

The Wheatbelt & the Midlands



Picture dazzling displays of wildflowers, from purple mulla mullas to red Sturt's desert peas, and abundant native wildlife, from emu families crossing a dirt road to magnificent wedge-tailed eagles circling slowly overhead. These are some of the rewards for undertaking travel through the vast regions of the Wheatbelt and the Midlands, stretching some 300km or so south of the Great Eastern Hwy up to the base of the Pilbara in the north.

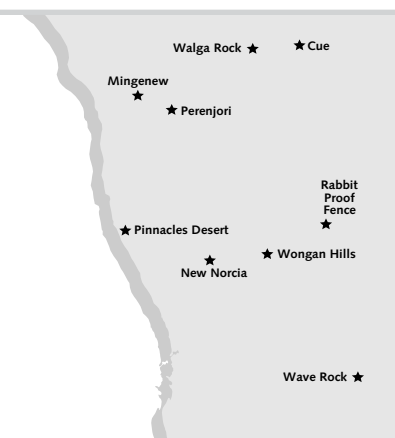
You can explore tiny pastoral towns with their windmills, wheat silos, wide streets and classic Aussie pubs. You'll be privy to architectural anomalies such as Hawes' wonderful buildings, Spanish-flavoured New Norcia, Cue's goldfields architecture and eerie ghost towns.

Off the beaten track you'll discover spectacular rock formations such as Walga Rock, or the much-photographed perfect granite Wave Rock. However, you don't have to travel far to experience extraordinary sights – the remarkable Pinnacles Desert is a short drive from Perth.

There are even more rewards if you visit during spring, when the region is awash with wildflowers, including appearances by fascinating flora such as the distinctive wreath flower.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoy the sublime sunset over the other-worldly **Pinnacles Desert** (p173)
- Admire 10,000-year-old indigenous paintings at the mini-Uluru, **Walga Rock** (p179)
- Surf the perfect granite wave that is **Wave Rock** (p172)
- Explore the intriguing monastery town of **New Norcia** (p178)
- Delight in blankets of spectacular native wildflowers at **Mingenew** (p175), **Wongan Hills** (p176) and **Perenjori** (p176)
- Soak up the faded grandeur and gold-mining history in **Cue** (p179)
- Appreciate Albert Facey's fortunate life in the **Wheatbelt** (p172)
- Enjoy the silence of the deserted red-dirt backroads crossing **Rabbit Proof Fence** (p177)



THE WHEATBELT

CENTRAL WHEATBELT

The Great Eastern Hwy (State Hwy 94; also known as the Golden Way) starts in Perth and passes through the towns of the Avon Valley before reaching the many agricultural towns on the way to Kalgoorlie-Boulder. For much of its length it runs alongside the Golden Pipeline, the pipes that carried water from Mundaring Reservoir near Perth to Kalgoorlie-Boulder (see p154). If you've got the time, you can use the National Trust's *Golden Pipeline Heritage Trail* guidebook (\$34.95) to make the trip from Mundaring to Kalgoorlie-Boulder more interesting.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

With your own wheels you can move at your own pace through the central Wheatbelt towns on your way to the goldfields. The **Perth-Goldfields Express** (☎ 1800 620 440; www.gold.rushtours.com.au; Perth-Kalgoorlie adult/concession \$70/43) is a bus service calling in 10 times per week en route to/from Kalgoorlie. Leaving Perth at 7.45am on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, it stops at Cunderdin (two hours), Kellerberrin (2½ hours), Merredin (three hours) and Southern Cross (five hours), arriving in Kalgoorlie at 3pm. On Sunday it leaves Perth at 2pm, arriving Kalgoorlie 9.15pm.

Cunderdin to Southern Cross

☎ 08
Sleepy **Cunderdin** (population 1255), 156km from Perth, is a fine spot to stretch your legs. The visitors centre is handily situated in the **museum** (☎ 9635 1291; 100 Forrest St; entry by donation; ☎ 10am-4pm), a restored steam water pumping station on the old goldfields pipeline, with exhibits on farming, gold mining and the 1968 Meckering earthquake, plus an original bush school and a Tiger Moth biplane.

If you're looking to rest your head, do it with your tongue firmly in your cheek at Cunderdin's **Ettamogah Pub** (☎ 9635 1777; cunderdinp@westnet.com.au; 75 Main St; s/d \$70/80; ☎). This wonky waterhole is a replica of an Albury-Wodonga hotel named after the pub that starred in Aussie cartoonist Ken Maynard's long-running comic for *Australasian Post* magazine. The Ettamogah does great-value counter meals and tasty steak sandwiches (mains \$9 to \$20).

It's worth stopping at **Kellerberrin** (population 1151), 203km from Perth, to take in the latest exhibition at the cutting-edge, contemporary **International Artspace Kellerberrin Australia** (ASKA; ☎ 9228 2444; 88-90 Massingham St; admission free; ☎ 1-5pm Thu, Fri & Sun, 10am-5pm Sat). The **visitors centre** (☎ 9045 4006; www.kellerberrin.wa.gov.au; 110 Massingham St; ☎ 9am-4.30pm) has info on other attractions.

Merredin (population 3428), 260km east of Perth, is a good place to refuel. If you want a driving break, the **visitors centre** (☎ 9041 1666; www.wheatbelttourism.com; Barrack St; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun) has info on wildflower and town tours, and can tell you where to see ancient granite rock formations dating back 2,500 million years. Architectural enthusiasts will appreciate the characterful exterior of the 1928 heritage-listed **Cummins Theatre** (Bates St).

If you've done enough kilometres for one day, try Merredin's **Commercial Hotel** (☎ 9041 1052; commercialhotel@westnet.com.au; 62 Barrack St; s/d with shared bathroom \$30/40) for basic rooms, or the agreeable **Merredin Caravan Park** (☎ /fax 9041 1535; 2 Oats St; unpowered/power site \$18/22).

