

Monkey Mia Dolphin Playground

A road trip to Western Australia's Shark Bay World Heritage region is always an adventure.

Story and photography
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*Insets: Feeding the dolphins with the guidance of volunteers.
Main pic: The beautiful Monkey Mia Holiday Resort sit right on the beach.*

The blue skies, aqua waters, vibrant red earth, and extraordinary marine wildlife make this region world class.

Monkey Mia is tucked into the eastern shore of the Peron Peninsula in the Francois Peron National Park. Monkey Mia is not on the way to anywhere but it is a destination worth visiting.

I have driven the 850 kms north, from Perth to Monkey Mia two years in a row to volunteer with the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA), Dolphin Experience. Both trips took place during the October school holidays. The DBCA in Monkey Mia require volunteers all year round, with their peak periods being school holidays. More about that later!

The Monkey Mia Dolphin Resort caters to all classes of traveller. In 2019 the resort

was awarded the Silver WA Tourism Award for caravan and holiday parks. The accommodation options include 120 caravan and camping sites, dormitory style accommodation and beach-front villas.

Many tourists stop at the RAC Dolphin Resort for a night or drive out to see the dolphins without staying. It's one of those places where people set down briefly before continuing their way to Exmouth or Perth

Having only ever camped at Monkey Mia in a tent, I would describe the camping facilities as first class. The camp kitchens are beautifully equipped with fridges, ovens, toasters and microwaves. The shower blocks and toilet facilities are clean and well maintained. There is even a TV and free access to Wi-Fi. One might describe

the experience as glamping!

Speaking of glamping, the resort also has eateries such as the more upmarket Boughshed Restaurant; and for pub grub and sunset views, there is the Monkey Bar. I have eaten at both establishments and found the food and service very satisfactory. If you are staying and plan to self-cater there is usually room in the camp fridges to store perishables. The resort shop has a small selection of food items if you need the basics, such as bread, milk and some meat, fruit and vegetables. The small fishing town of Denham is around 25 km away and has a small IGA supermarket if you need anything more substantial. We shopped in Geraldton on the way through.

It is useful to know that Monkey Mia Dolphin Resort does not take bookings for

non-powered tent sites, but it is possible to book powered tent and caravan sites in advance. The non-powered tent sites are a first in, best served arrangement. The overflow campground and transitory nature of guests ensures that no one is turned away. In 2019 my friend and I arrived in Monkey Mia around lunch time after spending the night in Geraldton. There were plenty of vacant camping spots available.

Last year's trip was very different from the 2019 trip as Western Australians could only travel within their state, due to Covid-19. Because I knew that camping was going to be at a premium, I rang a couple of weeks before the trip to book something because I was worried that this year might be the first year that people were turned

away. I managed to secure a powered tent/van site with a private bathroom for the first 2 nights for myself and two travelling companions. For the remainder of our 5 night stay we managed to find a space in the overflowing camping ground.

When I drove to Monkey Mia last year, we left Perth at sunrise in order to get there before sunset, stopping in Geraldton for lunch. The drive at that time of the year is nothing short of stunning: wildflowers on the roadside, glimpses of the Indian Ocean and the rolling green salt bush. Signs on the roadside warn of rogue goats and emus.

We arrived in Monkey Mia around 4:30 pm and checked in with the rangers. As volunteers we did not have to pay the park entry fee and we got a 10% discount on

our camping. However, if you are a member of the RAC a 20% discount is also available. We set up our tents in the hard ground of the powered tent/van site. Our site was close to one of the well-appointed camp kitchens and we had our own free-standing lockable shower/toilet building. Once we had set up, we strolled straight onto the beach just in time to see the most stunning of sunsets across Peron Peninsula and the calm waters of the bay.

Calm is not always the default in this part of the world. The Shark Bay region can get very windy as we were to discover, two days into our adventure. I had packed super strong screw-in tent pegs and tents that could withstand a strong wind. The year before we had been unable to erect a small tent with only one cross



Above: Fun with a mascot. **Right:** Crowds gather in fascination. **Opposite top:** Hire a paddle board, pedal boat or kayak from the beach. **Opposite from left to right:** Volunteers keep a close watch. A Bottle nosed dolphin. Thomas Francois Peron National Park.



pole and we found the ground incredibly hard.

The following morning, we walked the 200m to the dolphin experience area to watch the first interaction of the day. The view from the jetty was stunning. Because of Covid-19 restrictions the crowds were asked to line up and take a token as only 200 people were allowed on the beach. After the first experience the crowds were asked to leave the beach to allow the dolphins to head out and feed their calves. The second experience starts if the dolphins return after a break of 10 minutes. There may be a third and final experience during this time. Quite often people leave Monkey Mia straight after the first experience which means the following 2 experiences usually have fewer people attending. Being wild creatures, sometimes the dolphins choose not to come in to feed at all.

If you are staying in Monkey Mia, you soon realise that it's not just these crowd-ed feeding sessions that are the main attraction. It's watching dolphins hunt along the shore during the day and being lucky enough to see the dolphins swim by while you are paddling in the bay. People are required to maintain a 50m distance from the dolphins. Sometimes this is not possible if they approach you while paddling or swimming. The advice is to stay still and enjoy the experience!

