



Lonely Planet Journalist – Danielle Hugh

Margaret River's reputation as the jewel in Western Australia's crown is well merited, as it sparkles with fine wineries, captivating landscapes and exquisite hotels and restaurants, however, scratch beneath the surface of these delights and you'll find a wealth of diverse activities to make your visit even more memorable. Danielle Hugh finds caves, quandongs and her balance on an Aussie bush tucker tour.

Before we even begin, you should know that I'm anything but the poster child for physical fitness, so the prospect of four hours of canoeing, walking and caving was a little daunting. But having just turned 30 and given up my irrational fears of looking foolish, I jumped at the chance of trying a Cave, Canoe and Bush Tucker Tour on the wilds of the Margaret River. There were about 18 people in the group I joined and they had come from as far afield as Japan, Germany and the US and from as close as a couple of streets away. I'm guessing, but I would put the age range of the adventurers between five and sixty-something and the group was made up of singles, couples, families and groups of friends. Soon after arriving at the starting point, I met Anne and Rod from Adelaide who invited me to share their canoe.

Helen Lee, who owns the business and shares the tour guiding with her specialist guides, gave us a quick canoeing lesson and we were off, taking a few minutes to get the hang of going in a straight line, then powering solidly along after that. Having been most afraid that I might capsize the canoe and dump my unsuspecting new pals in the water, I was delighted to discover a sense of balance of which I had been previously unaware. For some reason, canoeing terrifies a lot of people, but in the very stable canoes provided for our use, finding and maintaining a good balance didn't seem to be a problem. Joy of joys, I was a well-balanced individual who was able to contribute soundly in teamwork situations. Cheered by this discovery, I found myself relaxing and soaking up the spectacular scenery of the river, its banks and the steep faces of the Wallcliffe Cliffs. The river was deep and clear and the surface was barely rippled by a light breeze. We had a leisurely 10-minute paddle to a little island of paperbarks, or melaleucas, in the middle of the river, where we stopped to taste some of the bush tucker Helen collects in the local trees, some 500 to 600 years old, which develop an air pocket in their trunks to allow them to breathe even when they are partly submerged for up to three months when the river rises.

There's an eerie feel to the Island, because little else grows under the paperbarks and the breeze whistles through the strips of bark that hang from their trunks and branches. Aptly named, the bark from these trees was given various uses by the local Aboriginal and European settlers, from nappies for babies to diary pages for recording experiences and learning to write. After the island of Melaleucas, which we were lucky to experience as it will soon be underwater, we paddle further upriver to the Margaret River Rowing Club, a rough timber building just metres from the water's edge. Here there is a rock landing – a great place to stop for a swim on a hot day. A tip here, don't forget your bathers. The river was cool and refreshing and I'm sure at least some people didn't want to get out. After cooling off, it was back into the canoes for the paddle down river to a spot at the foot of the cliffs. Then, and this was the only really tricky part, there is a steep hill to climb. There is a good path to follow and it is the kind of walk that will puff you out but not take too long to recover from. A short walk from the crest of the hill is the entrance to one of the 100s of local caves. With temperatures at a constant 20 degrees, the caves were used by early settlers like the Bussell family as a place to store milk and the cheese and butter they made.

While the Bussells were building Walcliffe House, on the banks of the Margaret River, the caves also provided a home. From the cave, you head back down the hill and into the canoes again for the return trip to a spot near the river mouth. The tour is over. Helen is proud that the tours can be designed to cater for people of all abilities and really there is not too much to be worried about if you are even slightly intrepid. However, if you know someone who can't cope with a little bit of dust and physical exertion and a few flies, this may not be the adventure for them.

This four-hour tour is a great way to find out more about the river and local history, as well as get some fresh air and exercise and meet people. The gourmet lunch is superb and includes 20 native dishes too! Don't forget your hat, sunscreen, walking shoes and some drinking water.