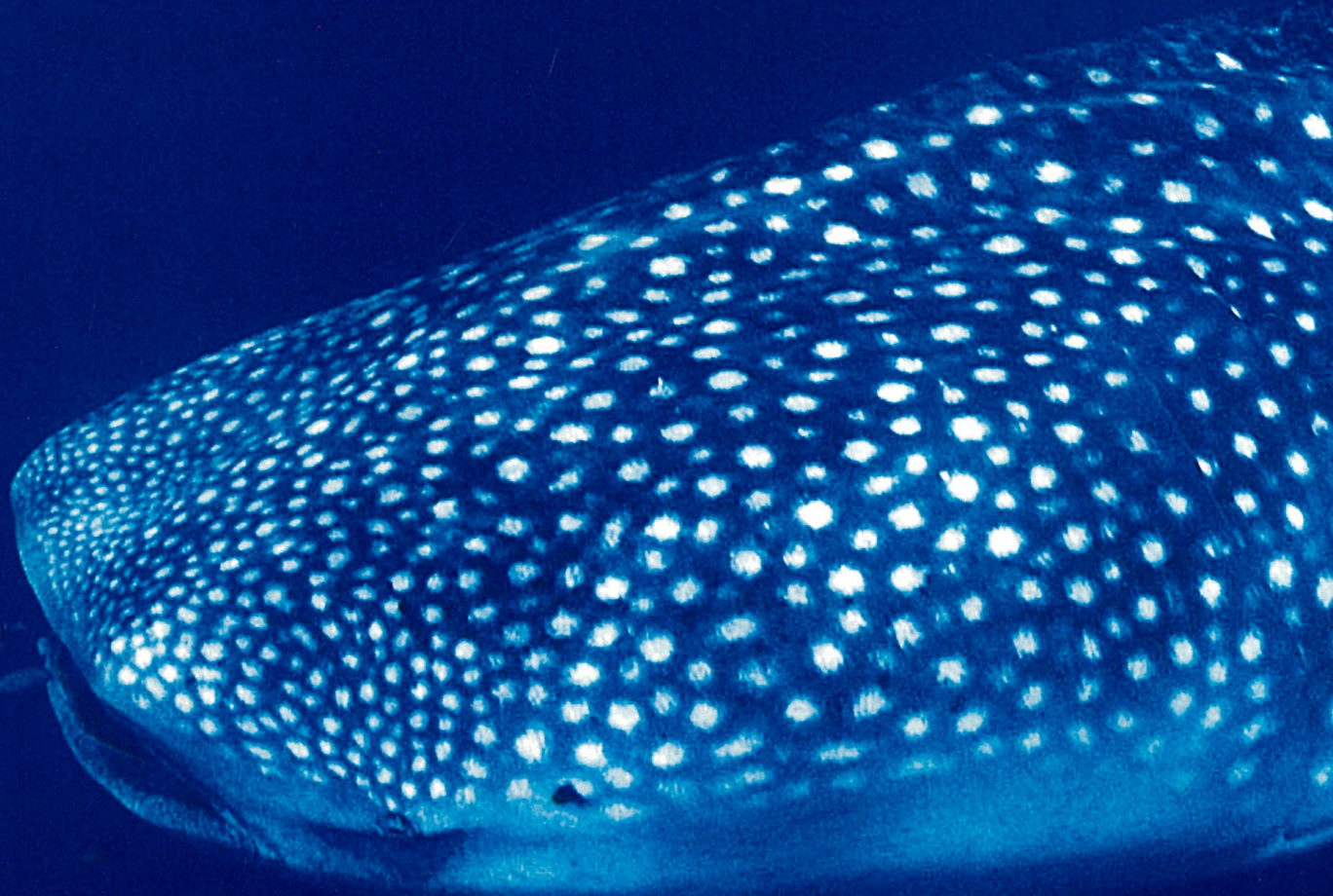


# Marine adventure

Chuck away your city slicker getup and mobile phones for an eco holiday where you can swim with whale sharks and spot manta rays. **BY JESSICA TAN**



A once in a lifetime adventure! Swim alongside whale sharks – the ocean's gentle giants.



