



# The wild, wild west

Little did the Brooker family know, the New Zealand borders would shut due to lockdown just one week after they returned from their overseas getaway! **Holly Brooker** inspires us to take advantage of the travel bubble and explore Western Australia



With immense landscapes, deserts, stunning white sand beaches and long summer days that lazily subside with breathtaking sunsets, Western Australia isn't the typical vaycay destination but it certainly stacks up. My husband and I had lived south of Perth eight years earlier and knew that this family getaway was going to be incredible!

Flying over the vast expanse of outback, I sprawled out in my luxurious child-free Air New Zealand Skycouch (miraculously, the kids had opted to sit behind me with Dad - win!) and reflected on the many experiences we'd had living in Western Australia, in what felt like a lifetime ago. Those long, hot days with zero humidity; evening beach swims after work with my husband Rico; Sunday sessions at wineries in Margaret River with friends, live music and good wine; wild kangaroos and emu running along the road while driving early to work; and I could never forget those daily checks over my Landrover before hopping in - fearing a live snake would uncoil itself from under my car and attack me en route (dramatic much?).

I remembered becoming a mum for the first time; my newborn son Hudson, not breathing well, being quickly strapped into a plastic box and flown to Princess Margaret Hospital without me. Not being able to see or hold my baby boy for four full days was tougher than anything I've experienced, and tears quickly surfaced again as I remembered those challenging first few months of parenthood. As I looked over the seats at my now two healthy kids, I felt so thankful I could have hugged them - but I dared not disturb the peace!

This holiday would be an adventure of a lifetime. The first week was to be spent in Perth and the second week exploring the South West. Upon landing in Perth, we went straight to the Budget Car Rental counter to get a vehicle sturdy enough to handle the terrain; we knew from experience we'd be driving along some narrow roads with wild kangaroos. There's no better way to

travel in the outback than in the classic WA 4WD: the Toyota Land Cruiser Prado.

Keys in hand, we stepped out of the airport and felt that delicious rush of hot, dry afternoon air that we'd missed so much. It had been a very long day travelling and we were ready to crawl into bed, alas it was only 2pm in WA (7pm NZ time). I was adamant we were all going to stay awake to get acclimatised into the new time zone.

We checked into a central city hotel, Aloft, near Swan River, where we'd booked a super spacious king suite with plenty of room to spread out and relax at the end of our action-packed days. The amazing staff had set up a kids' corner with a circus tent and games, which came in handy that first night when the kids woke at 2am (7am NZ time) excited, wired, hungry and ready to start the day! Let's just say it was a very long wait until 6am when the buffet breakfast finally opened.

From experience, we knew that planning just one main family activity each morning would be a wise parenting move; giving us the afternoons free to rest, swim or be spontaneous.

#### KINGS PARK

On our first day we were booked to ferry over to Rottnest Island, but there was a very unusual thunder storm with rain and hail so we decided to give it a miss. Here was our chance to be spontaneous! We considered Chipmunks for half a second, but quickly came to our senses. We decided to dodge downpours and explore Kings Park Botanical Gardens, where the kids became engrossed in the War Memorial and we got tested on our history knowledge for a good hour.

It finally got too wet to be outdoors so we bolted to the car, where I had a brainwave. The absolute best use of this rainy afternoon would be to go to Ikea! I'd had my eye on one (okay, two) of their giant light fittings and this would be the perfect time to grab them (getting them both home was another story!).







I know this travel story isn't getting off to a good start but to be fair, the kids loved the Ikea creche during my mad hour shopping dash and they were the only ones there (unlike Chipmunks, I'm sure!). After wrangling purchases and tired kids back to the 4WD, we were too worn out for any exciting dinner plans so we opted to eat dinner at the hotel restaurant where each of us sat with a book in hand, reading in silence over dinner!

#### PERTH ZOO

On day two the sun was back and we had all had a good sleep. As the kids were eager to experience Australia's animal life, we booked two Close Encounters at Perth Zoo: 'Scaly Mates' and 'Bush Buddies' to get up close and personal with the wildlife. Our son was enthralled with the bizarre and spiky echidna and I faced my reptile phobia and touched a live snake (surprisingly smooth).

The zoo is beautifully laid out with loads of friendly staff around keen for a yarn about their diverse range of residents. You could easily spend a full day here with a lunch break, just watch out for those hazardous bollards in the carpark. Yes, we drove into one. By 'we' I mean Rico, and we paid a hefty excess for the experience (I have to say, that the sturdy Land Cruiser hardly noticed the impact).

#### WESTERN AUSTRALIA AQUARIUM

You can't visit Perth without visiting this iconic underwater aquarium where you

can discover WA's marine life right from icy-cold Southern Ocean waters to the tropical wonderland of the coral reefs in the far north. We booked their newest experience; a hands-on boat trip which included feeding sharks, giant stingrays and other sea life from the boat for an up-close view which the kids absolutely loved!

#### A RIDE OF A LIFETIME

Camels roam freely in northern WA and the opportunity to experience riding one in the wild, wild west was way too good to pass up! We arrived at Calamunnda Camels and met the line-up of saddled camels rearing to go. We maneuvered legs and hips over the humps trying to make ourselves comfortable. Little Billie Darling sat on a camel with Daddy but took one look at their hairy faces and big teeth and decided no. She took on the very important job of leading our camels with the host as we wandered through the outback. As far as a first camel ride experience goes, I would quite happily say it was the ride of a lifetime!