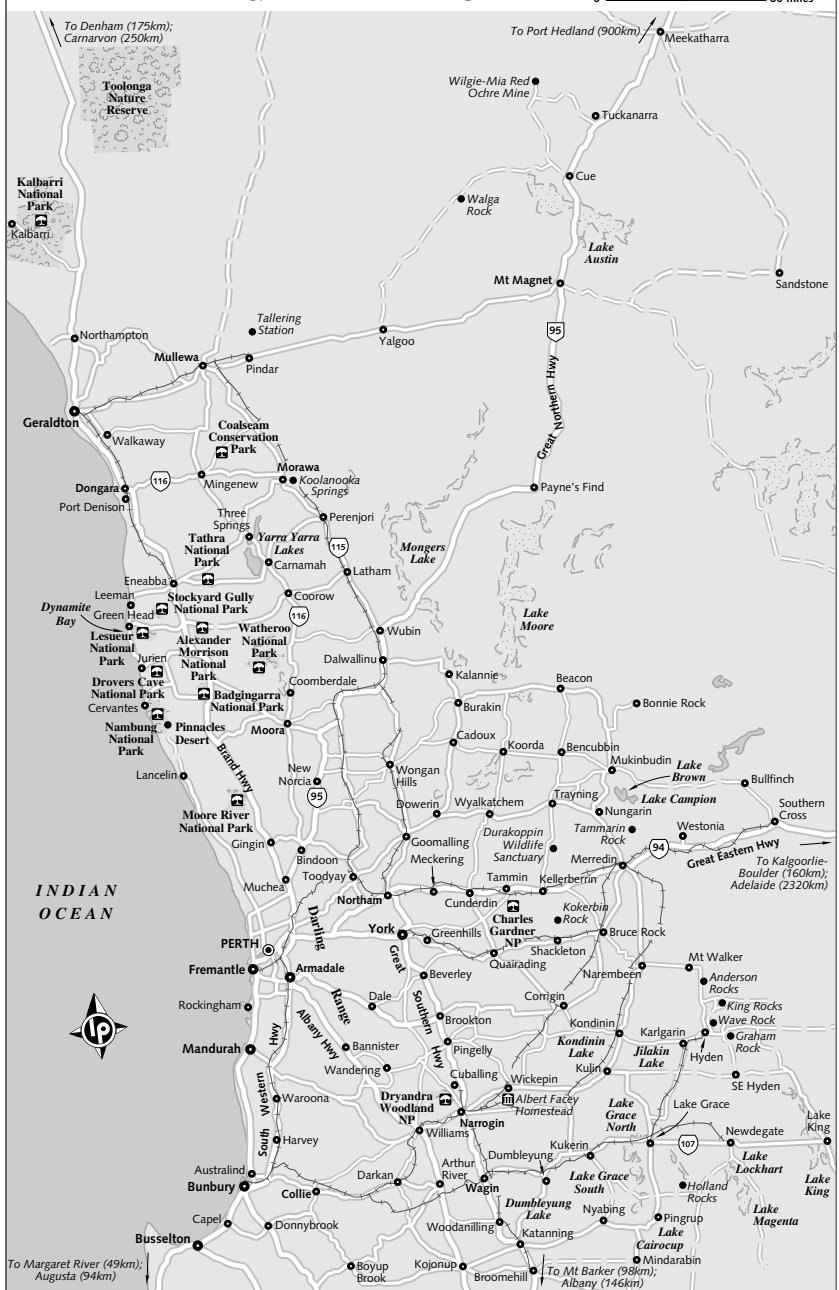
Southern Cross (population 1200), 370km east of Perth, is the last Wheatbelt town and the first goldfields town, making a fine living from both products. Named after the stars that prospectors Tom Riseley and Mick Toomey used to guide them to discover gold here in 1888, Southern Cross was the state's first gold-rush town. Its spacious streets also inherited their names from stars and constellations. The **visitors centre** (☎ 9049 1001; www.southern-cross.info; Shire of Yilgarn, Antares St; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) can organise bush tours and make transport bookings.

If the history of the place has you intrigued, you can discover the golden age at the mud-brick **Yilgarn History Museum** (Antares St; adult/child \$2.50/50¢; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 1.30-4pm Mon-Sat, 1.30-4pm Sun), the state's first miner's registry office and courthouse (1892). The **Southern Cross Palace Hotel** (☎ 9049 1555; Antares St; s/d \$65/75) is a classic Aussie pub with ample verandas, affable locals and agreeable counter meals.

SOUTHERN WHEATBELT

Spectacular Wave Rock and stunning ancient granite rock formations are the highlight of this farming region, stretching from Dryandra in the west to Wave Rock in the east, and from Beverley in the north to Kojonup in the south. While Wave Rock is 200km south of

THE WHEATBELT & THE MIDLANDS



the Great Eastern Hwy and a similar distance east from the Great Southern Hwy, it's an easy drive along sealed roads lined with splendid wildflowers in spring.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Most travellers visit Wave Rock on a day trip. Full-day tours from Perth can be done with **Western Travel Bug** (☎ 9204 4600; www.travelbug.com.au; tours \$135) or **Active Safaris** (☎ 9450 7776; www.activesafaris.com.au; tours adult/concession \$115/95) or as part of a five-day day southwest loop with **Western Xposure** (☎ 9371 3695; www.westernxposure.com.au; 5-day loop \$649). With your own wheels you can drop into the Wheatbelt towns on the way to Wave Rock or as part of a southern sojourn. There is also a weekly public bus service to/from Perth.

Hyden & Wave Rock

☎ 08

Perfectly shaped like an ocean wave about to break, the 15m-high and 110m-long multicoloured granite Wave Rock is worth the 350km journey from Perth – we dare you not to strike a surfing pose on this rock of a wave! Wave Rock was formed some 60 million years ago by weathering and water erosion, and the wonderful streaks of colour that flow down its face have been caused by run-off from local mineral-water springs.

