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WINE HERITAGE: The oldest grower in the Margaret River is Vasse Felix and it's a place you must visit.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED



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And it's not just about wine and great food

MARGARET River and its premium wine region is the place for indulging many passions.

It's the only wine region in Australia where you can hop from award-winning wineries and restaurants to stunning beaches, tall-timber forests, world-class surf breaks and ancient caves.

From Perth, it's an easy 3-hour-and-20-minute drive via coast or country.

Budget travellers can catch the coach that departs daily. Margaret River has evolved from a chilled-out surfer town into a popular base for enjoying the region's fine flavours and spectacular scenery, where rolling vineyards sit against a backdrop of ocean and forest. Producing more than 15% of Australia's premium wine, the tastings are top notch. And besides more than 100 wineries, you'll be spoilt for choice with many fine restaurants, boutique breweries, art galleries and fresh produce.

Known internationally as one of the best big-wave surfing locations on Earth for consistently spectacular breaks, there are more than 40 top spots along Margaret River's coastline.

Venture inland and you'll be dwarfed by some of the world's tallest hardwood trees, and awe-struck by the longest straw stalactite on show when you plunge into Jewel Cave – one of many ancient limestone caves open to the public.

More thrills can be found with rock climbing, abseiling, mountain biking, canoeing and whale watching tours.

Margaret River tasting



John Bishop finds the Margaret River is a welcoming place

THE Margaret River region produces a quarter of Australia's wine and much of it is the very best stuff.

What's great for visitors to the region is that the vineyards are very hospitable, quite close to each other, and have many excellent food offerings.

From the Margaret River township, head a few kilometres west and turn north on to Caves Rd and most of the interesting spots – vineyards, surf beaches and food outlets from venison to olive oil, nougat and chocolate, can be reached in one to two hours.

Blends of sauvignon blanc and semillon, and of cabinet sauvignon and merlot, are the staples of the region, although there plenty of chardonnay and shiraz about as well.

The great vineyards of the area typically produce across the spectrum, and almost all offer cellar door tastings, often combining that with high-class food, or cafe style offerings and events featuring music and art in pleasant surroundings.

Voyager is one of the giants of the Margaret River area. It and Leeuwin feature in the day tour brochures as a classy lunch stop. We visited Voyager and lunched in the large baronial hall of a restaurant.

The house is Dutch Cape

architecture from South Africa – high wooden beams, sloping ceiling, echoes of European hunting lodges.

The food was thoroughly modern and delicious: bread with their own oil and dukkha and a choice of mains and coffee.

The pick of the five wines our group sampled was the 2012 Girt by Sea Cabernet Merlot, a very accessible, and ready to drink blend typical of the area.

Leeuwin Vineyard is all class. Its 2011 Chardonnay was rated fifth in the world and is still

“The food at Voyager Estate was thoroughly modern and delicious.”

available for purchase at the vineyard and for tasting in the cellar room.

Its restaurant is highly rated and the setting overlooking the lawn is superb.

Like several other wineries in the region Leeuwin likes to associate its best wine with art and culture. For many years it has commissioned a group of disabled artists to design labels for its “art series” wines, and the labels are displayed in a viewing room downstairs.

Vasse Felix is the oldest vineyard in the Margaret River area, and arguably it still sets the standard in presentation, cuisine and in its wines.

The setting is magnificent; you get the feeling that you are somewhere important as you sweep into the café/restaurant/cellar set in wonderful gardens.

Unlike the other big guns which are typically family businesses, Watershed Wines is owned by a group of corporate investors, and they are nearly one of the premium winemakers.

Their 2013 Awakening Chardonnay is the pick of the offering; fully but lightly oaked, it'll benefit from further aging. Watershed is very proud of this wine, and the judges have given it many awards.

For something a bit different try Cheeky Monkey, an indoors/outdoors restaurant and café popular with families.

It is a brewery and cidery, and sells its own products on site.

Also on the Caves Road are the Nougat shop, Gabriel's chocolate shop, and go inland a bit to the cheese factory and Olio Bello to sample organic olive oil and a wide range of dips.

* John Bishop is a Wellington-based travel writer who visited the Margaret River at his own expense. See www.eatdrinktravel.co.nz

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