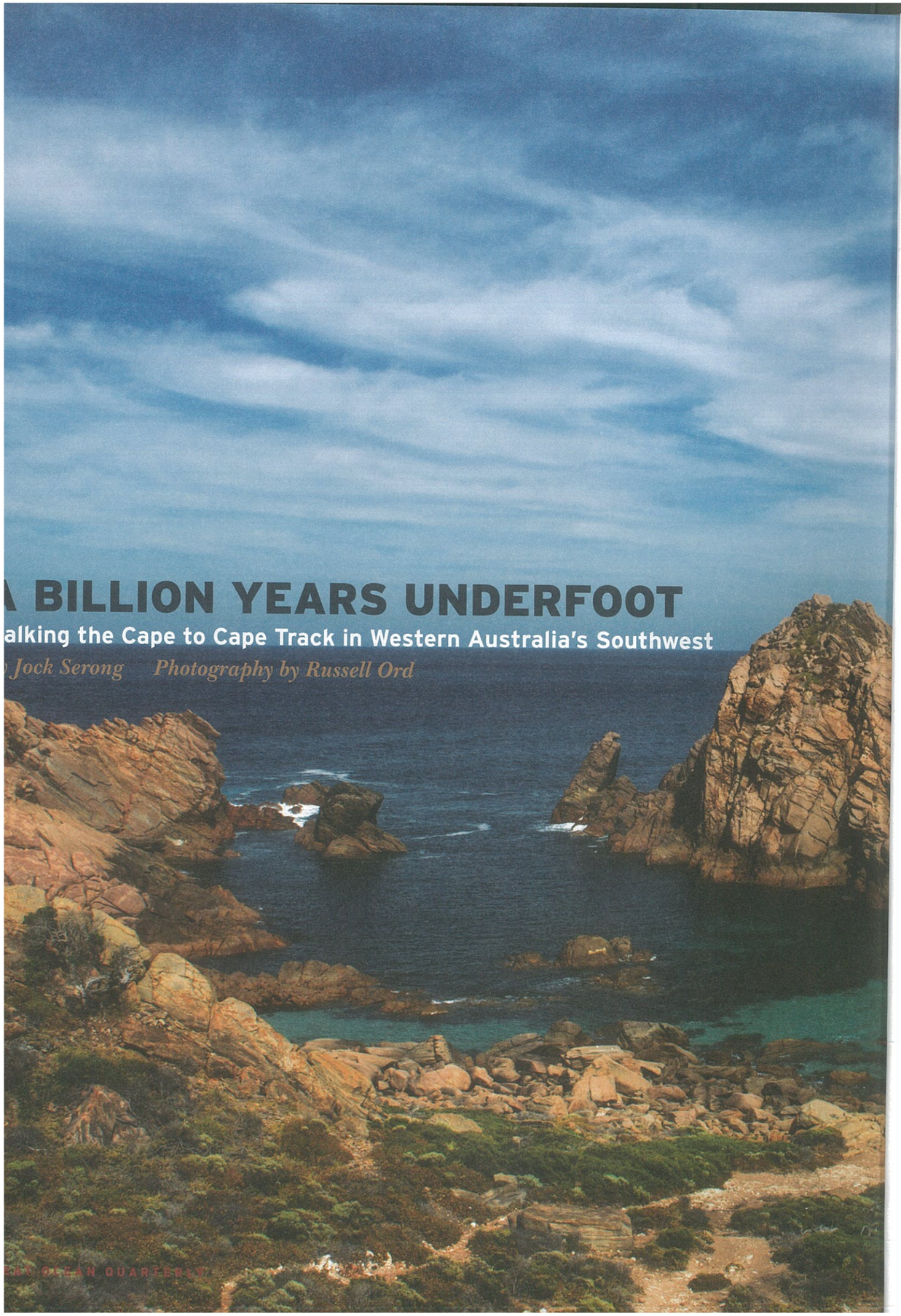
A BILLION YEARS UNDERFOOT

Walking the Cape to Cape Track in Western Australia's Southwest

Jock Serong *Photography by Russell Ord*



Western Australia's Margaret River region has developed such a reputation for wineries, surfing and gourmet produce that, imagining the place from afar, it's possible to overlook the very thing that lies at the heart of all these pleasures: the coastal landscape. Within the small distances between towns like Yallingup, Gracetown, Prevelly and Hamelin Bay – small by Western Australian standards, anyway – lie myriad variations in flora, fauna and geology. A bend in the road, a rise over a hill revealing the ocean – in each change of terrain lies the potential for a fundamental shift in the nature of the landscape, from karri forests to heathlands, cliffs and beaches and swamps. And that's what makes it so good for walking.

The Cape to Cape Track links 135 kilometres of coastal limestone ridge facing the Indian Ocean between Cape Naturaliste in the north and Cape Leeuwin in the south. Underfoot lie three distinct timescales: the 214-odd years of European occupation, the local Noongar history of over 50,000 years and the geological vastness of granites that date to between 600 and 1500 million years.