The Wave Rock **visitors centre** (☎ 9880 5182; Waverock; ☎ 9am-5pm), at the Wildflower Shoppe and Country Kitchen, has plenty of information and souvenirs, and can organise Aboriginal cultural tours. Remember to buy your ticket (\$6 per car) from the machine at the start of the short walk to the rock.

If you're staying overnight, phone ahead – accommodation can fill with tour groups. Camp amid the gum trees near the rock at **Wave Rock Resort & Caravan Park** (☎ 9880 5022; waverock@waverock.com.au; unpowered/powerd site \$22/25, cabin \$85; ☎). BYO linen for the cabins, or pay an extra \$12 if you're without.

In Hyden, 4km east, **Wave Rock Motel** (☎ 9880 5052; hotelmotel@waverock.com.au; 2 Lynch St; d \$117; ☎) has well-equipped rooms, a comfy lounge with fireplace, and an indoor bush bistro. The Hyden **visitors centre** (☎ 9880 5182; 20 Marshall St; ☎ 9am-5pm) has information on local wildflower specialities, including stunning spring orchids.

Transwa (☎ 1300 662 205; www.transwa.wa.gov.au) runs a bus from Perth to Hyden every Tuesday

(\$42, five hours), with the return service to Perth each Thursday.

Dryandra Woodland

☎ 08

The enchanting eucalypt Dryandra Woodland, 164km southeast of Perth, with its thickets of white-barked wandoo, powderbark and rock she-oak, hint at what the Wheatbelt was like before the natural bushland was bulldozed for farming and native wildlife eradicated by feral animals.

The showpiece of this 28,000-hectare wildlife habitat is the superb **Barna Mia Animal Sanctuary**, home to a number of endangered native species. After-dark torchlight tours, operated by the Department for Environment and Conservation (DEC), provide a rare opportunity to see these cute furry creatures up close. Book through **DEC** (☎ weekdays 9881 9200, weekends 9884 5231; narrogin@dec.wa.gov.au; tours adult/child/family \$13/7/35) by 4pm for post-sunset tours on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.

For the full escapist experience, stay at the 1920s forestry settlement of **Lions Dryandra Village** (☎ 9884 5231; www.dryandravillage.org.au), 8km from the animal enclosure, in rustic woodcutters' cabins. Midweek you'll pay \$25/10 per adult/child; on weekends and holidays there's a minimum charge (\$50/75 for a cabin sleeping two/four, and \$100 for a cabin sleeping eight to 12 people). Enjoy several wonderful bushwalking and cycling tracks, including the 5km **Ochre Trail**, focused on local indigenous Noongar culture. The woodland is 22km northwest of Narrogin, signposted from the Southern and Albany Hwys.

Other Wheatbelt Towns

☎ 08

Wickepin (population 679), 210km from Perth, is home to the atmospheric **Albert Facey Homestead** (☎ 9888 1005; Wogolin Rd; adult/child \$2.50/1; ☎ 10am-4pm Mar-Nov; Fri, Sat & Sun Dec-Feb, at other times see newsagent opposite) in the centre of town. Even if you haven't read Albert Facey's extraordinary autobiography, *A Fortunate Life* (see opposite) a visit still provides a sobering insight into the struggles of outback life during the Great Depression. Facey fans will appreciate the 86km self-drive **Albert Facey Heritage Trail**, taking in significant sites featured in the book. Pick up a brochure from the friendly staff across the road from the homestead at

A FORTUNATE LIFE

The story of Albert (AB) Facey (1894–1982) is a remarkable and heart-rending one. Before Facey had turned two his father died and soon after his mother abandoned him, leaving his grandmother to raise him until he was eight – at which time he went off to work.

Facey mainly worked in outback Western Australia (WA) as a farm labourer; his tough childhood saw him cheated by employers and one time so badly whipped that he was presumed to be on his deathbed. Later he fought in a boxing troupe before signing up to fight in WWI, where he landed at Gallipoli (where two of his brothers were killed).

Facey was badly injured in WWI, struggled through the Great Depression and lost a son in WWII, however his optimism rarely wavered. While Facey didn't teach himself to write until his return from Gallipoli, after this he kept copious notes about his experiences. Facey only stopped writing after the death of Evelyn, his wife of nearly 60 years. Facey was aged 85 when his manuscript was accepted for publication by the Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1979.

The autobiography, *A Fortunate Life*, was released in 1981 and Facey passed away nine months later, just long enough for him to see how deeply affecting the book was to anyone who read it. Apart from its emotional resonance, it's an important historical document, as Facey experienced many of the significant events that helped shape Australia's cultural identity. While he saw his life as a fortunate one, Australia is more fortunate that Albert so simply yet powerfully documented his life and the events that helped shaped a nation.

the **Telecentre** (☎ 9888 1500; Wogolin Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), which doubles as a visitors centre.

Kojonup (population 2119), 39km southwest of Katanning, was established in 1837 as a military outpost to protect travellers taking the mail run from the Swan Settlement (Perth) to Albany. Still a popular pie-stop on the Perth–Albany drive, Kojonup has a cutting-edge museum, the interactive **Kodja Place Interpretive Centre** (☎ 9831 0500; www.kodjaplace.net.au, www.kojonupvisitors.com; Albany Hwy; adult/child \$6/3; ☎ 9am-5pm). You can sit around a Noongar campfire, ride an old school bus and drive a farm ute. Noongar guide Jack Cox also offers excellent indigenous cultural tours (\$5).

CENTRAL MIDLANDS

There are four main routes north through the central Midlands, with three (roughly) parallel routes running to Geraldton: the Brand Hwy hugs the coast, and two inland roads branch off from (Hwy 116) or intersect (Hwy 115) the Great Northern Hwy. The fourth option is to follow the Great Northern Hwy north through the outback.

BRAND HIGHWAY

This coastal road (National Hwy 1) is the most popular route, with a number of side roads leading off to features such as the Pinnacles Desert and small fishing villages.