**T**he driver dropped us off at the start of a sandy footpath. “Just walk ahead some 200m and you’ll get there.” When the van sped off, my three travel companions and I found ourselves alone in what many have touted to be the best-kept secret of Western Australia – the Ningaloo Reef. Ahead of us, we could see the aquamarine reef waters lining the wide and distant horizon. Behind us were miles and miles of sun-kissed Australian outback where thousands of kangaroos – and other wildlife – roam freely among samphire and spinifex shrubs.

Pulling our city slicker black trolley bags, we walked along the windy trail towards the campsite. Eight minutes later, despite our holiday singalong session, we got a little worried when nothing appeared. “I hope we’re going in the right direction,” one of us quipped. We laughed and kept on trudging along. Soon enough five or so unassuming tents emerged over the little slope ahead. And we knew we had finally arrived at the Ningaloo Reef Retreat. This was where we would be coming home to the next night after spending an afternoon swimming with the whale sharks – our main mission for this five-day trip covering the two Western Australian towns of Exmouth and Monkey Mia.

On the boat ride back to shore – tour mates bond over their whale shark experience.



### Escape from the city

The Ningaloo Reef Retreat offers the perfect escape from the urban madness and stress of city living. Even if you have your Palm Treos or Blackberries here, they will be of no use. There are no mobile phone networks, no television, no radio. The back-to-basics eco-friendly campsite has five spacious tents and one main dining-cum-kitchen area just minutes away from the white sandy beach and crystal clear seawater.

The entire site is powered by solar energy and each tent comes with an ensuite nature loo. But just because you’re going back to basics doesn’t mean you have to compromise on comfort. As you unzip the front of the tent and slip into the generous space, the first thing that grabs you is the queen-sized bed decked out in crisp white linen. The tent also has a little side table and a sofa.

And if that’s not good enough for you, there’s always the hammock in front of your private tent to cradle you to sleep during the evenings as you look into the sunset and

watch the waves rolling onto the shore.

For a moment, the lush retreat and the amazing feeling of being in the midst of such an expansive wilderness by the sea took my mind off our impending mission – swimming with the whale sharks. Admittedly, I had my concerns and reservations. Whale sharks may be a filter feeder that lives on plankton, but they are known to be the world’s largest fish – some are 18m long and weigh 15 tonnes. Plus I’d never really snorkelled before.

### Getting ready for the whale experience

So when Cameron, our Ningaloo Reef Retreat guide, suggested some light snorkelling before our evening sunset snack – I jumped at the opportunity to get some practice. We quickly suited up and headed for the beach for my first official lesson in snorkelling. Once I mastered breathing through the snorkel gear, I discovered that while under water, I was as calm as my breath. In 10 minutes flat, I was already pretty comfortable snorkelling with the rest.

Getting the basics out of the way fairly quickly, my eyes were soon opened to a whole new world. The Ningaloo Marine Park stretches 300km and prides itself with beautiful corals and a rich marine life that makes spotting manta rays, turtles and colourful tropical fish as easy as peering into an aquarium. It is home to more than 200 species of coral, 500 species of fish and threatened species like the dugong and turtles. It is also an important migratory path for humpback whales and a key feeding area for whale sharks.

In the evening, we left the retreat to spend the night at the Novotel Ningaloo Resort, a great alternative if you’re not the camping sort. The newly-opened resort has a gorgeous pool and villas with easy access to the sea just a stone’s throw away. In fact, you can enjoy the ocean view right in the comfort of your bathtub in the villas.

### Ready, set, go

The next morning, we were all set for swimming and snorkelling with the whale sharks. At a nearby jetty – about 45 minutes away from the Novotel Ningaloo

Resort – speedboats lined up to ferry us to the main boat that would take us further and deeper out into the ocean. My feet were cold – likely from the cool seawater as we walked along the shore and climbed into the speedboat but even more likely from my excitement and anxiety about swimming alongside the ocean’s gentle giants.

