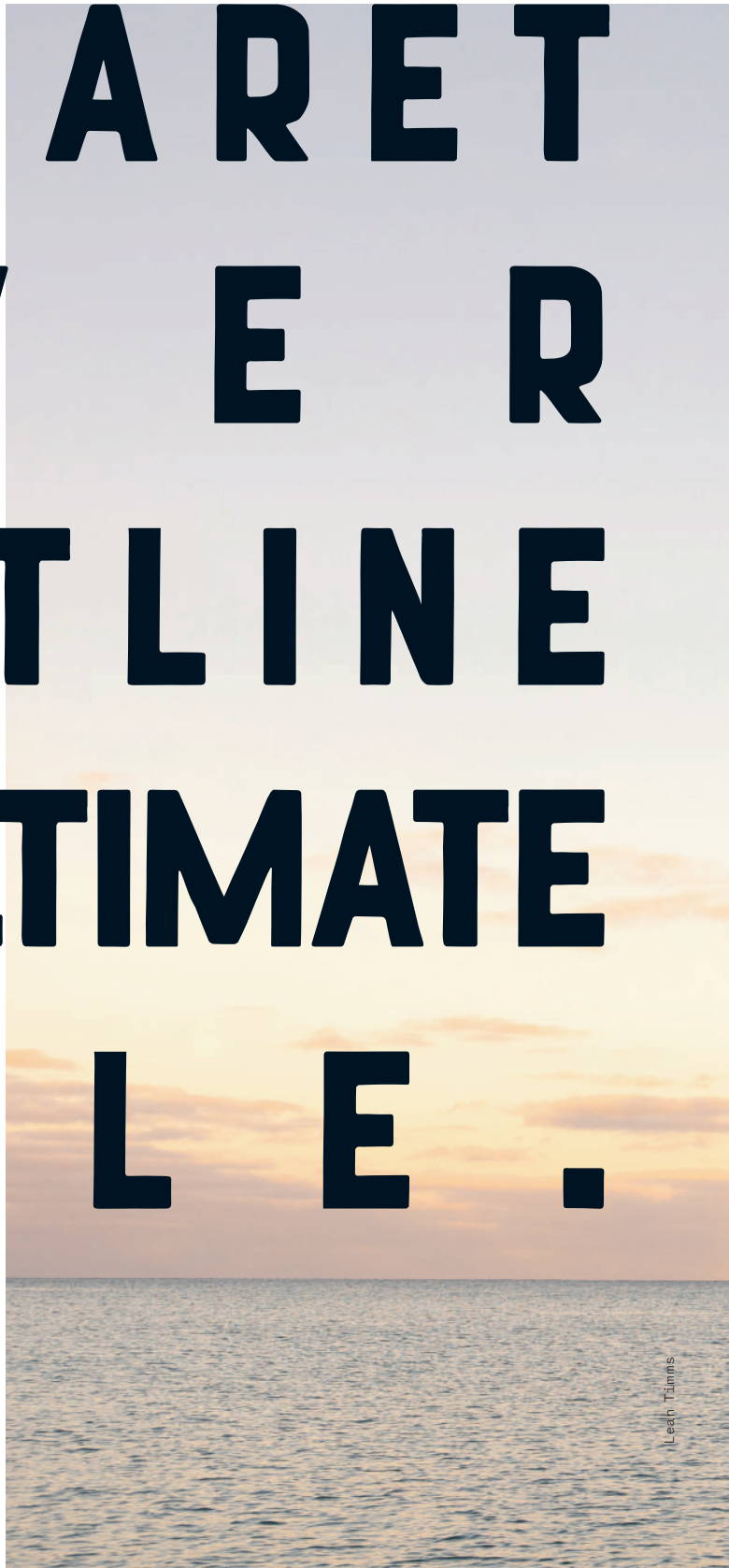
THE JOURNEY

Off the coast of the Margaret River region in Western Australia



Lean Timms

SAIL THE MARGARET RIVER COASTLINE IN ULTIMATE STYLE.