From Cervantes, a sealed road follows the coast before rejoining the Brand Hwy and running through to Dongara-Port Denison. This stretch is marked by a few small towns and verdant national parks.

NATIONAL PARKS

Those with 4WD vehicles and a love of nature should explore the following parks and reserves – particularly during the spring wildflower explosion. Contact **DEC** (☎ 9652 1911; Bashford St, Jurien) for more information.

Alexander Morrison National Park (8.5 sq km)

Extensive strands of low woodland and mallee.

Badgingarra National Park (130 sq km) Walking trails, wildflowers.

Drovers Cave National Park (27 sq km) Limestone caves.

Lesueur National Park (270 sq km) Significant for the rich diversity of plants.

Tathra National Park (43 sq km) Walking trails through typical bushland.

Watheroo National Park (445 sq km) Heathland and woodland, Jingenia Caves.

Cervantes & Pinnacles Desert

☎ 08

Nambung National Park (bus passenger/car \$4/9), 17km from Cervantes, is home to the spectacular, otherworldly Pinnacles Desert, where thousands of limestone pillars are scattered in a moon-like landscape across a golden desert floor. The lime-rich desert sand originated

from seashells, which compacted with rain and subsequently eroded, forming individual pillars, some towering up to 5m. A good gravel loop-road runs through the formations so you can stop to walk among them.

The cruisy crayfishing town of **Cervantes** (population 750), 245km north of Perth, makes a wise overnight stop to enjoy the Pinnacles at sunset when the light is sublime and the crowds thin. Crayfishing season is from mid-November to June, when the fresh sweet crustaceans provide a compelling reason to visit.

About 20km south of Cervantes at Thirsty Point, **Hangover Bay's** white-sand beach is good for a dip, and you can cook on the gas barbecues here and further north at Kangaroo Point.

Get information on accommodation, wildflowers and Pinnacles tours at Cervantes' **visitors centre** (☎ 9652 7700; www.turquoiseoast.org.au; Cadiz St ☎ 10am-5pm). There's a general store, liquor shop and takeaway here too.

TOURS

Australian Excursions (☎ 9455 3162, 1800 048 000; www.supporttours.com.au; tours adult/concession \$162/144) Offers full-day tours to the Pinnacles, taking in wildflowers and sand-boarding.

Turquoise Coast Enviro Tours (☎ 9652 7047; 59 Seville St; 3hr Pinnacles tour \$40) These guided tours (incorporating a 2½-hour walk) leave Cervantes at 8am and 2½ hours before sunset.

SLEEPING & EATING

Pinnacles Caravan Park (☎ 9652 7060; cervpinnpark@westnet.com.au; 35 Aragon St; unpowered/powerd site \$22/25, on-site van/cabin \$70/60) This shady park is in a prime tent-pitching position next to the beach. Excellent facilities and a supermarket are a plus.

Cervantes Lodge & Pinnacles Beach Backpackers (☎ 9652 7377, 1800 245 232; www.cervanteslodge.com.au; 91 Seville St; dm \$23, d with shared bathroom \$75, d with views \$95) Travellers love the communal kitchen and beach proximity, and the cleanliness of the place makes up for its lack of charm.

Cervantes Holiday Homes (☎ 9652 7115; rose.knowles@bigpond.com.au; cnr Malaga Ct & Valencia Rd; cottage d from \$75; ☎) These spotless, spacious self-contained cottages come with fully equipped kitchens, comfy lounge and TV, and are great value.

Ronsard Bay Tavern (☎ 9652 7009; 1 Cadiz St; mains \$12-26; ☎ 11am-2pm & 6-8.30pm) Locals love this place for its fireplace, big screen TV, dart boards, pool tables and jukebox. Not to men-

tion its delicious counter meals – try the seafood basket.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Greyhound (☎ 13 14 99) has services from Cervantes to Perth (\$39, four hours, daily) and Geraldton (\$20, 2½ hours, daily). Buses continue north to Jurien (20 minutes) and Leeman (35 minutes).

Jurien Bay

☎ 08 / pop 1500

Swimming and sailboarding the pristine waters off a white sandy beach, fishing for delicious snapper and dhufish, and feasting on fresh crayfish are just some of the attractions that keep travellers returning to Jurien Bay, 266km north of Perth.

You can snorkel with sea lions and watch humpback whales migrate south (September to December) with **Jurien Bay Charters** (☎ 9652 1109; www.juriencharters.com; Jurien Marina; 2½hr sea-lion tour adult/child \$80/40).

Pitch your tent or camp your van at the very edge of the beach at the **Jurien Bay Tourist Park** (☎ 9652 1595; www.jurienbaytouristpark.com.au; Roberts St; unpowered/powerd site \$23/25; on-site van \$70; 1-2-bedroom chalet \$110/140) then cook your own freshly-caught fish in its campers kitchens.

The popular local watering hole, **Jurien Bay Hotel Motel** (☎ 9652 1022; jurienhotel@wn.com.au; 5 White St; s/d \$80/95; ☎ ☎), has comfy, spotlessly clean motel rooms out back, with the added bonus of fresh crayfish on the menu in season at its Sea Change Restaurant (mains \$17 to \$28) and decent counter meals (meals \$7 to \$22) in the bar.

At **Lesueur's** (☎ 9652 2113; 36 Bashford St; meals \$4-9; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) you can order a gourmet sandwich and real espresso (yeah!) from the corrugated-iron counter. For dinner, opt for pasta or seafood at the pseudo-rustic **Sandpiper Tavern** (☎ 9652 1229; cnr Roberts & Sandpiper Sts; mains \$12-24; ☎ 11am-2.30pm & 6-8.30pm). There are several snazzy Asian and seafood takeaways on Bashford St, while self-caterers can check out the supermarket at the Jurien Bay Shopping Centre, along with an ATM, newsagency and post office.

