



Conto Field of Fun

Words and images: Emma George

Once a hangout for daredevil surfers willing to risk dangerous rips, rocks and reef for the thrill of riding nearby surf breaks, Conto Field is now a family campsite.

Discovering a campground that ticks every box is rare, but Hamelin Hollow Loop at Conto Field, 300 kilometres south of Perth, comes very close.

Being more of a winter camper, I was hoping for plenty of room and lots of shade to escape the West Australian summer and was pleasantly surprised by the abundant peppermint trees and sense of privacy we had despite being in a popular national park. Hamelin Hollow Loop has twenty-two sites, but there are more spots available at the four other camping loops nearby.

There's no better way to keep the kids entertained during the school holidays than to get them camping out in the bush and away from computers for a week. My friend Kylie was taking her two boys to Conto Field for three weeks. Our husbands were home in Perth working and I was excited about camping with the kids by myself in one place for a whole week. My husband Ashley is the adventurous camper, who loves to visit remote places, drive hundreds of kilometres, and camp in different spots every few days.

The shops at Margaret River are only twenty minutes away from the camp, so packing was a breeze because I didn't have to plan and organise a week of food, water and supplies: what a treat!

Between us we had a posse of five boys who could entertain each other and I had a friend for

company – I wondered why I hadn't orchestrated this before.

After securing one of the biggest sites, centred around a huge shady climbing tree, we were ready for the 'full set up'. The kids knew dad was absent so they stepped up and it was great to see how capable they were; banging in pegs, erecting their own tent and holding up poles for me.

In an hour we had ourselves spread out; between us we had shower tents, a cooking tent, hammocks, separate tents for the kids, a swing and even a dedicated Lego table. There was a drop toilet, camp kitchen and water tap around the corner and I had the Tvan camper to myself; we were living in luxury.

The kids took their bikes for a spin to explore the campsite complete with UHF radios and the banter started instantly. My boys have limited freedom living in the city, so camping gives them the opportunity to explore, gain independence and responsibility. I keep a radio with me, so if they get lost or fall off their bike, we can easily contact each other.

We left it to the kids to plan the next day's activities. Choices included: bushwalks, caves, lighthouse, beach and exploring, but the decision was unanimous, caves.

The kids willingly helped with the camp chores. The older ones carried buckets of water for a bath and, once I had the kettle boiled, it was time for dishes. Between the five boys, they actually enjoyed doing the dishes and even managed to stack everything away.

With the kids tucked in bed, Kylie and I enjoyed a quiet cup of tea and were surprised the camp was so quiet despite being surrounded by other families.

One thing that can wreck camping for me are noisy, selfish campers drinking and playing loud music, oblivious to all those around them. This rarely happens at Conto Field as it is an alcohol-free campsite. The rangers are happy for adults to have a quiet wine or beer in the evening, but they have the power to move on badly behaved campers.

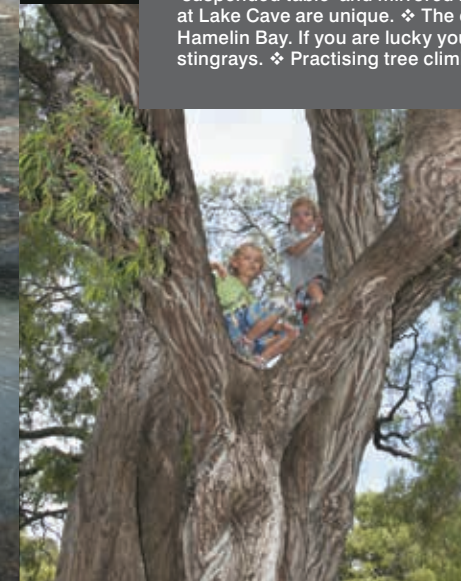
Caves

Margaret River is renowned for its caves and there are more than 150 in the region all belonging to a series of karst systems, which are formed by the rapid drainage of water underground. Lake Cave, one of the most stunning caves in the area, is only a few kilometres from Conto Spring. We called into Caveworks, the information centre, and purchased a caves pass that enables a visit to the three main caves and the lighthouse at Augusta.

