



A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Spanning more than 186,000 hectares, Kalbarri National Park is a vast natural paradise. Why not lose yourself among its wildflowers, ancient trails, rivers, epic gorges, soaring cliffs and endless possibilities for adventure.

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There's an emu, cat-walking across Kalbarri's coastal highway, flaunting feathers which threaten to fly away in fierce onshore winds. I want to follow its twiggy legs as it strides into a soft duvet of lambswool wildflowers, but the car is rocking around like a spaceship simulator in an amusement park. Opening the door is futile. Overhead, a black veiled sky acts as a dark reminder of Cyclone Seroja, which ravaged Kalbarri's small community last year. People's roofs are peeled back like pull-string lids, baring scars bandaged by blue taupe.

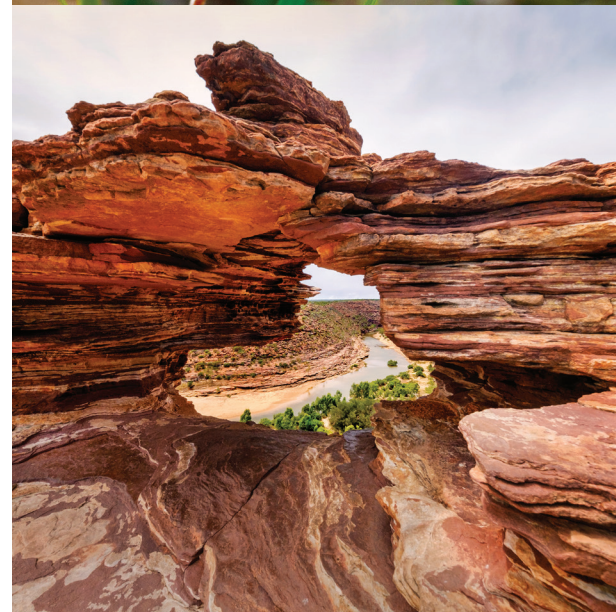
But the popular Western Australian seaside town is coming back to life. And there's a lot of life to be lived in the tiny welcoming town that boasts Kalbarri National Park, which covers some 186,000 hectares – two and a half times the size of Singapore.

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

I continue towards the national park, passing grevillea 'ivory whip' wildflowers that light up the sweeping plains like welcoming lanterns. Before exploring the park's curves and crevices I meet up with senior park ranger, Mike Paxman, who greets me with a giant grin.

"Kalbarri Skywalk just won two awards!" he says. "One for excellence in architectural design, the other in tourism, winning a national regional award." He pauses. "It's well deserved, too. Construction began early 2018 and was completed by June 2020, it's a remarkable feat of engineering."

Mike fills me in on the park's general safety, urging me to pack water and think carefully before tackling difficult trails.



Clockwise from opposite page: Lambswool wildflower grows throughout Kalbarri National Park in springtime; Kalbarri Skywalk provides incredible views across the Murchison River; This pink feather flower is just one of the park's many floral curiosities; Wildflowers set to bloom; Nature's Window is one of the park's iconic attractions; Beautiful banksia; Melaleuca pom-pom wildflowers.





“Consider your ability if you attempt a Class 4 hike – they are steep, unstable and physically demanding.”

I’m here at the tail end of spring, when temperatures are cooler, and wildflowers dust the landscape in a fiesta of vivid colour.

Armed with brochures, I head to the Skywalk. It has wheelchair access, is open to all levels of fitness and the platforms can support 1,000kg per square metre, helping those who fear heights feel more at ease.

“MOTHER NATURE IS A POWERFUL ARTIST.”

Even more impressive are two huge hands etched in the ground representing the Nanda Aboriginal people. Their message is simple: “This story is about people from all walks of life coming together, coming together as one.” I feel their footsteps below my own as I follow the Beemarra serpent sandblasted into the pathway. Belonging to their Dreamtime, the snake guides visitors along the track. Plaques displaying animals who once roamed here around 400 million years ago lead me to the lookout. The Nanda people named it Kaju Yatka – walk to sky – and it’s easy to see why.

Suddenly I’m ‘floating’ on cantilevered platforms, peering into the Murchison River 100m below. At 820km long, the river slinks through the gorge, a life-giving artery feeding

the park’s fauna and birdlife. Layered sandstone stretches across the valley like a backdrop from a Hollywood western. At any moment I expect cowboys to come galloping through on handsomely maned horses.

ANCIENT LANDSCAPE

But where are the wildflowers? In search of blooms, I set out to Nature’s Window, the park’s naturally formed rock window. There’s a nine-kilometre, Class 4 option, which can take around five hours. I opt for the easier, Class 3, 45-minute loop trail, where I pass bright yellow pom-pom acacias, flame grevillea – with its long frilly fingers pointing skywards to soak up the sun – and smoke bush, its scraggly branches the colour of ash. The star of the show though is layered with thick slabs of Tumblagooda sandstone that have eroded over time to create the perfect lookout into the deep river gorge below. Mother Nature is a powerful artist – her brush strokes continue to bring the ancient landscape into the modern world, attracting visitors from around the globe.

With Mike’s words – “consider your ability” – freshly in my mind, I head to the Z-Bend, a Class 4 hike with a 2.6km return. The sign advises to take a companion; two litres of water; expect loose rocks; steep descents; ladder climbs and allow two hours. Alone, I begin the trail. No one is on the path. Within minutes I’m climbing down full body lengths into the gorge, gripping onto sandstone crevices with my fingertips.


Realisation sinks in; the 1.3km descent is almost vertical. Tempted to head back, I’m relieved when I hear

Clockwise from this page, far left: Explore the park at your leisure; Two hands, created by the Nanda Aboriginal people, represent unity and community near the entrance to the Skywalk; Poker wildflower; The Murchison River is perfect for cooling off; The park’s natural beauty is awe-inspiring and includes grevilleas, kangaroo paw, the Z-Bend River Trail, melaleuca pom-pom wildflowers and banksia.

voices echoing from the crevices beneath. A young, fit 20-something bounces past me while I cling to a ladder with a rookie rock climber’s grip. “Only 500 metres more!” he says.

I carry on. A pink poker wildflower points me to a narrow corridor, but massive boulders almost block its entrance. It’s like a mystery horror ride – exhilarating, scary, edgy. A young family on the upwards climb tell me the promised land is just around the corner.

A few more careful manoeuvres bring me to the river mouth where a natural watering hole lies before me: A sparkling prize pool of crystal-clear water where I bathe my feet.

I picture the Nanda people hunting and gathering as a cohesive community, living together as one. I rest my ear against the red-blushed rock. The soul-stirring sounds of clapsticks and didgeridoos are playing from another lifetime, when the Nanda people danced here during Dreamtime, kicking up dust, singing their ancestors’ songs. 

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GETTING THERE

Kalbarri is a six-hour drive (590km) from Perth, or a two-hour drive from Geraldton Airport.

STAYING THERE

Kalbarri Edge Resort, kalbarriedge.com.au

EATING THERE

Finlay’s Kalbarri is an outdoor restaurant and brewery that has the perfect setting in which to refuel after exploring the national park. finlayskalbarri.com.au

MORE INFO

Australia’s Coral Coast, australiascoralcoast.com
Western Australia Tourism, westernaustralia.com

