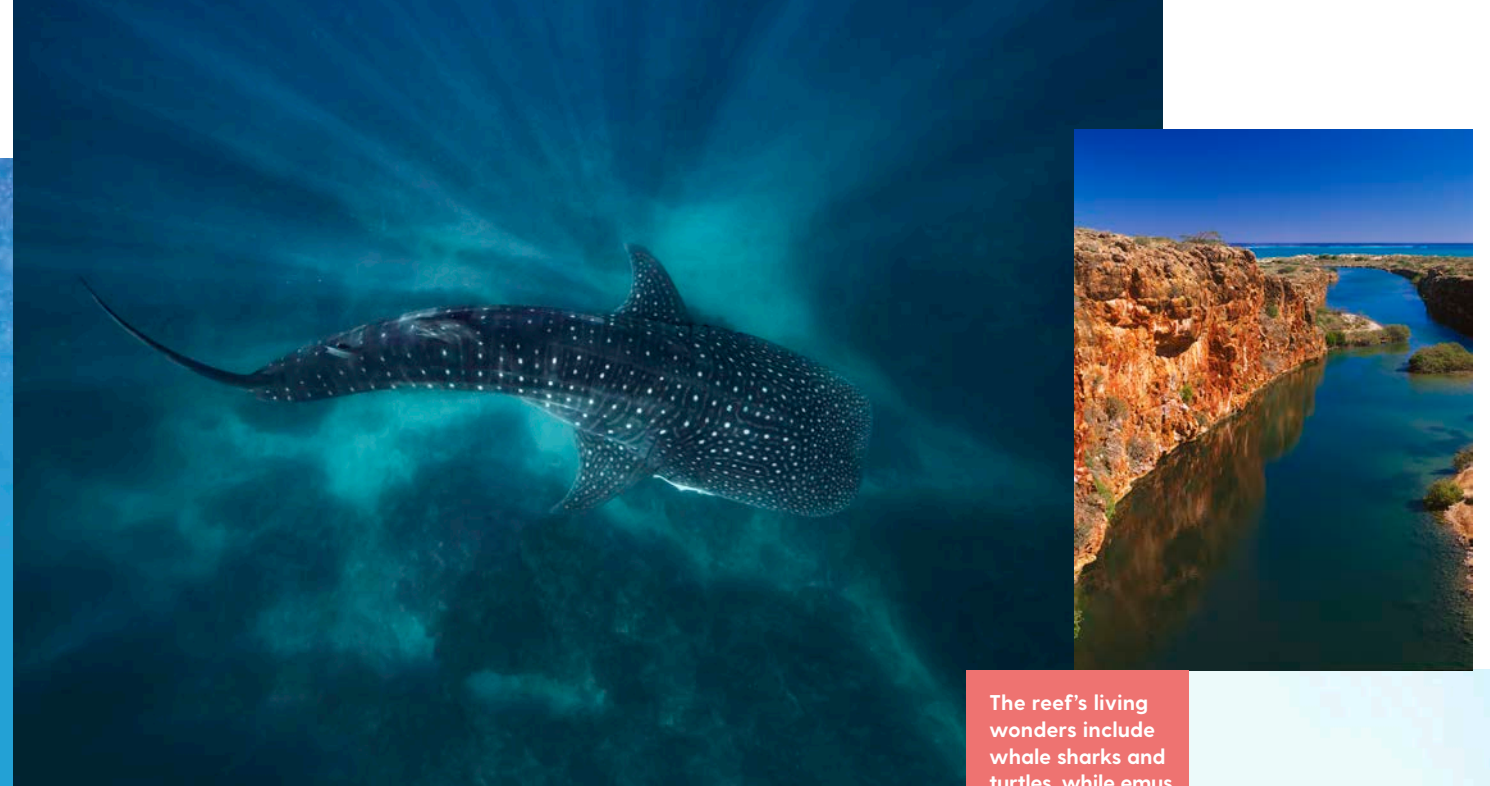


# The *real* wild west



The reef's living wonders include whale sharks and turtles, while emus take in the lie of the land. Above: Yardie Creek meets the sea.