The crew from the Ningaloo Blue Dive did a great job in prepping all of us for the day ahead. We were told that there would be a spotter plane that would help us locate the whale sharks and direct us to them. After one warm-up snorkelling session, we soon set off on our mission. In less than 30 minutes, our first whale shark was spotted. With no time to waste, the boat sped to the location while we put on our snorkel equipment and flippers. “Keep a distance of about 3m away from the whale shark, we don’t want to scare it,” a crew member reminded us.

As the boat came to a stop, we all jumped into the water and stayed close to our guides. All I could remember was my racing heart and my heavy breathing before I finally spotted my first whale shark – a 5m-long creature which →

swam past us and away. I felt so close to the whale shark I could see the hundreds of little fish that swam with it. In competitive open water swimming, it's called drafting. The smaller fish are quintessentially catching a free ride as the whale shark glides through the water.

I flapped my flippers furiously – trying as best as I could to keep up with the whale shark and the rest of the group. In a couple of minutes, the whale shark dove further down and disappeared into the deep blue. As we came up for air, all I could hear was laughter. The air was

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thick with pure exhilaration as everyone was in disbelief at what we had just witnessed. We climbed back onto the boat and began an amazing whale shark run that day. Up to eight whale sharks were sighted that afternoon.

Along the way – we saw some humpback whales, manta rays, a venomous yellow sea snake and what seemed like hundreds of dolphins. Never have I seen so much nature at a close range within a short span of five hours.

Back at the Ningaloo Reef Retreat that night, we capped the perfect day with a hearty fish steak dinner before hanging out in the open deck. Untainted by ambient citylights, the stars were brave and bold, leading us to the Milky Way as we sang and sipped our wine. It was a perfect day.

### **A snake scare**

“Stop, was that a snake back there?” Murray, our holiday escort, shouted halfway through our 4WD trip out around Shark Bay – a world heritage area – not too far off from Monkey Mia Dolphin Resort.

The car came to a halt as we all jumped out to feed our curiosity. The five of us backtracked some 3m and came upon the snake. Or what looked like a snake. I squatted on the dusty Australian outback ground and gazed in disbelief. Our so-called snake turned out to be some 240 caterpillars (Murray counted!) crawling one after another in a line. A whole colony of them were making their journey across the salty sandy grounds once covered by ocean water some five million years ago.

Where did the caterpillars come from and where were they going? We didn't know. And in all likelihood, they didn't either. As an outsider looking at those caterpillars, I registered their smallness in the presence of the open lands surrounding us and marvelled at how Western Australia is brimming with so much wildlife and nature. From watching tiny caterpillars march in a single file to swimming with whale sharks – everything here is refreshingly new for a city slicker like me. **HW**



Ah, this is the life...  
Resting on a hammock  
and enjoying the view.

## **FACT FILE**

**HOW TO GET THERE** The beautiful Ningaloo Marine Park in Exmouth and Monkey Mia/Shark Bay are about two to three hours away from Perth city by air. Skywest Holidays has flight and accommodation packages to Exmouth and Monkey Mia that start from A\$299 (S\$379). For more information, check out [www.skywestholidays.com.au](http://www.skywestholidays.com.au). Qantas flies direct to Perth from Singapore twice a day.

**WHEN TO GO** The perfect time to swim with whale sharks – the world's largest fish – at the Ningaloo Reef is from March to June. This is the period of time when whale sharks visit the reef to feed on plankton.

**WHERE TO STAY** A great way to experience the wonders of the Ningaloo Reef would be to stay at the Ningaloo Reef Retreat, a four-star campsite minutes away from the beach. If you're not that into camping, the Novotel Ningaloo Resort is a safe bet. The newly-opened resort is lush and offers one of the best oceanfront villas in Exmouth. For more details, check out [www.ningalooorefretreat.com](http://www.ningalooorefretreat.com), [www.accorhotels.com.au/novotel-ningaloo](http://www.accorhotels.com.au/novotel-ningaloo) and [www.skywestholidays.com.au](http://www.skywestholidays.com.au).

**WHAT TO DO** Ningaloo Reef is famous for its whale sharks. For a fun day out swimming with the whale sharks, you can book a full-day eco tour with Ningaloo Blue Dive for A\$350 (includes meals, snorkeling gear and gift pack). For more information, log on to [www.ningaloooblue.com.au](http://www.ningaloooblue.com.au).

