



A WHALE OF A TIME AT

# Ningaloo

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THE NATURAL BEAUTY, SAFETY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF THE NINGALOO MARINE PARK SETS THIS HERITAGE DESTINATION FRONT AND CENTRE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S MUST-VISIT LOCATIONS. BY DAN AVILA





Getting to many of the world's best adventure and wildlife hotspots often involves overcoming challenging journeys and enduring tough conditions just to catch a glimpse of something special. Not so on the Ningaloo Coast, where outstanding close encounters with terrestrial and marine wildlife is practically assured and all in sublime conditions. After first falling in love with Ningaloo more than 25 years ago on an extended fishing and diving sojourn, I recently ventured back to the Coral Coast to see how much had changed and to try to capture some images of my personal aquatic 'big five' – manta ray, whale shark, turtle, dugong and humpback whale. Ningaloo delivered in magical style.

Not much has changed over those 25 years. The coastal town of Coral Bay looks almost the same and the sheltered beach and turquoise water are as wonderfully inviting as ever. Yet thanks to some careful planning and bold investment by a few visionary tourism operators, Ningaloo has come of age as a diverse and integrated tourism destination while maintaining its 'miles from anywhere' appeal.

Although I was keen to hit the water, Ningaloo proved to be just as enjoyable on land. This had a lot to do with our transcendent accommodation at the unparalleled Sal Salis Eco Retreat located in the Cape Range National Park. Sal Salis is the most exclusive and luxurious accommodation in the region and part of the lauded Luxury Lodges of Australia. There are very few places around the world that pull off 'eco' and 'luxury'. Sal Salis absolutely nails it. There are no signs guiding would-be guests from the road. Sal Salis is completely hidden, nestled in the dunes on the most enchanting section of the Ningaloo Coast, a few kilometres south of Turquoise Bay. Rumour has it that an entire Ningaloo coastal survey of over 100 kilometres was undertaken to select this spot.



**Opening image:** Drawing visitors from around the world, the gentle whale shark is simply awe inspiring, photo credit: Tourism WA/Dan Avila.

**Clockwise from top:** Green turtles are a common site when snorkelling the coral bombora or Ningaloo, photo credit: Tourism WA/Dan Avila; The night sky above the honeymoon suite at Sal Salis; Turquoise Bay offers protected swimming and is magical on a sunny day, photo credit: Tourism WA/Dan Avila.

## IT'S ABOUT THE VIBE

There is a bit of a ritual to arriving at Sal Salis. After being driven to a staging area by resort manager, Candice, our luggage is transferred to electric buggies and whisked away. We look at Candice – waiting to be asked into the remaining buggy. Candice points to a track in the dunes and says, “the retreat is about half a kilometre that way. I’ll meet you there”. I must have been looking a little perplexed as Candice said with a smile; “Don’t worry, this is how all our guests arrive – you’ll love it”.

As we set off and I crack a joke to my wife about preferring to be dropped in by private helicopter over unceremoniously hoofing it in, it became clear why Sal Salis make their guests enter this way. It is silent, except for the sounds of nature, and devoid of any buildings or man-made structures. The walk along the dunes calibrates your senses and attitude to exactly where you are – and it is simply brilliant. Kangaroos are lolling around the track and for most of the walk along the gentle dunes, the ocean and protective fringing reef is clearly in view. Behind the reef, humpback whales are breaching with incredible frequency. Then Sal Salis comes into view – a series of tents and wooden pathways threading through the dunes. By the time we arrive, staff are waiting for us with a drink and we are nicely in tune to the serenity and beauty of our new surrounds.

Staying at Sal Salis is genuinely off the grid. No mobile reception, no Wi-Fi and very little power in the rooms, which are tents on suspended timber floors. As much as I get



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separation anxiety when I first unplug from technology, it only takes a couple of cocktails and the omnipresent sounds of the ocean to realise that some down time is a good thing ... and a word to the wise, it's far more romantic. Meals at the resort are a big deal with the gastronomy akin to inner city fine-dining, made all the more delish by the fabulous and remote surroundings.

