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# MARINE WONDERLAND

WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S NINGALOO REEF OFFERS UP WHAT MUST SURELY BE SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST CONVENIENT SNORKELLING...

WORDS: Helen Ochyra

slip off my flip flops, strap on a snorkel and stroll the few metres across the almost snow-white sands to the water.

One big step and I am in the Indian Ocean, one last breath and my face is in the water – and I am in a different world.

This is Ningaloo Reef, the world's largest fringing reef. It runs for approximately 260 kilometres along the coast of Western Australia, passing within flipper-swinging distance of the shore and offering up what must surely be some of the world's most convenient snorkelling.

It is so convenient that I have been snorkelling here day in, day out for the best part of a week. First, I based myself at Sal Salis, where a cluster of very upmarket safari-style tents lead straight onto the sands of South Mandu beach. Here, my guide EJ takes me out on guided snorkels, pointing out eye-poppingly orange clownfish >>

Main image, divers explore the marine life-rich waters of the Ningaloo Reef



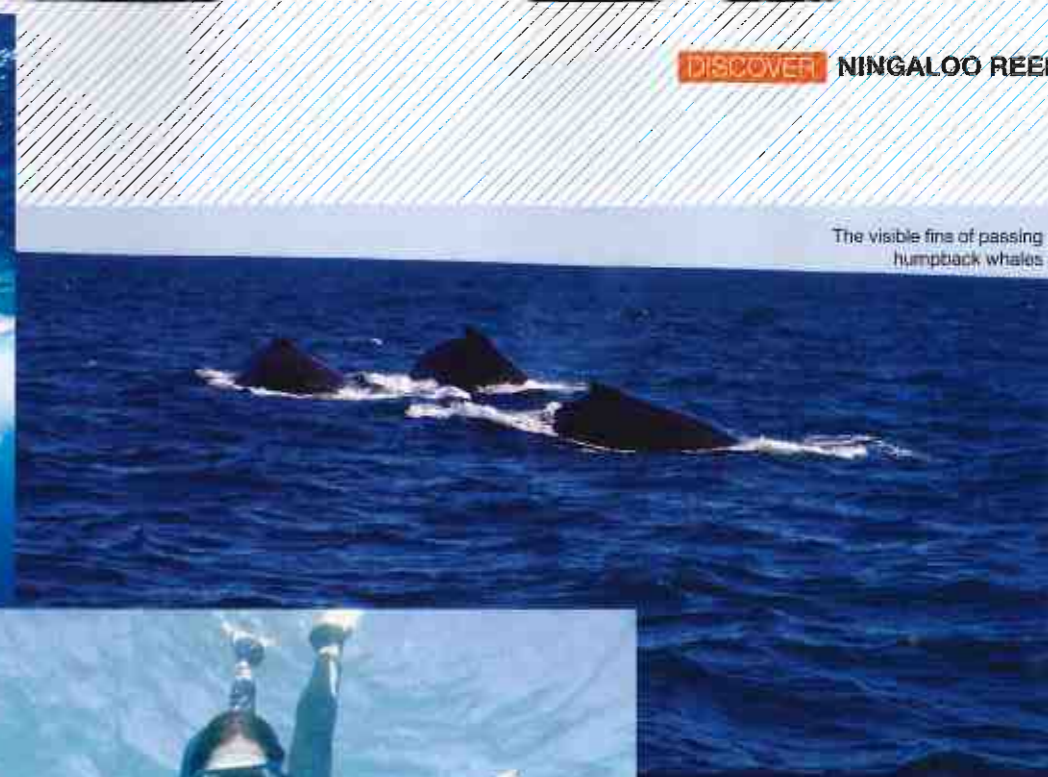
bobbing and weaving through the coral, telling me to listen for the delicate chomping of the parrotfish on the reef's edges and showing me that there is nothing to be scared of when you see a reef shark (they are in fact far more scared of you).

Evenings at Sal Salis are spent eating delicious communal meals (red emperor fishcake; fillet steak) on the canvas-covered deck of the main tent as the kangaroos gather and slowly outnumber us, and end with me lying in my private hammock watching the stars.