#### SOUTH SIDE

While we love city life, I was stoked to head south, starting with a few days in Bunbury: WA's second biggest city with 85,000 people. Hudson was born here, so he'd heard all about our old stomping ground and was keen to check it out.

Arriving in town we drove straight to the waterfront and stumbled upon action! The streets were closed and a crowd had







gathered for a public stunt motorbike show, with a wake boarding competition right out front! What an arrival, standing just metres away from motorbikes doing 360° flips in the air! Once the blood pressure had calmed down a bit, we checked out our son's first home at the Dolphin Bay Apartments, and I reminisced about how I would stand out on our deck holding him as a tiny baby while dolphins jumped in the water right out front! They were special times.

It's a magical spot. Along with catching up with old friends, swimming at the beach and having a beautiful sunset photoshoot on the main beach with my photographer friend Sasha Hesson, we also had an incredible boat cruise at the Dolphin Discovery Centre! The kids were captivated by the beautiful dolphins swimming around our boat, playing and jumping as they followed the wake.

### BUNKING DOWN

We'd had a busy week and it was time to head even further south for a three-day luxury escape at the Pullman Resort in Bunker Bay - a small settlement on the coast, nestled between Busselton and Margaret River. We planned to chill out, sleep in, enjoy local wineries and beaches and keep it chilled.

Driving south in our trusty Land Cruiser, we stopped off at the longest timber-piled jetty in the Southern Hemisphere, at the beachside town of Busselton. Walking along the waterfront

bought back memories of my lunchtime walks down to the harbour when I worked at the local newspaper here (after completely changing careers from high school teaching to marketing and writing), and I marveled at how dramatically different my life was now, eight years on! A new playground, as well as loads of new eateries, had developed along the waterfront.

It was a scorching hot day, and without togs easily accessible in the luggage, the kids stripped off to their undies for a swim. Hubby chuckled as I gave our son extensive tips on how to truly nail a Kiwi bomb off the wharf while filming him in slo-mo so we could review the quality and impact of each bomb!

Pulling up at Pullman Bunker Bay we were overwhelmed by the stunning luxury aesthetic of our 5-star beachfront resort - this was going to be bliss! We were driven by golf cart to our beautiful two-bedroom bungalow-style villa, equipped with everything we could need for a family getaway. The grounds were surrounded by eucalyptus dominated shrublands, looking out to endless golden white sand beaches. We settled in and spent the rest of the day alternating between the pool and the beach.

### CHOCOLATE AND ROOS!

The next day we spent the morning swimming at the beach. I then escaped for a midday pamper with a full body massage at Vie Spa, before our planned trip to







Margaret River. Can I just say, the massage was incredible – how is that not part of my weekly routine back home?! Willing myself awake post-massage, we spent the afternoon checking out local wineries, boutique stores and, of course, the famous Margaret River Chocolate Factory where we sampled way too much chocolate, watched the chefs making Easter bunnies and came away laden with chocolate to enjoy back in New Zealand (let's be honest, it didn't last the trip home). The kids were thrilled to see hundreds of wild kangaroos roaming the roadside farms, while I was quietly thankful for our study 4WD Land Cruiser that could handle a collision with one of these speedy giants!

#### DATE NIGHT

As it was our final day to be enjoyed at the resort, Rico and I thought we should try to wrangle a date. We opted for bar service at the Bunker Bay Restaurant, which thoughtfully had a media and games room right next to the bar to keep the kids entertained! Rico and I enjoyed local wine and delicious crême brûlée while overlooking the magical ocean and keeping an eye on the kids in the adjoining media room: perfect situation. Okay, I lie;

instead of the world-famous local Margaret River wine I should have opted for, I had a gin and tonic. Some habits don't change!

#### HEYO, FREO!

On Saturday, we were almost ready for the familiarity of home after a busy two weeks. We had two final days back in Perth and opted for a slow day in Fremantle. With no agenda, we spent hours meandering through the village, visiting playgrounds, battling Rico at TimeZone (to say we're quite competitive is an understatement), stopping for gelato at Cocco Bianco and browsing stores at the Freo Markets.

By the time we got back to the hotel it was 5pm and we were done! I'd promised our youngest a swim at the Crown Hotel rooftop pool, so we had a quick dip before heading back to the room to sort out our bags for our imminent departure. And those very large light shades somehow needed to get home with us!

Just like that it was our final day in Perth, and almost time to fly home. It was another stunning 35° day and we'd been invited to visit Outback Splash. It was perfect weather to spend the day at a huge water splash and slide park and burn off some energy pre flight. Billie had

an encounter with the resident koala and hung out in the less intense kids' area while Hudson and Rico went wild on slides that looked as tall as skyscrapers.

On route to the airport we shared our worst and best moments from the holiday and I knew we wouldn't have done anything differently. Looking back now over the past year of Covid-19, it's hard to believe our luck that we got this overseas escape in the wild, wild west, returning to Auckland just a week before New Zealand's borders were closed, toilet paper became a rare commodity, and we were locked down at home for almost two months!

We'd had an amazing memory-filled holiday that was both relaxing and fun, in a unique part of Australia that has much to offer travellers. Who knows when it will happen, but I'm already planning our next overseas getaway! ●

#### SHOUT-OUT TO:

Air New Zealand, Aloft Hotel, Pullman Bunker Bay Resort, Budget Car Rentals, Western Australia Tourism, Perth Zoo and Dolphin Bay Discovery.