

A walk on the wild side

COLIN BARLOW discovers WA's wildflower treasures on an adventurous journey south from Broome

A RECENT West Australian wildflower safari gave me an insight into our vast and rugged state that I recommend every garden lover should try at least once in their lives.

Growing up in dreary Lancashire, I had my first encounter with WA wildflowers when, as a young lad, I would set fire to newspaper, dried leaves and seeds sent to me by my aunt in WA. The excuse I gave my parents was that I was only following the instructions on the packet, as any good gardener would do!

Now, as a WA resident, I have grown many varieties of wildflowers and often longed to see the more unusual ones in their natural environment. So when an invitation came from Ross Garden Tours to help Graham Ross, from Channel 7's Better Homes and Gardens, on their 19-day Wildflowers of Western Australia tour, I jumped at the chance.

Having been advised to take plenty of sunscreen, a big hat and plenty of fly repellent, I knew I was in for an adventure. The travel group of 25 consisted of mainly 50 to 60-something ladies, a couple of younger ladies, five married couples (the husbands were supposedly being "dragged along" for the ride), two coach drivers, Graham and me. Two of the men were in their 80s.

Before my arrival on the tour, the travellers had already experienced four days based in Broome, visiting the famous orson boab tree, a pearl farm, touring the pioneer town of Derby, and of course relaxing at the Cable Beach Resort in Broome before embarking on the journey south to Perth.

First stop was the huge iron ore and salt-mining facilities at Port Hedland, followed by the historically rich towns of Roebourne and Cossack. A short trek to the culturally and spiritually sensitive petroglyphs, or Aboriginal artwork, on the Burrup Peninsula was thought provoking before we arrived in Karratha. At regular stops along the way we enjoyed stunning displays of Sturt's desert pea and purple mulla mulla, the best seen in over 15 years.

Travelling east from Karratha we ventured through the vast Chichester ranges to the lush desert oasis of Millstream, where mature date palms, courtesy of early Afghan traders, and the rare *Livistonia alfredi* created the ultimate mirage.

We continued through the Hamersley Range into the awe-inspiring deep red spinifex-clad gorges of Karji in National Park, these being an inspiration for many early Aboriginal dot paintings. The trek to the bottom of the gorges and swim in the delightful Fern Pool while chatting to Graham perched on a submerged tree branch was a surreal experience.

The dedication of all members of the group to reach the bottom of the gorge was an inspiration and showed their determination not to miss a thing.

Onwards to the world's biggest rock at Mt Augustus and the Kennedy Range, where we saw emu bush and the vibrant calyrix. An early morning short cut over the dry bed of the Gascoyne River provided some excitement as the coach drivers struggled to avoid becoming bogged. We all ended up having to jump off the coach and walk the mighty Gascoyne River.

We followed the Gascoyne River to Carnarvon and headed south to Denham. A highlight was feeding the dolphins at Monkey Mia and



a relaxing and educational cruise on a charter around Shark Bay, where whales, dolphins, dugongs and turtles were viewed up close. A chance to go boom netting out the back of the boat led to a hilarious, thrilling ride, where coach driver Kym and Graham were trying their best not just to hang on but to stop their boards heading off into Shark Bay!

Luminous displays of wattles lined the roadsides as we headed south. Unfortunately, due to drought this year, areas usually covered in everlastings were few and far between from Carnarvon in the north to as far south as the turn-off to Kalbarri.

The deep gorge created by the Murchison River in Kalbarri National Park did not disappoint. Here we found great displays of banksia, grevilles, synaphes, thryptomene, cat's paw, smokebush and the best-ever display of the Kalbarri rose (*Diploleena grandiflora*), probably due to the drought conditions.

Travelling south of Geraldton we found the rare and beautiful wreath lechenaultia in a secret location after much hunting. The elusive black kangaroo paw was discovered along with grass trees, kingias, dampiera, firebush, donkey spider and cowslip orchids and the giant blooms of *Eucalyptus macrocarpa* south of Moorea.

A drive through the surreal Pinnacle Desert before arriving in Perth's King's Park to enjoy the late afternoon view of the city capped off an amazing two weeks. At the farewell dinner at the Duxton Hotel, the "dragged-along" husbands eventually acknowledged that the tour was more than just about wifeflowers. ■

Details at www.rosstours.com.au or phone Ross Garden Tours on (02) 9484 5100.

Pictures: Colin Barlow

1 Pom-pom everlastings. 2 Mulla mulla (*Ptilotus exultans*). 3 The wreath lechenaultia (*Lechenaultia macraensis*). 4 The Kalbarri rose (*Diploleena grandiflora*). 5 Mulla mulla (*Ptilotus mullianifolius*). 6 Date palms at Millstream National Park. 7 Graham Ross and Colin Barlow en route to Fort Hedland.