The pace of life is slower here and I gradually adopt a loose-



The writer floats close to a whale shark



The visible fins of passing humpback whales



Swimming above an inquisitive turtle



Sal Ningaloo's sleek catamaran Shore Thing

**"THE BEST THING ABOUT NINGALOO IS THAT MUCH OF WHAT LIVES HERE IS UNUSED TO THE PRYING EYES OF MASK-FACED HUMANS"**

shouldered attitude to everything – even the open-air bathroom and the wildlife noises that punctuate the silent nights.

**SHORE THING**

The snorkelling at South Mandu is excellent, but I've heard tell of an even better one, at Turquoise Bay just along the coast in the Cape Range national park.

This snorkel is famous for its effortlessness. Here, you simply get in the water at the far end of the beach and allow the natural currents to float you back along the

reef to where you started. It is so easy. I fold my arms behind my back and watch a swarm of sky-blue damselfish swimming through the tendrils of an almost-as-bright-blue staghorn coral.

A cloud of convict surgeonfish, coloured a brilliant yellow, starts sweeping around me, and just off to the left a green turtle appears, peering at this interloper in its midst with great interest.

The best thing about Ningaloo is that much of what lives here is unused to the prying eyes of mask-faced humans. The marine life here is just as likely to take an interest in you as you are in it and as a result there is always plenty to see here.

Although much of it can be viewed easily from the shore, boarding a boat is the only way to see the outer reef. And so the following day I limber up my sea legs and board Sail Ningaloo's sleek catamaran Shore Thing.

This thoroughly kitted-out boat has a specially designed hull that allows it to access shallow reef lagoons and the remote reaches of Ningaloo that nobody else can –

not to mention comfortable cabins and a communal lounge where freshly cooked meals are served.

I board Shore Thing at Coral Bay for a three-day stay and within the hour I am in the water.

Our first snorkel is at a shallow coral garden called Asho's Gap. Here we watch grey reef sharks getting their dead skin and parasites nibbled off by cleaner fish at the "cleaning station" and chase shoals of butterfly fish as they dart in all directions.

**TAKING THE HUMP**

The following days pass in a blur of snorkelling, swimming and sun-worshipping. I watch humpback whales appear with a puff of air on the horizon before swimming past the boat, their silky backs emerging just metres away.

I am blown away by bottlenose dolphins frolicking at sunrise and turtles filling their lungs at dusk for the night ahead. And I am mesmerised by the sunsets, so sensational they render me not only speechless but motionless too, unable to shift from the deck of the boat until the sky has turned from clearest blue to blackest ebony.

On our last morning onboard we drop anchor one final time at Bateman's Bay. This is a bankable spot for swimming with manta rays, which are here year-round, and our captain Luke is instantly on the lookout. I strain my eyes to the horizon but am not sure what >>



A fawn nurse shark glides along the ocean bed.

**WAKE UP TO THE WONDERS OF CORAL BAY**

With the reef at your doorstep, you can relax, re-energize and refresh at Ningaloo Reef Resort in picturesque Coral Bay.

The Resort offers modern beachfront accommodation for all tastes, from motel-style rooms to apartments, with a swimming pool to refresh yourself in and manicured lawns to lounge around on, all a few paces away from the shorelines.

[www.ningalooresort.com.au](http://www.ningalooresort.com.au)



Clockwise from below, a graceful manta ray; snorkellers get close to a five metre-long manta ray; a whale shark; spangled emperor fish; moray eels



### RESORT ON THE BEACH

**N**ovotel Ningaloo Resort Exmouth is located just metres from the waterline, right on the beach. The resort features a choice of modern apartments and bungalows. It boasts an award-winning restaurant and bar and guests can enjoy the swimming pools, gymnasium or simply whale watching from their own private balcony. [www.novotelningaloo.com.au](http://www.novotelningaloo.com.au)



This page, from left, sweetlips fish; a pretty coral garden; convict surgeon fish; brightly coloured sunshine coral



“WHALE SHARKS APPEAR OFF THE COAST EVERY YEAR WITHOUT FAIL FROM APRIL UNTIL JULY AND SIGHTINGS OF THEM ARE ALMOST GUARANTEED”

My final few days are spent in Exmouth, the largest town in this area by quite some stretch and the centre of Ningaloo’s whale shark industry. Yes, this marine life-packed reef still has one thing up its sleeve – the chance to swim with the world’s largest fish.