Green Head & Leeman

☎ 08

Get away from it all at the laid-back fishing villages of Green Head (population 300) and Leeman (population 680), where there's little to

do besides swim and fish in secluded bays. Both are pretty but Leeman's picturesque old wooden jetties at Pioneer Park give it the edge.

Sea Lion Charters (☎ 9953 1012; sealioncharters@hotmail.com; 24 Bryant St, Green Head; half-day tours adult/child \$75/30) offers tours to interact with friendly sea lions living offshore on Fisherman's Islands.

Travellers who stay here have trouble leaving the lovely beachside **Green Head Caravan Park** (☎ 9953 1131; 9 Green Head Rd, Green Head; unpowered/powerd site \$18/21, on-site van from \$47). The hospitable owners treat guests like family with regular barbecues and discounts for longer stays.

Leafy **Leeman Caravan Park** (☎ 9953 1080; 29 Thomas St, Leeman; unpowered/powerd site \$19/20, on-site van from \$68, cabin from \$58) offers lots of shade and space just 100m from the beach.

Green Head has a general store and pub with an ATM, while Leeman is slightly more sophisticated with seafood takeaways and a surf shop. With its fresh burgers and rolls, Leeman's **Snack Shack** (☎ 9953 1110; Spencer St; \$3-9; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) lives up to the promise of its signage: 'A great little place to feed ya face!'

MIDLANDS ROAD (HIGHWAY 116)

This is the route to take if you prefer wildflowers, wheat silos and wide-veranda pubs over white-sand beaches and cobalt sea bays. It's possible to weave in and out to experience a bit of both.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Transwa (☎ 1300 662 205; www.transwa.wa.gov.au) has a Perth-Geraldton service that runs four times weekly via Moora (\$25, three hours) and Mingenew (\$46, 5½ hours).

Moora

☎ 08 / pop 2574

Like most Wheatbelt towns, tall gum trees line Moora's wide streets, the railway runs through the centre of town, and buildings are festooned with wonderful murals depicting rural life. The largest town between Geraldton and Perth, Moora is central to the area's vast sheep and wheat industry. The spring wildflower season here is spectacularly colourful.

Campers will enjoy the grassy sites and great facilities (including barbecues and free washing machines and dryers) at shady **Moora Caravan Park** (☎ 0409 511 400, 9651 1401; Dandaragan St; unpowered/powerd site \$16/21). The good-value rooms at **Moora Motel** (☎ 9651 1247; 44 Roberts St; s/d \$80/90; ☎) are spotless and have toaster and kettle.

Moora's **Pioneer Bakery & Restaurant** (☎ 9651 1277; 50 Padbury St; meals \$5-20; ☎ 7.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 7.30am-2pm Sat) has lots of old-fashioned charm, bakes fresh bread daily (a rarity in these towns!) and serves real coffee.

You can dine in or take away at the **Gourmet Café** (☎ 9651 1043; 97 Gardiner St; meals \$7-22; ☎ 6am-9pm), which does tasty toasted sandwiches, big burgers, steaks and salads.

Drovers Inn (☎ 9651 1108; cnr Dandaragan & Padbury Sts; mains \$15-26; ☎ 5-9pm Wed-Sun) is a classic Aussie pub with lots of atmosphere and a characterful restaurant serving the usual counter meals.

Access the internet at the **Telecentre** (☎ 9653 1053; Padbury St; per hr \$8; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri). There's a supermarket, newsagency and ATMs on Dandaragan and Padbury Sts.

Mingenew

☎ 08 / pop 525

For most travellers Mingenew, 383km north of Perth, is an overnight stop on the inland route north or a base for wildflower wanderers – the speciality here being orchids and everlasting. The **visitors centre** (☎ 9928 1081; Mingenew post office; ☎ 9am-5pm Jul-Sep) has wildflower info and maps.

The **Coalseam Conservation Park**, 34km north-east of town, is named after the seams of coal that can still be seen in the riverbed of the Irwin River, and is the site of the first coal deposit discovery in Western Australia (WA) in 1846. Admire the splendid wildflowers, such as the pink schoenia, and check out the ancient fossil shells embedded in the cliffs.

The **Commercial Hotel** (☎ 9928 1002; mingenewhotel@bigpond.com; Midlands Rd; hotel s/d with shared bathroom \$60/70, motel d \$98) does home-style counter meals for lunch and dinner (mains \$18 to 28) and has comfy rooms with shared bathrooms upstairs and basic but clean motel units next door. Breakfast is included in the rates.

A real bush setting awaits under the big gum trees of the **Mingenew Springs Caravan Park** (☎ 9928 1019; Lee Steere St; unpowered/powerd site \$12/17).

There's a well-stocked supermarket, bakery and fuel stop on Midlands Rd.

WONGAN HILLS TO MULLEWA (HIGHWAY 115)

An alternative route north through the Wheatbelt towns takes you from Wongan Hills, crossing the Great Northern Hwy at Wubin, and continuing inland roughly parallel to the

Midlands Rd (Hwy 116), to Mullewa. Expect wildflowers in season, wheat silos, and wide-street towns with classic corner pubs.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Transwa (☎ 1300 662 205; www.transwa.wa.gov.au) leaves from Geraldton to Mullewa (\$13, one hour), Morawa (\$25, 2½ hours) and Wubin (\$38, four hours).

Wongan Hills

☎ 08 / pop 1462

Fields of yellow-flowered canola and barley provide a welcome break from the wheatfields and bushland. Bushwalkers enjoy Wongan Hills for its well-organised walking trails and wonderful spring wildflowers, including the unique crimson verticordias.

The friendly volunteers at the **visitors centre** (☎ 9671 1973; Railway Station, Wongan Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm Mar-Dec) can point you toward the wildflowers and provide maps and organise guides for the popular Mt Matilda and Speaker's Chair walking trails through **Wongan Hills Nature Reserve**, the **Fowler Gully Reserve** for remnants of natural woodlands, and the **Rogers Nature Reserve** for spectacular verticordias and other wildflowers.