Exmouth is the gateway to the World Heritage-listed Ningaloo Reef and offers a swag of wild experiences, writes Carolyn Beasley.

“Look down now!” yells our guide as we pile off the boat into the deep blue. Still adjusting my snorkel, I peer down, straight into the face of an enormous shark, incoming like a slow-moving bus. It’s a harmless whale shark, and I stare goggle-eyed at the 10-metre-long behemoth. The toothless mouth gapes as its spotted body glides by. Adrenaline courses through me as I gaze after the disappearing tail, and I’m exhilarated by its wild beauty.

I’m offshore from Exmouth, Western Australia, some 1200 kilometres north of Perth. It’s a wild, red-dirt outpost, perched on the edge of North West Cape, a finger of land pointing into the Indian Ocean. On its eastern side is sheltered Exmouth Gulf, while the western cape is flanked by vibrant Ningaloo Reef. Whale sharks visit every year between March and July (often until September), and like most human visitors, it’s Ningaloo Reef that brings them here.

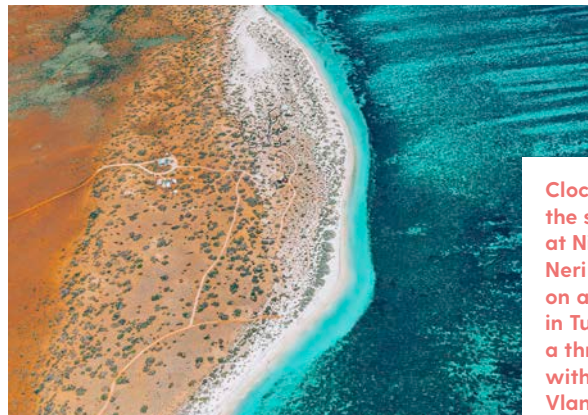
But it wasn’t tourism that started the town. Exmouth began as a US Navy listening base in

1967, during the Cold War. Today, the base still has antennas up to 387 metres tall that communicate with submarines around the world. It was a tiny town on a wild frontier then, and although Exmouth now offers every creature comfort, it’s the astounding natural wonders of this place that still generate that untamed vibe.

On a visit to the Ningaloo Aquarium and Discovery Centre, I find out more about this American-born town, complete with Chevrolets that cruised the right-hand side of the road. Stepping inside a cyclone chamber, I feel the extraordinary force of Cyclone Vance, which battered Exmouth in 1999, and I get an underwater introduction with displays of colourful reef life.

I’m ready to explore the wilds of the reef firsthand, and decide on a guided snorkelling tour. On the 50-minute drive to Turquoise Bay in Cape Range National Park, my guide Neri Grieve of Exmouth Adventures shares her passion for the environment. →





Clockwise from left: the striking coastline at Ningaloo reef; Neri Grieve embarks on a snorkel tour in Turquoise Bay; a thrilling encounter with a whale shark; Vlamingh Head Lighthouse at sunrise; graceful manta rays.



“If I get to take someone snorkelling for the first time, it’s a real highlight for me,” she says. “I know if I take someone out there, they’ll be emotionally invested, and help to protect it.”

With mask and fins in hand, we stroll the glittering white beach before wading into idyllic aquamarine water. Neri explains that unlike the Great Barrier Reef, which is offshore, Ningaloo Reef is a fringing reef, meaning after a few lazy fin-kicks, I’m hovering above a thriving coral reef.

Turquoise Bay is a “drift snorkel”, and a gentle current does the work of swimming for us. Blue angelfish with iridescent fins and tomato anemonefish dazzle me as I glide. An octopus changes colour as it scurries to hide. A baby reef shark skittishly darts away, while a relaxed green

turtle scrutinises us. Neri points out a one-metre-long, black-spotted rock cod hiding under a huge boulder coral, just metres from the shore.