### PLANE TO SEE

Whale sharks appear off the coast here every year without fail from April until July and are so common that sightings of them are almost guaranteed. But I have decided not to take any chances, and have selected a tour operator with its very own spotter plane.

Ocean Eco Adventures send up a plane because tracking down the whale sharks before anyone else does means their boat heads to the right areas first.

This is vital because any whale shark in Australian waters is protected by the country’s Wildlife Conservation Act. This means that only one boat at a time is allowed within the so-called “exclusive contact zone”, an area 250 metres around the whale shark. Arrive within this area first, or you miss your chance.

Fortunately, the plane and our boat are in constant contact and so the boat moves around the reef >>



I’m looking for. Fortunately, Luke is, and before long he is pointing excitedly at a dark splotch in the water. We all slip off the back of the boat, plunging our faces into the water and sure enough, just a few metres away, is a manta ray, some five metres wide, gliding along directly in front of us.

We follow it along the reef and suddenly more appear. Some are all black, others have white bellies that catch the eye as they roll through the water, and I quickly realise that they are playing with us.

One comes towards me. Its glassy eyes gazing at what I am sure it must think is a very odd sort of fish. I giggle gleefully to myself as it passes, causing myself to splutter into my snorkel, but I couldn’t care less – this feels like a once-in-a-lifetime experience.



Below, a Sail Ningaloo guide shows off his catch; and (right) snorkelling over a coral garden



according to the plane's instructions – and so we always seem to arrive first. I had assumed we would get one, perhaps two, swims with the whale shark, but every single opportunity to get in the water is taken and our snorkel guides have us leaping in from the back of the boat continuously.

I tire quickly – but I barely notice. Swimming with these graceful creatures is all-consuming and before long every single one of our group of 10 (the maximum number of swimmers allowed in the water with the whale shark at any one time) is completely absorbed. Cameras are put away, arms folded behind backs, legs slowed to a deliberate pace – we are beginning to mimic the whale

shark. I float alongside it, watching its unmistakably shark-like fins propelling it through the water and try to mentally capture this most special of moments.

Just as I am examining the checkerboard of large pale spots that reaches along its London bus-length back, the whale shark alters course.

It is almost imperceptible at first but it gradually dawns on me that it has turned towards me – and I find myself facing the largest mouth I have ever seen.

The whale shark is a filter feeder and so it has a mouth over a metre wide to draw in as much water – and consequently as much plankton – as possible. There is no question that it could swallow me whole.

There is however also no question that I should get out of its way and so I flail sideways as seven metres of hefty whale shark heads straight at me – and straight past me. I am so close I could reach out and touch it but this is, of course, against the rules, so I simply watch as it sweeps past me and on with its journey to who knows where.

I float silently, dumbstruck by the reef's unrivalled marine life. Ningaloo really is a different world, and it's one I could come back to time and time again. 🌊



## USEFUL INFORMATION

The easiest way to get to Ningaloo is to fly. The local airport is Learmonth, 37 kilometres from Exmouth and 115 kilometres from Coral Bay.

Virgin ([www.virginaustralia.com](http://www.virginaustralia.com)) and Qantas ([www.qantas.com.au](http://www.qantas.com.au)) fly here from Perth. Cars can be hired from the airport but most hotels offer transfers.

Sai Sails ([www.saisails.com.au](http://www.saisails.com.au)) is located within Cape Range national park and has luxury safari tents sleeping two from A\$725 (£429) per person per night.

Novotel Ningaloo ([www.novotelningaloo.com.au](http://www.novotelningaloo.com.au)) is located on Sunrise Beach in Exmouth's marina development. Rooms range from one-bedroom studios to three-bedroom beachfront bungalows and start from A\$320 (£189) a night.

Sail Ningaloo ([www.sailningaloo.com.au](http://www.sailningaloo.com.au)) offers all-inclusive sailing holidays onboard luxurious catamaran Shore Thing from A\$1,700 (£1,006) per person for three nights. There are five cabins accommodating a maximum of 10 guests.

Ocean Eco Adventures ([www.oceanecoadventures.com.au](http://www.oceanecoadventures.com.au)) has Whale Shark Discovery cruises departing daily from Exmouth in season (April to July) for A\$395 (£233) per person. Lunch and a DVD of the tour are included.