Sleep under shady gum trees at the **Wongan Hills Caravan Park** (☎ 9671 1009; Wongan Rd; unpowered/power site \$15/20, cabin \$60, chalet \$90).

The historic art deco **Wongan Hills Hotel** (☎ 9671 1022; www.wonganhillshotel.com.au; 5 Fenton Pl; hotel s/d \$45/65, motel d \$75) offers older-style pub rooms and modern motel-style accommodation. While takeaway is available from an international menu (\$12 to \$24), eating in the original art deco dining room makes for a refreshing change.

There's an excellent, well-stocked supermarket and a bakery on Fenton Place.

Perenjori

☎ 08 / pop 573

Perenjori, 350km from Perth between Wubin and Mullewa, is named after the indigenous word for waterhole, *perangary*. It's a popular stop on the 'wildflower way' and the country bursts with colour year-round, from the yellow of wattle in autumn through to the pink of everlastings in spring. The **visitors centre** (☎ 9973 1105; Fowler St; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri), also home to the **pioneer museum** (adult/child \$2/50c), has handy self-drive tour brochures, *The Way of the Wildflowers* and *Monsignor Hawes Herit-*

age Trail, and can provide access to the beautiful **St Joseph's Church**, designed by the prolific John Hawes (see the boxed text, p188).

If you're heading to the Great Northern Hwy, stop at **Mongers Lake Lookout** for views across the blinding-white salt lake, signposted from the red-dirt Perenjori-Wanarra Roads. Not far away, **Camel Soak**, 500m off Rabbit Proof Fence Rd (see the boxed text, opposite), was sunk to provide water for the camel teams used to construct the fence. There is abundant birdlife here – you will spot pink and grey galahs, red-tailed black cockatoos, white corellas and emus.

The red-dirt, eucalyptus-shaded **Perenjori Caravan Park** (☎ 9973 1193; Crossing Rd; unpowered/power site \$3/13, van \$23, cabin \$50) offers decent facilities, including a campers kitchen.

The friendly, family-owned **Perenjori Hotel** (☎ 9973 1020; Fowler St; hotel s/d with shared bathroom \$40/60, motel s/d \$60/70) has basic pub rooms with shared bathrooms and motel rooms with private ones; both include breakfast. Prop yourself at the bar to tuck into hearty counter meals (\$12 to \$22) with the locals.

Perenjori Newsagency and Café (Fowler St) also does takeaway food.

Morawa

☎ 08 / pop 880

The highlight of Morawa – a town that survives on wheat, wool and wildflowers – is the splendid Hawes-designed **Church of the Holy Cross** and its one-room stone hermitage where Monsignor Hawes lived for many years.

The **visitors centre** (☎ 9971 1421; 34 Winfield St; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm May-Oct) can supply travellers with information about wildflower drives and sites.

Call ahead if you intend staying in town as accommodation quickly fills with contract workers. **Morawa Caravan Park** (☎ 9971 1204; White Ave; unpowered/power site \$15/20) has tidy sites.

Guests enjoy staying at the **Marian Convent B&B** (☎ 9971 1555; morawanuts@wn.com.au; Davis St; dm \$20, s/d \$50/80). Opposite Hawes' church, it has basic twin rooms, a backpacker dorm, a big communal kitchen and a cosy dining room.

Morawa Motor Hotel (☎ 9971 1060; cnr Solomon Tce & Manning St; motel s/d \$75/95; ☎) has basic motel rooms (hotel rooms were being renovated at time of research) and serves hearty counter meals for lunch and dinner (\$12 to \$24).

There's a supermarket, bakery and coffee shop on Winfield Street.

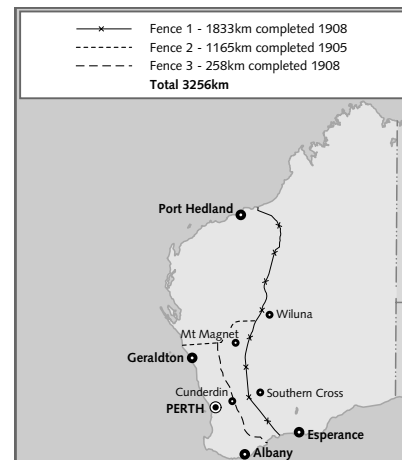
THE WASCALLY WABBIT-PROOF FENCE

In keeping with the rich tradition of being completely clueless to the delicate balance of Australia's natural habitat, in 1859, farmer Thomas Austin imported 24 rabbits to the state of Victoria from England. They were to provide him with 'a touch of home...a spot of hunting...[and] could do little harm'. Good thinking Tom. Fast-forward to 1894 and the offspring of Tom's randy rabbits had eaten crops and pastures across Australia's eastern states, before reaching the Western Australia (WA) border.

To combat the spread of the wascally wabbits into WA, construction of a 1833km-long Rabbit Proof Fence began in 1901, taking seven years to complete. As construction of the fence advanced, so did the rapacious rabbits. Two more adjoining fences were built: Fence 2 in 1905 and Fence 3 in 1908. However, biological warfare proved more effective than 3256km of fence with the introduction of myxomatosis in 1950, 1080 poison in 1956 and the calicivirus in 1996.

Today the fence is maintained by the Department of Agriculture, and used as a baiting corridor for wild dogs, to contain feral goats and to halt emu migrations. Every 10 years or so, dependent on seasonal conditions (eg drought), emus migrate en masse in search of food. At these times, the hapless birds are said to be in plague proportions, and threaten to damage crops and farm-fences, with up to 70,000 emus pressed up against the fence line.

Unfortunately the fence will be of little help in stopping the latest threat to WA's fauna and flora: the cane toad, introduced into Queensland in 1935 to control the native cane beetle and now slowly jumping their way across the country...