Mammoth Cave was first up. It is a self-guided tour and the boys got headsets and torches at the entrance. Its huge entry chamber is very impressive and numerous stairs take you through the rest of the cave system. It is unique because it holds a number of fossils of fauna that are more than 350,000 years old, including Thylacines and a giant marsupial herbivore, Zygomaturus, that looks like a giant wombat.



Clockwise from left:
Conto beach is beautiful, but has dangerous waves and rips. ❖ The 'suspended table' and mirrored reflections of stunning formations at Lake Cave are unique. ❖ The calm waters and white sand of Hamelin Bay. If you are lucky you might see some of the resident stingrays. ❖ Practising tree climbing skills to escape little brothers.



Lake Cave was next and it was surprisingly different to Mammoth. Towering karri trees cover the stairway entrance and, once you descend into the stunning limestone cave, the mirrored beauty is breathtaking.

The cave's permanent lake reflects the stalagmites and stalactites and creates a spectacular scene. Delve into the cave a little further and you see a 'suspended table' that weighs several tonnes and is one of the only formations like it in the world.

Jewel Cave is on the way to Augusta from Conto Field and it's worth coordinating the lighthouse and cave in the one trip. Even the drive through the karri, jarrah and marri forest to the cave is impressive.

Once inside there are four huge chambers and you can wind from one to another via stairways. Here there is one of the longest straw stalactites found in any tourist cave in the world and there are endless arrays of straws, columns, stalactites, stalagmites and even the unexplainable helictites, which grow outwards as opposed to up or down.

The more caves we visited, the more cave-fever gripped the boys and they kept requesting to explore more caves. Luckily they are abundant and we set about finding some of the more adventurous, self-guided tour ones.

Calgardup Cave is a bit of fun as the kids get to don helmets with head torches and guide their way through a system of three caverns covered in water. At one stage, the head height is only a bit more than a metre and you need to scale a few ladders.

Just when we thought we had done enough caving for one week, the older boys twisted my arm to take them to 'just one more'.

Giants Cave is for children aged six years and over because of the ladders and tight climbs, so Kylie took the two younger boys to visit an olive farm. I did my best to squeeze through the narrow cavern holes and realised I hadn't made a good choice on this one. I opted to escape the heat in the cool cave, but left wishing I hadn't overindulged so much at the Margaret River bakeries as I breathed in, twisted and turned to get through the small crevices.

The kids powered ahead and one hour later they wanted to do the cave once again, but thankfully the kind lady at the front gate saved me by explaining we would have to pay again. Although Lake Cave was my favourite, Giants was the boys' pick because they loved the freedom and adventure that came from guiding themselves through.

The week was flying by so fast. We had explored a cave a day and spent the rest of the time at camp with the kids, either riding their bikes, playing with other campers, making Lego creations, climbing trees, swinging in hammocks, hunting for insects, and playing cricket and board games.

The boys were so used to doing the dishes and camp chores that when we gave them a night off it was lovely to hear them say thank you so sincerely, which is something I definitely don't get at home!

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FACT FILE



Getting there

Conto Field is 300 km south of Perth and approximately 20-minutes' drive from Margaret River.

Where to camp

Conto Field, Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park. There are a few campsites to choose from. Facilities include toilets, water and picnic tables, but check for camp kitchens and fire pits as they can vary. Camp areas include: Hamelin Hollow Loop, Isaacs Loop, Whalers Cove Loop, Davies Drive Loop and Whistlers Way Loop.

The campground is managed by the Department of Environment and Conservation, pets are not allowed, campsites cannot be booked and rangers are stationed at the park.

We stayed at Hamelin Hollow Loop, which was well shaded, had fire pits for winter use, a camp kitchen and large picnic tables.