People have been interacting with dolphins at Monkey Mia in various guises since 1960. The story goes that a fisherman and his wife started feeding the dolphins a part of their catch in 1960 and before too long the dolphins started to come in to feed. By the early 1980s pretty much anything went. People were getting in the water with the dolphins and feeding them indiscriminate amounts of fish. There were no controls or supervision. Unfortunately, the dolphins became so dependent on the fish and were also becoming aggressive to people. The saddest consequence of this unfettered interference was that the new calves had a mortality rate of up to 90%. Their mothers were not feeding them properly, nor teaching them how to hunt for themselves.

In 1982 marine biologists started the Monkey Mia Dolphin Research Project and controls were put in place. Today the park rangers monitor the dolphins carefully and patrol the beaches to ensure the dolphins' natural hunting skills are not being interfered with.

This is where being a volunteer comes in! The DBCA have dolphin feedings in the dolphin experience area, between the hours of 7:45 am and 12:00. They are currently feeding two female bottle-nosed dolphins, Picolo and Kiya. These two beautiful dolphins are usually accompanied by their

calves Pan and Jindi, who frolic in the back-ground. Other dolphins quite often come in and swim around at this time, but they are not fed.

Anyone can volunteer at Monkey Mia. You need to register your interest via the Monkey Mia Dolphin Experience website or Facebook page before you go. Every volunteer attends a one-hour induction the day before volunteering, where you are taken through the tasks and safety expectations. There are two shifts available. The morning shift is where you get to prepare and weigh the fish and then enter the water with the dolphins, to choose members of the public to come and hand feed them. The afternoon shift is quieter with beach patrols, dolphin spotting and general sweeping and cleaning. If you are fond of dressing in costumes, there is always an opportunity to dress as Charlie the Dolphin and go and entertain some kids!

Volunteering makes the whole Monkey Mia trip worthwhile and you feel like you are part of something special. The rangers are always welcoming and really appreciate the help. I would thoroughly recommend it.

When not volunteering there is so much to do in this magic part of the world. The bay is not only home to the bottle-nosed dolphin, but there are also turtles, rays, dugongs, and sharks (it's not called Shark Bay for nothing) and an amazing array of sea-

birds. If you are lucky, dad emus and chicks will parade round the campgrounds looking for snacks or dipping their toes in the sea.

The dugongs in Shark Bay, also known as sea cows, make up 10% of the world's population. The seagrass and sheltered conditions in the bay make perfect breeding conditions for these gentle creatures. The dugongs can be observed from the two catamarans that operate from the jetty in the bay.

Last year we went on a sunset cruise aboard the Aristocat 2. We hoped to see dugongs but ended up very wind swept. The views from the deck were stunning. The Aristocat 2 has a bar, and snacks available for passengers but you can take your own. If you are feeling adventurous you can sit in the nets and risk a wet behind.

The Shotover which is operated by Wildsights Cruises was undergoing a refit last year, but in 2019 we spent an afternoon cruising on her. Dugongs were not to be seen that day, but we did see dolphins and turtles and got to swim off the back of the boat. The catamaran operators offer return trips if you fail to encounter the creatures that you were expecting to see. Unfortunately, we could not take them up on this because we were leaving the following day.

If water sports are your thing, you can hire stand-up paddle boards, peddle boats and kayaks from the beach. I took my own

stand-up paddle board and had a couple of close encounters with a pod of dolphins. They swam towards me and dived under my board at the last minute, stopped, turned around and came back for another pass. Seeing a logger head turtle surface not 2 metres from my paddle was another highlight.

Not far from the resort there are some beautiful natural and manmade sites to visit.

Shell Beach, as its name suggests, is a beach made of shells. This brilliant white beach is 44 km from the resort. The shells are all one type, *Fragum* cockles, 10 metres deep in places. The waters in this area are very saline, which makes floating in the shallow waters effortless.

Hamelin Pool is home to stromatolites, living fossils over 3500 million years old. These ancient naturally formed structures can be viewed via a 750m walkway. While you are on the Boolagoorda loop trail you can visit the old telegraph station where a visit to the tearooms and museum is a must.

If you tire of simply looking at the magnificent red dunes of Peron Peninsula from your towel on the beach at Monkey Mia, there is both 2WD and 4WD access to the park. The Peninsula, otherwise known as Wulyibidi to the local Malgana people, is accessible up to the Peron Heritage Precinct in a 2WD, but you will require a 4WD to go further afield.

Dirk Hartog Island is a place of significance in this area. To access the island you will need a private boat or a light aircraft. Every year Loggerhead turtles make this rugged island their nesting place. I have been told that they are always looking for volunteers to help with the annual turtle tagging which takes place in December. I imagine this would probably be an activity not for the faint hearted.

While swimming, boating and fishing are not permitted in the dolphin experience area, there are many places in the bay where you can fish to your heart's content! The resort caters to the fisherperson by providing areas for cleaning fish, a giant freezer to store all your carcasses, and barbeques to cook them on. Mullaway, Pink Snapper, Tailor, Dusky Flathead, Bream and Yellow-fin Whiting are commonly caught species in Monkey Mia. You will be feasting in no time!

As we discovered, you don't need to stray too far from the beaches of the Monkey Mia Dolphin Resort to feel like you have been on a very special holiday. If you have never volunteered with wildlife and think you might like to, get in touch with the friendly rangers at Monkey Mia. It's an experience to remember! In the words of Douglas Adams "so long and thanks for all the fish"!