Mullewa

☎ 08 / pop 1057

People make pilgrimages to Mullewa in spring for the town's famous wreath flower, the star of the annual Wildflower Show (late August). Mullewa's other main attraction is the splendid Romanesque **Our Lady of Mt Carmel Church** (Doney St), designed and built by John Hawes (see the boxed text, p188), and the adjoining **Priest House** (☎ 10am-noon Jul-Oct), now a museum honouring Hawes. Typical of Wheatbelt towns, murals depict Mullewa's history on buildings around town. The helpful **visitors centre** (☎ 9961 1500; cnr Jose St & Maitland Rd; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri Feb-Dec) has information on self-drive tours to view wildflowers and Hawes buildings.

The struggle between pioneer pastoralists and the ancestors of Mullewa's sizable Aboriginal community is recognised at the heritage site of **Butterabby Graves**, 16km south

of Mullewa. It's the location of two bloody 1864 conflicts between pastoralists and five Aboriginal men who killed them over territorial disputes, and the site of the public execution of the indigenous men.

If the barbed wire doesn't bother you, **Mullewa Caravan Park** (☎ 9961 1161; 7 Lovers Lane; unpowered/power site \$10/15) has tidy sites; head down the block to the centre of town to pay at the **Ampol Garage/Deli** (☎ 9961 1180). The well-stocked deli also has an ATM.

Railway Motel Hotel (☎ 9961 1050; Gray St; s/d \$66/88) has rooms in an old pub, and decent counter meals (\$12 to \$24).

GREAT NORTHERN HIGHWAY

Outback travel doesn't get any more real than Hwy 95 (Great Northern Hwy), the inland route from Perth to Port Hedland. Not long after leaving monastic New Norcia, the bushland and wheatfields give way

BENEDICTINE BUSINESS

In this rural area of Western Australia (WA), where the largest structures are the corner pubs in tiny towns, your first sight of New Norcia comes as quite a shock. In Australia's only monastic town, the Byzantine-influenced St Ildephonsus and Gothic Revival style of St Gertrude's, both former colleges, are as striking as they are incongruous set in this landscape.

Just as absurd must have been the sight of two Spanish Benedictine monks, Dom Joseph Serra and Dom Rosendo Salvado, who arrived here in 1846 to start a mission for the local Aborigines, the Noongar people. Dom Rosendo Salvado envisaged a self-sustaining village where Aborigines were encouraged to settle as land-holders, as a way of becoming 'civilised'. Salvado was a rare figure in these times, being sympathetic to indigenous culture and learning the local language.

It was under its second abbot, Dom Fulgentius Torres, who took over at the turn of the 19th century, that New Norcia changed dramatically. Torres designed and supervised the building of both St Gertrude's Ladies College in 1908 and St Ildephonsus College for boys in 1913. Today the National Trust has registered 27 of the 65 buildings in the town.

Despite the architectural splendour, New Norcia will always be associated with what has become known as the 'stolen generation' (see p21), based on the 1997 report *Bringing Them Home*. While the number of indigenous children (particularly those of mixed Aboriginal and European descent) forcibly taken from their parents is still disputed by some, the fact remains that many of these children grew up in missions such as New Norcia.

The closure of the last school in 1991 removed the community's main source of income. To survive financially, New Norcia had to publicly exploit the very thing that kept it independent from the outside world: its very fine foodstuffs. Day after day visitors line up in the shop, arms laden with local goodies such as fabulous breads, cakes and olive oils.

to endless stretches of semiarid desert and the small mining towns of Mt Magnet, Cue and Meekatharra. While you'll see plenty of wildlife, many hours can slip by before you see another vehicle, usually in the form of a road-train.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Integrity Coach Lines (☎ 1800 226 339; www.integritycoachlines.com.au) has a weekly service along the Great Northern Hwy that leaves Perth each Thursday. It passes through New Norcia (\$20, two hours), Mt Magnet (\$80, seven hours), Cue (\$90, eight hours) and Meekatharra (\$105, 10 hours).

Transwa (☎ 1300 662 205; www.transwa.wa.gov.au) coaches leave Perth on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday, arriving in New Norcia two hours later, and return to Perth on Tuesday and Thursday (\$20).

New Norcia

☎ 08 / pop 51

The splendid monastery settlement of New Norcia, 132km from Perth, consists of a cluster of ornate Spanish-style buildings set incongruously in the Australian bush. Established in 1846 by Spanish Benedictine monks as an Aboriginal mission, today the working

monastery holds prayers and retreats alongside a multi-million dollar business producing boutique breads and gourmet goodies (see the boxed text, above).

New Norcia Museum & Art Gallery (☎ 9654 8056; www.newnorcia.com; Great Northern Hwy; combined museum, tour & tastings ticket adult/child \$23/12; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Aug-Oct, 10am-4.30pm Nov-Jul) traces the intriguing history of the monastery and houses impressive art, including works by Charles Blackman and Pro Hart, and one of the country's largest collections of post-Renaissance religious art. The **Museum Gift Shop** sells kitsch souvenirs (dig those monk figurines!), Abbey Wines, cold-pressed olive oils, honeys, preserves, *pan chokolatti*, *biscotti*, nutcakes, and over 20 different types of breads baked in the monks' 100-year-old wood-fired oven.

Guided **town tours** (tickets from museum; adult/child \$12.50/5.50; ☎ 9am, 11am & 1.30pm) enable you to get a look inside the monk's private chapel within the monastery, the abbey chapel, and the frescoed college chapels; the 9am tour generally lasts one hour, the 11am and 1.30pm tours are two hours. **Meet a Monk** (adult/child \$12.50/5.50; ☎ 10.30am Mon-Fri, 4.30pm Sat) gives you the chance to find out what it's like to be a monk. Choral concerts and organ recitals are also held.

The grand **New Norcia Hotel** (☎ 9654 8034; hotel@newnorcia.com; Great Northern Hwy; s/d with shared bathroom & breakfast \$70/85) has sweeping staircases, high ceilings and atmospheric public spaces. The understated rooms open onto an enormous veranda. An international menu (\$18 to \$25) is available at the bar or in the elegant dining room.