**MONKEY MIA/SHARK BAY** If you're staying at the Monkey Mia Dolphin Resort, wake up early in the mornings to see dolphins swimming right up the shore during designated feeding times.

To take in the beautiful sights around the Shark Bay area, book a 4WD day trip with Monkey Mia Wildsights at [bookings@monkeymiawildsights.com.au](mailto:bookings@monkeymiawildsights.com.au) or call +61 8 99 48-1481.



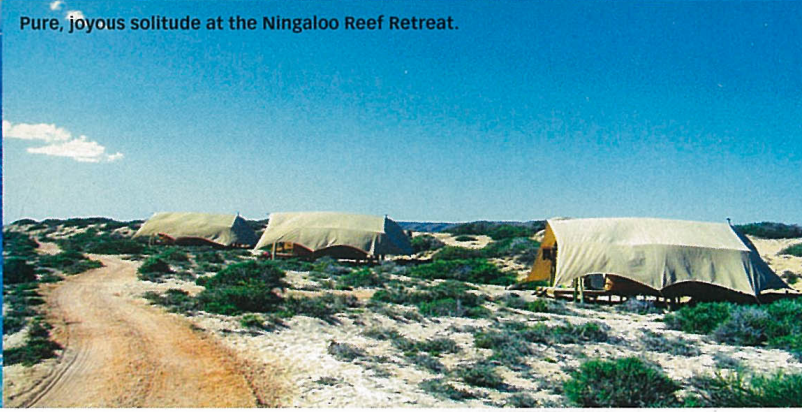
Overlooking the expansive wilderness.



Welcome to my luxurious tent!

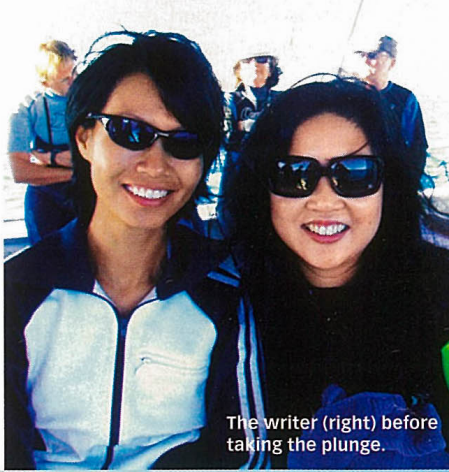


Get real close to the dolphins during their morning feed at the Monkey Mia Dolphin Resort.

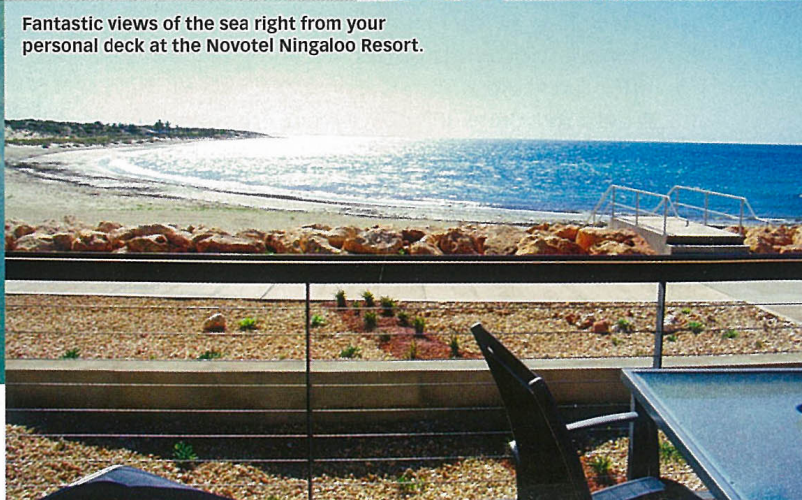


Pure, joyous solitude at the Ningaloo Reef Retreat.

We saw some humpback whales, manta rays, a venomous yellow sea snake and *what seemed like hundreds of dolphins.*



The writer (right) before taking the plunge.



Fantastic views of the sea right from your personal deck at the Novotel Ningaloo Resort.