## THE BIG 5

The hero of the region is the beautiful reef. The coral starts at the shoreline and extends out several hundred metres to the main outer reef barrier with plenty of marine life both in the lagoons and outside the reef. Whale sharks have been a staple of Ningaloo for many years and snorkelling with them is best from April to July. Swimming with such a massive fish is awe inspiring and any sense of trepidation and anxiety quickly slips away when the shark cruises into view.

The latest addition to the marine interaction option list here is swimming with humpback whales. We go on a boat tour specifically targeting humpback and the conditions are perfect. The vessel is a custom-built 40 foot flybridge cruiser set up to take fewer passengers than other operators in the region. One of the advantages of Live Ningaloo is that all guest can jump in the water for every encounter, rather than taking turns, as those with larger numbers must do. Sail Ningaloo is another operator giving visitors the chance to get up close and personal to the incredible creatures of the deep.

Steaming outside the reef, skipper and co-owner Murray is in constant contact with a spotter plane circling over-head. When the right whale is spotted and Murray feels there is the prospect of a good swim, he makes the call to the guide to get everyone in the water. There is a solid rush of adrenaline as we slip into the inky water and quickly look to get our bearings. Our guide then takes over direct communication with the spotter plane via waterproof radio and we swim as directed by the pilot with the bird's-eye view of us and the whale.

"OK – look that way!" our guide yells out. Looking and scanning the endless blue, nothing, then just like that, a whale is almost upon us. It is amazing how a whale can almost sneak up on a snorkeller. Their agility, inquisitiveness and sheer size



provide for a moving close encounter. Simply breathtaking.

Snorkelling inside the reef, the water is shallow, and dense, coloured coral is everywhere. The opportunity for close contact with creatures is also excellent. Not being able to swim with dugong given their protected mammal status, we do get our special encounter with manta ray. After a swim in close proximity with gracefully gliding and turning mantas with massive five-metre wingspans, it's hard to wipe the smiles off our faces. They are truly other-worldly, completely harmless and beautiful.

Our final swim session is with both green and loggerhead turtles and they go about their business of cruising and feeding, a little curious but generally ambivalent about the excited humans swimming alongside them.

For those not so keen to get wet, the terrestrial exploring opportunities are wonderful. Sal Salis arranges guided walks into the gorges and I do a sunrise soft-hike to Mandu Mandu Gorge making it to the top of the hill just as the sun peeps over the horizon. The colour and drama at dawn is the pay-off for the early morning and the local rock wallabies that inhabit the protected gorge are far more active at this time too.

Swimming with these local creatures and enjoying the beauty of the region from our salubrious digs has reinvigorated my love for the ocean and desire to experience other unplugged, nature-based adventures, seeking out authentic and bespoke experiences. If only they could all be as perfect as glorious Ningaloo. •

*Photography by Dan Avila.*





## TRAVEL FACTS

### GETTING THERE

- Qantas flies from Perth to Exmouth's Learmonth Airport, Exmouth. [qantas.com.au](http://qantas.com.au)
- Sal Salis is an hour's drive (70 kilometres) south of Exmouth. Book the transfer through Sal Salis.

### WHERE TO STAY

- Sal Salis: [salsalis.com.au](http://salsalis.com.au)

### WHEN TO GO

- March to October is the best time to go.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

- Australia's Coral Coast: [australiascoralcoast.com](http://australiascoralcoast.com)
- Sail Ningaloo: [sailningaloo.com.au](http://sailningaloo.com.au)
- Live Ningaloo: [liveningaloo.com.au](http://liveningaloo.com.au)
- Ningaloo Marine Interactions for manta and turtle interactions: [mantaraycoralbay.com.au](http://mantaraycoralbay.com.au)
- Luxury Lodges of Australia: [luxurylodgesofaustralia.com.au](http://luxurylodgesofaustralia.com.au)

*From far left:* Swimming with the mighty Mantas inside the Ningaloo reef, photo credit: Tourism WA/Dan Avila; The honeymoon suite at Sal Salis.

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