Made in places from disused four wheel drive tracks, smooth asphalt, cut stone and nothing more than beach, the Track can be tackled as a day or even a half-day ramble, or as an end-to-end challenge that takes up to a week and demands real fortitude, especially in high summer. The walking, of course, was a life and not a lifestyle for the Wadandi and Bibbulmun people of the region, occupying the north and south respectively. The Wadandi (translating as "forest people by the sea") have maintained a finely balanced way of life, turning upon six seasonal rotations for something like 1600 generations.

What the Noongar have seen, and what still astounds walkers today, is a landscape that stands apart from anywhere else. There are currently thirty plant species along the route classified as Declared Rare Flora, and between 75% and 80% of the vegetation here is endemic. In the heathlands, there's pink pimelea, yellow buttercups and wattles, blue fan-flower, white beard-heaths and red cockies' tongues, punctuated by larger rottnest tea-tree and peppermint. On the back side of the ridge at the northern end of the walk, there are woodlands of jarrah-marri and sheoak. In the south, the walker can be enveloped in majestic forests of ruler-straight karri, while fragrant thickets of peppermint scent the air along the ridge.

And that's just looking at eye level. Lower down, there are over 150 orchid species: 2500 wildflower species in all. Darting among them – especially at night – are southern brown bandicoots, echidna and western grey kangaroos, whilst overhead the branches are home to brush-tail and ring-tail possums, and a wealth of endemic birdlife concentrated by the bordering deserts and sea in all directions. The noisy scrub-bird, western bristlebird and western whipbird are considered three of Australia's most elusive birds, being crepuscular (active only at dawn and dusk). Corellas, cockatoos, parrots, rosellas and honeyeaters are found here in varieties that exist nowhere else on earth.

The warm sun on the rocks brings out reptiles, from venomous dugites and tiger snakes to the harmless and exquisitely-patterned carpet python. Skinks, bearded dragons and bobtail lizards dart between crevices, no doubt mindful of the aerial firepower of ospreys, falcons and nankeen kestrels watching from higher vantage points.

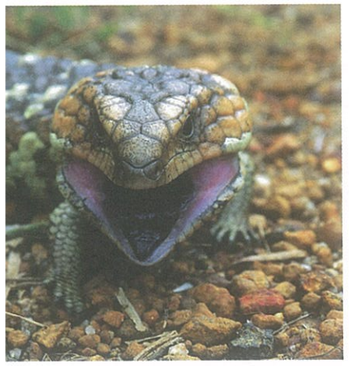
Coming down from the ridge and looking out to sea, humpback, southern right and (more rarely) blue whales move through these waters between June and December, along with year-round pods of dolphins; while the sand is a constantly-moving swarm of cormorants, oystercatchers and plovers.

The Track is included in the World Trails Network, and is divided into five roughly equal sections, each with its own campsites. The northernmost section is fully paved and has safety rails, making it readily accessible for people with disabilities.

Great Ocean walked two sections of the Track with photographer Russell Ord. First, we hiked north along Injidup Beach, a vast stretch of blinding white sand marked only

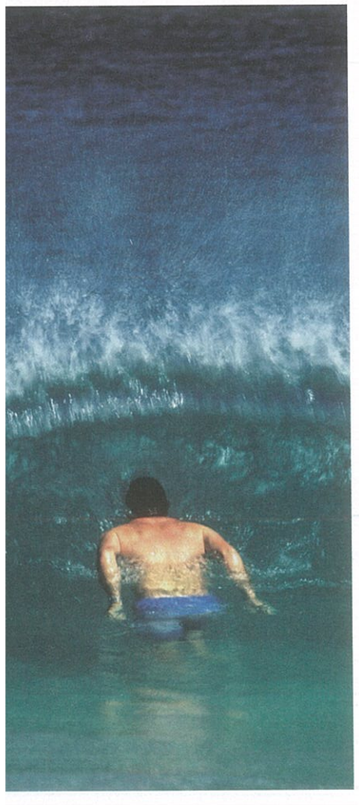
Left: *Sugarloaf Rock*

Below: *Heathland on the Cape to Cape Track just south of Cape Naturaliste lighthouse*



ve: Shingleback or 'bobtail' lizard
iqua rugosa)

rw: Injidup Beach



by a couple of surf fishermen casting into a deep sandy hole next to a patch of reef. Peeling offshore waves threw plumes into the blue sky as the fishoes caught nothing much and seemed happy with that as a scoreline. The scrub that slopes gently up from the beach is mostly untouched, being predominantly national park. Here and there, a patch of freehold reveals itself by the cleared scrub or the glass fencing of a horizon pool. Despite a short-lived proposal a few years ago to blast a Great Ocean Road-style scenic drive through this scrub, the landscape is more or less unscarred. It's the luxury of space that easterners find so hypnotic.