When to go

All year round.

Further information

Margaret River Visitor Centre
www.margaretriver.com

DEC Campground finder. Search for 'South West', then click 'view all' tab

www.dec.wa.gov.au/campgrounds

Things to do

- Caves – Mammoth, Jewel, Lake, Giants, Calgardup and Moondyne (during winter)
- Beaches – swimming, surfing, fishing and snorkelling
- Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse
- Wineries
- Bushwalking – Cape to Cape track and various shorter hikes
- Bike riding
- Restaurants, café and breweries
- Fishing
- Whale watching during winter



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Clockwise from far left:

Our campsite was so big, we had plenty of room to set up a Lego table. ❖ Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse, the tallest on mainland Australia, has superb views over the Southern and Indian Oceans. ❖ Peppermint tree woodlands and an abundance of space all centred around a ring road which is safe for kids. ❖ Motorbike frogs made regular appearances at night. ❖ The boys' favourite caves were Calgardup and Giants Caves where they were given helmets and head torches to explore. ❖ Spending quality time with the kids and slowing down from our hectic lifestyle.



Beaches

Conto beach is very close to camp, but unfortunately because of its king waves, strong rips and currents, it's not a place to take kids. We went for a look and I kept the kids well away from the breakers and didn't allow them to enter the water at the beach. There are, however, plenty of other options nearby that have beautiful white sand and crystal blue calm water.

Gnarabup beach is a good option and there's a café nearby for an ice-cream. It generally has calm water and there's also a little boat ramp nearby.

Redgate beach is great to visit when there's no swell, unless you want to surf. There is a shipwreck, *SS Georgette*, which ran aground in 1876 and you can see it in five metres of water off the coast. There is a reef in front of the car park, which is suitable for kids to snorkel on and rock pools they can explore.

Hamelin Bay is a beautiful stretch of coast and perfect to set up for half a day or more. The bay is famous for its very friendly stingrays, which often come to feed off fishermen's scraps. Although we saw a few stingrays, we weren't lucky enough to touch any.



Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse

Just a short drive down the road from Hamelin Bay and Jewel Cave is Augusta and its historic lighthouse. Built in 1896 and standing fifty-six metres above sea level, it is the tallest and most southern lighthouse on mainland Australia.

Four-year-old Bailey was so excited to be in a lighthouse he almost skipped the 186 stairs to the top! On the balcony we had clear views of where the Indian and Southern Oceans meet.

Although it can be cold during winter, the advantage of visiting the lighthouse between May and September is you may see migrating whales in Flinders Bay.

My camp trip with the boys was nearly coming to an end and we were all looking forward to the dads' weekend visit. The boys wanted to show them how fast they could complete the 'loop track' on their bikes, their cricket pitch, the caterpillar they had caught, which spun a cocoon in their insect catcher, the motorbike frogs, which habitually came into camp at bath time, and explain their caving adventures and all the other exciting things they had done during the week.

Me, well I cheated on the arduous task of packing up and took advantage of hubby's visit, which was timed perfectly for the return home!

It was a first for me to take the boys camping alone, but I'm looking forward to doing it again because it was lovely to spend quality time with them exploring rather than trying to occupy them during a long holiday break.

The week was far more relaxing than I anticipated. We didn't overschedule and the boys had many activities at camp to keep themselves occupied. Kylie and I even got the odd cup of tea in the hammock while they did the dishes!

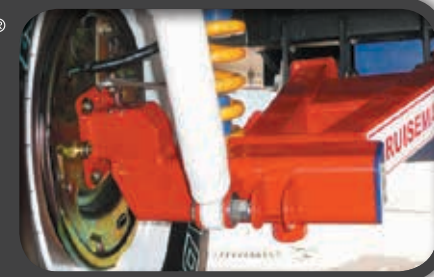
If you're wondering how to fill in the next school holidays, find a friend and take a bunch of kids camping, it can be a lot more fun than it sounds. ❖

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