Leah Timms

Story by Kendall Hill

Cries of delight fill the air as sea lion pups zoom across the Indian Ocean to frolic with us in seaweed meadows off the southern coast of Western Australia. They shimmy and glide and mimic our movements with playful grace before surging up to our snorkel masks and staring intently. Coming eye to eye with Bunker Bay's charismatic creatures would be the highlight of any holiday but it's just one of many extraordinary daily encounters aboard *Eclipse* (eclipsewa.com.au), a new sailing catamaran that's spending its first summer off the coast of Margaret River.

After hot showers, cooked breakfasts and a lunch of goldband snapper and local wine, we head to shore at Meelup Beach for a hike









through Wardandi Country of colourful heath and woodlands to the Cape Naturaliste Lighthouse. On clifftops pockmarked with caves and stalactites, I marvel at the fluorescent-orange blooms of the Nuytsia, the West Australian Christmas tree, blazing against a turquoise sea.

Meelup is a Noongar word meaning "place of the moon rising" and later, when we're anchored off Castle Rock, a full moon shines its beam across the water as bottlenose dolphins arc past the aft deck.

The Margaret River region is renowned for its wines and tonight the Woodlands cellar door has come to us, pouring its prized organic drops, including a top-shelf cab sav blend, while guest chef George Cooper (@tillerdining) serves a six-course dégustation of poached pink snapper, local lamb and passionfruit Martini potions smoking with dry ice.

Eclipse's south-west itineraries depart from Busselton before tracing the coast west and south towards Cape Leeuwin. The voyages are two or three nights long, which seems sensible – few could sustain this level of enthusiasm and excitement for much longer. Our group of seven is welcomed aboard the 15-metre

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catamaran at Geographe Bay marina with flutes of WA sparkling and the smiling faces of skipper/owner Jackson Howson, stewardess/deckhand Jessie Bolton and chef Will Peregrine.

The custom-built vessel has four double passenger berths, a hydraulic swim platform and solar panels and lithium power banks that cut fuel use by 90 per cent. The brand-new ensuite cabins are, as Bolton notes, "cosy but have everything you need", and there's a central saloon and kitchen, plus spaces for alfresco dining and relaxing. A sky lounge above the bridge captures 360-degree views, an ideal spot for sunset cocktails and snacks – perhaps crumbed abalone or a platter of charcuterie and gooey French cheese. (The onboard catering is exceptional; "something we try to make incredible down here using the produce of the south-west", Howson tells me.)

From April to September *Eclipse* sails the Kimberley, its flagship luxury cruise. In October and November it explores the 265-strong Montebello archipelago and then summers on the south coast from December to February. The itineraries are weather-dependent but the beauty of this sometimes wild coast is that there are many sheltered bays for swimming and daily shore excursions. "There are always amazing spots to hang out," says Howson. "And we'll get some good sails in because we've got the wind for that."

Though the wine and surf hub of Margaret River is hardly a tourism frontier, experiencing it from the ocean offers an exhilaratingly fresh perspective. Four of my fellow guests are from Perth and come here regularly but as my new friend Courtney explains, seeing it from the water "just resets the magic of this place". The Perth posse are as thrilled as I am to spy a blue-spotted eagle ray in the shallows, watch







ospreys on the wing and share the deck with welcome swallows who gossip and preen on the stanchions. To snorkel along the granite shoreline as waves splinter sunlight over schools of fish; to swim, sunbathe, SUP and snorkel from a floating beach mat off the back of the boat; or to sip cocktails while Peregrine grills eye fillets on the deck in the twilight.

After our sea-lion encounter and before our dégustation dinner, a brief sun-shower sweeps across Castle Bay to form a brilliant rainbow on the water. It's a moment that captures the romance of sailing along this charmed coastline.

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