Subtle signposts led us up off the beach and along the ridge to Smiths Beach, as wide and pristine as Injidup but aligned a little more to the north and more frequented by humans. They gathered in small clusters like vegetation clinging to cracks in a giant pavement. By late afternoon, the air was warm and still enough that voices carried all the way to the top of the dune: tinkles of laughter, adolescents horsing boisterously, parents calling children. And a repeated motif, towel after towel – the time-honoured Western Australian ritual of the Sunday Session: a quiet beer on the sand to see out the weekend.

The Indian Ocean was glowing in its characteristic high-note blues and greens. Backlit barrels whoomped on the sand. Further up the beach a darker patch of reef drew a knot of surfers. The carpark behind the dune was cleanly divided between backpackers in Wicked vans and local surfers.

The next morning, we walked from Sugarloaf Rock to Bunker Bay, this time starting off among the distinctive pink/grey granite known as the Leeuwin Complex. In a roundabout way, it belongs to Sri Lanka: when the Gondwana landmass broke apart around 300 million years ago and Australia separated itself from India, a thin line of this rock – just fifteen kilometres wide – remained behind, adhering to the coast between the capes. East of the granite line there's a wide belt of sand stretching southward from Perth, through Busselton and all the way to the south coast. This is the Swan Coastal Plain and it was once seafloor. It's bordered on the west by the hilly rock outcrops of the Darling Scarp, once a coastal ridge just like this one.

Sugarloaf Rock is the most southerly nesting sight for pairs of red-tailed tropicbirds, which roost here out of reach of terrestrial predators in spring and early summer. Further north along this stretch, there are erosional gullies in the ancient granite, forming pools and lagoons. We watched a group of divers struggle up the cliff with a bag of crays from one such pool, near Canal Rocks. The cliffs became steeper and higher as we approached Cape Naturaliste, and as we rounded the bend near the lighthouse, the land sloped downhill again, this time into the glorious sweep of Bunker Bay. There's a café there, nestled among the trees. It was a Monday but there were plenty of people and they looked pretty local, if Dockers T-shirts are any indication. Maybe this is the upside of fly-in/fly-out.

Had we walked further south from these two sections, there's an extraordinary range of scenery to take in. There's a marine reserve at Yallingup Beach, teeming with life. The Quinninup Falls plummet over an escarpment, at their most spectacular in winter and spring, on a stretch of coast known to have been significant to the Noongar. The massive Wilyabrup sea cliffs just north of Gracetown are often adorned with dangling climbers from around the world.

There are more falls at Meekadarabee, near Ellensbrook Homestead, which was built for the Bussell family in the 1850s, the oldest European settlement along this coast. Poking out over Kilcarnup Beach, there's a curious limestone formation known as Joeys Nose, said to resemble a joey peering from its mother's pouch. Further south, the mouth of the eponymous Margaret River features a heavy shorebreak and views out to two of the most famous – and feared – waves in the region: Margaret River Main Break and The Box. The Margaret is the most significant river to cross the walking route. In summer, it often closes with sand build-up, but in winter the crossing can test the nerves of even experienced hikers.

One of the loveliest sections of the Cape to Cape Track meanders through the heathland on the ridge above Contos Beach, sprinkled with wildflowers in the spring. The shade of the Boranup karri forest on the protected side of the ridge makes a serene change from days of coastal exposure, flourishing now, a century after heavy logging, and supporting a vibrant understorey of clematis and small shrubs. Nearby Boranup Beach stretches south to Hamelin Bay where the Track is the beach for over seven kilometres and there's rarely any sound but the roar of the surf to occupy the thoughts of the walker. Hamelin Bay Jetty, at the southern end of the beach, was once the embarkation point for all that karri timber. Shipwrecks litter the bay (including those of three unfortunate vessels in one storm in July 1900), and are patrolled by large stingrays. The snorkelling here is among the best on offer on the Western Australian coast.

The biggest misnomer on the Western Australian coast must surely be the lovely beach at Foul Bay: from here, there's a string of similarly remote and beautiful bays including Deepdene, Cosy Corner and Skippy Rock. The rock shelf at Cosy Corner is comprised of limestone, softer than the predominant granite and eroded with circular wells, creating spectacular blowholes in heavy seas.

And as the Track winds to its conclusion at the southern end, there's one last reminder of the intersections between settlers and the coastal wilderness: the Leeuwin Waterwheel, which once pumped water from the swamps up to the light-keepers' residence. Over more than a century, it's been encrusted with the limestone that leaches from the water-supply. It's a petrified monument, a frozen moment in time that marks the start of the coast's relentless march to the east.

With thanks to Walk Into Luxury and Augusta Margaret River Tourism Association.

***Above:** Australian Emperor dragonfly* (Hemianax papuensis), *near Bunker Bay*

On *A Billion Years Underfoot* Russell Ord used Nikon D4 and D800 cameras.

His kit included 50mm, 24-70mm, 300mm and 400mm lenses.