Those preferring to stay dry can also enjoy Ningaloo’s wild nature. Ningaloo Ecology Cruises offers glass-bottom boat tours with easy accessibility. Keep an eye out for the odd manta ray, and even humpback whales between the months of June to October.

The adjacent landscape of Cape Range National Park holds wild treasures, too. At Charles Knife Canyon, deep incisions cut through the landscape, exposing layers of striking colours. A lone bird of prey watches me as it soars above the mini-Grand Canyon.

On the opposite side of the cape, Yardie Creek has sliced a gorge from the Cape Range to the sea. Here I join Yardie Creek Boat Tours and meet Ash Broinowski, naturalist guide and Aussie larrikin, for a one-hour tour. As the boat chugs along, Ash regales us with stories of Cape Range’s fossilised corals and extinct megalodon shark teeth, and points out the medicinal plants used by the Indigenous Thalanyji people. With dry wit, Ash introduces us to wildlife, like the rare and gravity-defying black-footed rock wallabies that live on precarious rock ledges. “This one’s called Rocky, his wife is Roxy, and there’s the kids, Rocco and Roxette,” Ash says.

On the way back into town, I drop in at the Vlamingh Head Lighthouse

on the tip of the North West Cape. High on the hill, the lighthouse affords sweeping views of the gulf and Ningaloo coastline, and at sunset, the country glows red.

The only way to top this view is to see it from the air, and before I leave, I’m seeing it in the wildest way possible. It’s just Birds Eye View pilot Gavin Penfold and me in the microlight aircraft, which at first feels like a glorified paper aeroplane. But once in the air, my trepidation disappears as the unobstructed beauty below unfolds.

Over Exmouth Gulf, Gavin points out giant manta rays gliding peacefully, while dolphins hunt fish, and a dugong mother and calf graze seagrasses. Crossing the Cape Range, I see ancient canyons shedding to both sides of the cape. Red sands contrast with the turquoise stripe of Ningaloo lagoon, and a line of white breakers define the edge of the deep sea. In the clear shallows below are turtles in their hundreds and swarming schools of parrotfish.

Near the end of the flight, Gavin cuts the engine and the microlight becomes a hang-glider, coasting silently over Ningaloo. And just for a moment, I’m a wild bird above a wild place, threatening never to come down. **AWW**

For more information, visit [australiascoralcoast.com](http://australiascoralcoast.com) and [westernaustralia.com](http://westernaustralia.com). The writer travelled courtesy of Tourism Western Australia.

THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROLYN BEASLEY. TOURISM WA. BIRDS EYE VIEW: JEWELS LYNCH. GETTY IMAGES. MANTARAYS NINGALOO BEACH RESORT. OPENING SPREAD: TOURISM WA/DAN AVILA. GETTY IMAGES.



Writer Carolyn Beasley gets a glorious bird’s-eye view with pilot Gavin Penfold. Below: an inquisitive rock wallaby; Ash Broinowski at Yardie Creek; stunning skies over Mantarays Ningaloo Beach Resort.



## HOW TO GET THERE

- Qantas ([qantas.com](http://qantas.com)) flies between Perth and Exmouth, and the best season to travel to Ningaloo is between March and October.

## WHERE TO STAY

- RAC Exmouth Cape Holiday Park has campsites and cabins in town: [parksandresorts.rac.com.au/exmouth](http://parksandresorts.rac.com.au/exmouth).
- For something more upmarket, try Mantarays Ningaloo Beach Resort on the shores of Exmouth Gulf: [mantaraysningalooresort.com.au](http://mantaraysningalooresort.com.au).
- Camping is available at Cape Range National Park beside Ningaloo Reef: [parks.dpaw.wa.gov.au/park/cape-range](http://parks.dpaw.wa.gov.au/park/cape-range).

## WHEN TO GO

- March to July is the best time for the whale sharks, and swimming with humpback whales is possible August to October, though the timing varies slightly each year, depending on the animals.
- There is something to see at Ningaloo all year, but during the summer months it’s very hot.

