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The old Swan Brewery and Perth city skyline are some of the sights to take in while cycling beside the Swan River. Picture: Tourism Western Australia Source: Supplied



The Createurs Loft bar at the Little Creatures brewery is a popular hangout. Picture: Tourism Western Australia Source: Supplied

- **DESTINATION AUSTRALIA
THE SECRET SEVEN SERIES**

THE most isolated capital city in the world, Perth, with its population of just over 1.7 million, is not only a great stepping stone to some of the most beautiful scenic outback destinations but it's become a hot spot for gourmet cuisine, quality local wines, luxury shopping and night-life.

And with a climate that's a cross between Californian and Mediterranean (February is the hottest month and July the wettest), there's a wide choice of sporting and leisure activities.

Three events have contributed to changing Perth's reputation during the past few decades: the British Empire and Commonwealth Games in 1962, the America's Cup in 1987 and, more recently and most significantly, the raging resources boom.

It's an easy city to navigate, with few traffic jams and lots of parking at the pristine beaches along the Indian Ocean coastline, only 12km away. "People go into raptures, Perth's time has really arrived," Lord Mayor Lisa

Scaffidi says.

"We are blessed with a lot of open space in and around the city. People are realising that, being a little bit younger, we've probably learned from the mistakes other cities have made and we're evolving in another way. We've got a unique sense of self, we know we're different, we're not trying to be similar; we will maintain our uniqueness while growing."

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One of Scaffidi's favourite Sunday treats is to cycle along the Swan River (it takes about an hour to travel the length of the path), stopping en route at one of the many cafes. Pedalling through 400ha of natural bushland in Kings Park with its stunning city views is another. In 1872 it became Australia's first park to be designated for public use and is the largest inner-city park in the world. Note the many trees that bear plaques dedicated by local families of servicemen and women who died in the two world wars.

Perth prides itself on its casual lifestyle, and its informality makes it an attractive holiday destination. Consider a beer at the Creatures Loft bar overlooking Fishing Boat Harbour or a seat at the Perth International Arts Festival (launched in 1953 and the longest-running annual international multi-arts festival in the southern hemisphere). Or how about an afternoon browsing some of the 17,000 works at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, brilliantly directed by Stefano Carboni, or some retail therapy at the brand new, light and breezy Claremont Quarter, just 10 minutes' drive from the CBD?

1. Perth podcasts: The i-Walk City of Perth Trails are the way to experience history and culture in a format that's flexible, fun and free. A series of audio tracks provides information and stories about significant landmarks and directions between locations. The i-Walk City of Perth Trails can be downloaded to any MP3-compatible player. There are three in the series: Boom or Bust Locations Map (the rise of Perth in the 1890s after the discovery of gold in the region); Icons of Influence (focusing on significant landmarks); and Convicts and Colonials (an interesting look at the legacy of convicts). More: showmepertth.com.au/podcasts.

2. Pedestrian laneways: In 2008, the City of Perth embarked on a project to rejuvenate four of its little-known pedestrian laneways that weave through the CBD. Wolf Lane was completed several years ago and Grand Lane earlier this year, with McLean yet to be started. Opened late in 2009, Howard Lane, in the heart of the city's financial quarter, was given an extensive facelift, including the restoration of the original cobblestone pavement.

Where once the area was dead come sunset, it's now the catalyst for retail outlets and a lively al fresco dining scene. Two new small bars, Andaluz and Helvetica, are perfect for any rendezvous, or just a drink at the end of a busy day. The lane's dominated by a large wall mural titled *The Conversation*, by internationally recognised urban artist Stormie Mills, and a night-forest themed work by Yok.

Grand Lane, off Murray Street, features a 99m-long mural by Victorian artist Scott Neoh and Japanese artist Hiroyasu Tsuru (known as Bonsai and Two-One). Art lovers will enjoy both lanes, but local artists are understandably miffed that their talent wasn't harnessed. More: perth.wa.gov.au/grandlanemural.

3. DownStairs at the Maj: His Majesty's Theatre, built in 1904, is one of Perth's most loved historic buildings. Great names have performed here over the years, including John Gielgud, Rex Harrison, Katharine Hepburn, Vivien Leigh, Laurence Olivier, Nellie Melba, Anna Pavlova and Margot Fonteyn, and its Museum of Performing Arts houses more than 30,000 items of memorabilia.

But the theatre has another attraction. Tucked under the Edwardian structure is the cosy licensed cabaret venue aptly called DownStairs at the Maj, which hosts a range of comedy and musical acts by Perth-based artists as well as top international performers. Beware: audience members are often invited to take part. More: hismajestystheatre.com.au.

4. Angove Street, North Perth: This street has its own free festival (in April), and with so many attractions on offer its reputation is on the up. The east end of Angove Street is home to an eclectic group of shops and cafes, including MilkD, which offers Wi-Fi and award-winning coffee combinations such as Maria's speciality (a double espresso over ice with a dash of sugar syrup). Nearby Rosemount Hotel is said to be one of the best pubs in the city, and gaining solid local support is relative newcomer Il Circolo, which offers friendly service and authentic Italian cooking. Up the road, design house and retailer Future Shelter is worth visiting and around the corner in View Street is Ray Costarella's studio and shopfront located in North Perth's old post office building; his designs are exquisite and his sales are a must. More: futureshelter.com; milkd.com.au; aureliocostarella.com.au.

5. The Bakery, James Street, Northbridge: Perth's leading contemporary arts performance venue has been refurbished and has a large courtyard and bar made almost entirely from disused shipping containers. There's a large live music space where you can catch acts such as Unkle, Darwin Deez, The Go! Team, Fresh Faced Follies, Sex Poems, Ikonika, Steve Ignorant and Ruins Alone. More: nowbaking.com.au.

6. Midland Atelier, Midland: In the old Foundry Building and Pattern Shop of the historic Government Railway Workshop site, the development isn't complete yet but some designer studios are already up and running, with visits by appointment.

A centre for excellence, Midland Atelier combines creativity and innovation with local and international designers working across mediums from photography and fashion to jewellery and furniture design. Each artist has their own studio, the idea being to share their skills and create an environment for learning and exchanging ideas. More: midlandatelier.com.

7. Mt Claremont Farmers Market: Held every Saturday morning since 2007 at the Mt Claremont Primary School, the market has grown from eight to 45 stalls and attracts more than 2000 visitors a week.

The market is a school community-based project that allows farmers, food producers and chefs to sell fresh fruit and veg and associated gourmet products directly to customers. It is managed by volunteers, with 100 per cent of net operating proceeds going to the school and local community projects. It's the perfect place to buy fabulous goodies for a picnic in any of Perth's many stunning parks. More: mountclare.schooljotter.com.

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