You can also stay at the **Monastery Guest-house** (☎ 9654 8002; guesthouse@newnorcia.wa.edu.au; full board \$75) within the walls of the southern cloister, in gender-segregated rooms.

Mt Magnet

☎ 08 / pop 1180

After gold was discovered at Mt Magnet in 1891, locals claim 'they dug it up like potatoes'. Mt Magnet, 567km from Perth, is the state's oldest operating gold-mining settlement, and its wide streets and once-grand hotels are remnants of its heyday.

The friendly volunteers at the **visitors centre** (☎ 9963 4172; Hepburn St; ☎ Jul-Oct) can provide information on a 1.4km heritage walk, self-drive tours, and where to see spectacular carpets of spring wildflowers.

Marvel at the enormous open-cut mines from **Warrambo Hill Lookout**. The **Granites**, a stunning 15m-high red rocky escarpment, 7km north of town (signposted), is home to Walga Rock (also known as Walganna) and its 10,000-year-old Aboriginal paintings. It's a very popular picnic and sunset-watching spot. The area is sacred to the local Barimaia people; the paintings have been damaged before and the site is undergoing restoration.

The **Mt Magnet Caravan Park** (☎ 9963 4198; Hepburn St; unpowered/power site \$12/17) can provide a patch of dirt to park for the night.

Miners and backpackers exchange stories in the communal kitchen and barbecue areas at the good-value **Outback Gold** (☎ 9963 4433; 12 Scott Close; dongas \$35, s/d with shared bathroom \$55/66, self-contained units s/d \$77/88; ☎).

The **Commercial Club Hotel** (☎ 9963 4021; Hepburn St; hotel s/d \$49/70, motel s/d \$77/99; ☎) has comfort-

able motel rooms and hearty counter meals (\$12 to \$22).

There's a supermarket, a café and a few shops on Hepburn St.

Cue

☎ 08 / pop 350

If you've been underwhelmed by the Wheatbelt towns, you'll think you've struck gold when you get to Cue, 'the Queen of the Murchison', 80km north of Mt Magnet and 650km northeast of Perth. Cue boasts fine examples of classic goldfields architecture, a legacy of the 1892 gold rush – the grand Gentleman's Club (1895) and Government Buildings (1896), the spooky Masonic Lodge (1899), and the atmospheric Austin St shops with their iron awnings. Unfortunately many remain abandoned, giving Cue a cinematic ghostliness that's intriguing.

In the grand Gentlemen's Club building, the **visitors centre** (☎ 9963 1041; Cue Shire Council offices, Austin St; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) has *Cue Heritage Trail* booklets, info on wildflowers (July to October) and amateur gold-prospecting, and will happily evaluate your gold nuggets!

Visit during **QFest** (www.qfest.com), a four-day family festival in mid-October celebrating the town's diversity through indigenous culture, music, dance, comedy, circus and enormous fire-sculptures.

The crumbling ruins of ghost towns **Day Dawn**, 5km southwest, and **Big Bell**, 30km west, are atmospheric.

Dusty **Power Caravan Park** (☎ 9963 1107; Austin St; unpowered/power site \$15/18) has basic facilities.

The **Murchison Club Hotel** (☎ 9963 1020; Austin St; hotel s/d with shared bathroom \$60/85, motel s/d \$88/110; ☎) has budget rooms upstairs and does hearty counter meals (mains \$16 to \$28).

The classic **Queen of the Murchison Hotel** (☎ 9963 1625; Austin St; s/d \$77/110; ☎) received a multi-million dollar facelift a few years ago, and while its rooms are cosy and clean, the teddy bears and dolls scattered about the hotel are somewhat disconcerting.

BONZER BACKROADS – FROM CUE TO A VIEW

From Cue, with a 4WD you can take the red-sand road to the massive red granite monolith of **Walga Rock**, also known as Walganna, 48km west of Cue. This mini-Uluru is a significant Aboriginal art site – *walga* means 'ochre painting' in the local Warragi language – with an impressive 'gallery' of 10,000-year-old desert-style paintings of animals, hands and, mysteriously, a sailing ship. Along the way you'll see plenty of eagles, emus, kangaroos and wild goats.

Historic **Bells Emporium** (Austin St) still operates as a supermarket and liquor store.

Meekatharra

☎ 08 / pop 1529

Meekatharra, 764km north of Perth and 541km northeast of Geraldton, has a large indigenous population, the Ngoonooru Wadjari and Yugunga-Nya peoples, and while its name means 'place of little water', this town supports some of the area's largest cattle and sheep stations, and significant mining ventures.

While there are few sights in Meekatharra, it makes a good stopover on the long haul north. Call ahead as accommodation can fill quickly with workers.

The shire office **visitors centre** (☎ 9981 1002; www.meekashire.wa.gov.au; Main St; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) has little tourist info but can advise on road conditions. Internet access is at the **Telecentre** (☎ 9980 1811; 55 Main St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri).

The future of the state's first **School of the Air** (☎ 9981 1032; Meekatharra District High School, High St; ☎ 8-10.30am) was undecided at the time of writing after two fires in late 2006; however, you can visit the **Royal Flying Doctor Base** (☎ 9981 1107; Main St; ☎ 9am-2pm).

You can watch a flick with local families under the stars at the corrugated-iron **Meekatharra Picture Gardens** (☎ 9981 1002; Main St; ☎ 7.30pm Fri & Sat).

The rather dusty **Meekatharra Caravan Park** (☎ 9981 1253; Main St; powered sites tent/van \$17/19, cabins \$70) requires tent-campers to pay for a powered site.

The **Commercial Hotel** (☎ 9981 1020; 77 Main St; hotel s/d with shared bathroom \$35/45, motel s/d \$75/90) has great-value and well-maintained motel rooms, and does delicious counter meals (\$10 to \$22) – the burgers and steaks are memorable.

Get fuel and stock up on water and food at the supermarket on Main St.