



# The best of the mess

**Esther Teo** learns that bad times don't last but good times do during a road trip with her hubby, parents and mother-in-law in Perth



Esther (far left), with her family posing as explorers at Pinnacles Desert. PHOTOS: ESTHER TEO

**W**arring-in-laws are a common trope for TV dramas — at least in the over-the-top, thousand-episode Taiwanese ones I've watched. Luckily, my parents and mother-in-law get along cordially in real life. But still, I felt uneasy when my husband suggested to ask them along for our next holiday trip. We had just gotten married a few months ago and I wasn't sure if going on a long bumpy road trip would strengthen or strain their budding relationship.

But we threw caution to the wind and decided on a five-day trip to Perth in Australia. It would be my mother-in-law's first trip on a plane to an "ang moh" (foreign) country.

**The drama begins**  
We landed in Perth on a balmy

winter morning and began ticking off some of its greatest hits: hang out with koalas at the Caversham Wildlife Park, explore Pinnacles Desert, pig out at Lobster Shack Cervantes, sample wine in Swan Valley and shop at Fremantle Market.

Everything was hunky dory till we arrived at our Airbnb accommodation, a lovely terrace house by the picturesque Swan River. It did cross my mind that it could be a matter of time before our relations went south — just not in a way I'd anticipated.

So both my mother and mother-in-law deemed the room with a balcony overlooking the river as the best in the unit and fervently urged each to stay in it. The rest of us were gobsmacked as we watched the comedy unfold. But it soon stopped being amusing

as the strange tussle to win for the benefit of the other escalated into a royal rumble. After a tug of war with luggages and sighs of exasperation from the rest of us who tried to mediate, the room eventually went to my husband and me as they gave up and refused to even step foot inside it.

At every meal time, they would fight tooth and nail to push the last morsel of food they had onto the other's plate, in an overly valiant attempt to be the last one standing (on ceremony). Diners from other tables looked on, bemused at the spectacle they were unwittingly creating. My foodie father settled the disputes by happily finishing up what they tried so hard to offer each other.

*I never thought I'd say this, but their selfless, giving nature, which resulted in this constant courtesy one-upmanship, was grating on my nerves.*

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# Natas Travel 2019

**sweet spot**  
Partner Content

Right: Rottnest Island is a slice of paradise and a must-visit for nature-lovers.

Below: Esther's mother (left) and mother-in-law enjoyed cycling on Rottnest Island.

PHOTOS: ESTHER TEO



*Freewheeling by the coast, I felt a sense of calm that filled my soul as I inhaled the fresh air tinged with sea breeze and watched ospreys riding the wind above, with my nearest and dearest not far behind. I could see that even my risk-averse mother-in-law was beginning to let her hair down and enjoy the great outdoors.*

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## The best of the mess

I never thought I'd say this, but their selfless, giving nature, which resulted in this constant courtesy one-upmanship, was grating on my nerves.

And if you think one mother is difficult to please, try travelling with two. We often found ourselves at an impasse when making decisions — such as which place to visit or where to eat — because the two matriarchs could not make up their minds. Would it be too unsafe? Too cold? Too tiring? Too expensive? They quizzed endlessly.

By the third day of the trip, I was rolling my eyes so much I thought they would atrophy.

All I'd wanted was for them to relax and enjoy the trip, but it seemed like mother hens just cannot stop being mother hens — putting everyone else's needs above their own and constantly worrying about every single thing on the trip.

### Things fall apart

My ideal family holiday crumbled even further when we got to the idyllic Rottnest Island, a protected nature reserve that is 90 minutes by ferry from Perth's Barrack Street Jetty. It was meant to be the highlight of our trip, but due to a lack of options in winter, we'd have to settle for the best accommodation available — a three-bed dorm room in a three-star hotel.

To my mortification, our room turned out to be a dilapidated hole in a wall, with dust all over the floor, peeling paint, creaky spring beds and a musty bathroom.

It sent my mother and mother-in-law's proclivity for cleaning into overdrive. They were all over the room in seconds, clearing cobwebs, investigating the buoyancy of the beds and more.

Meanwhile, I was trying to shake off the disappointment and guilt for letting them down with

such subpar accommodation.

Despite my protests, the best bed — which I thought should be reserved for my mum because of her bad back — eventually went to hubby and me.

### Paradise found

I was glad when we got out on our rental bicycles to explore the island.

For once, there was peace as everyone's efforts were trained on navigating the island's meandering pathways and ascending its steep slopes on two wheels. Looking at my parents tackling the upslopes with gusto, I sheepishly resolved to step up my exercise regime when we returned home.

Rottnest Island is a little slice of paradise with clear skies and sparkling, azure blue sea for as far as the eye can see, as well as pristinely white sandy beaches and quiet coves perfect for picnics.

Freewheeling by the coast, I felt a sense of calm that filled my soul as I inhaled the fresh air tinged with sea breeze and watched ospreys riding the wind above — with my nearest and dearest not far behind. I could see that even my risk-averse mother-in-law was beginning to let her hair down and enjoy the great outdoors.

With frequent rest stops (and non-stop snacking), we got as far as Cathedral Rocks, a 22km round trip from our hotel. We were greeted by a magnificent colony of New Zealand fur seals lounging and splashing about like overweight water gymnasts amid the crashing waves below.

As we raced to the edge of the viewpoint for a closer look, I caught the looks of childlike wonder lighting up the faces of my parents and mother-in-law, and for a moment, smoothening each crease the years had left behind on them.

That was when it occurred to me that family trips, just like relationships cultivated over many years, are not always pretty. There are shortfalls, petty squabbles and rude awakenings, but they are always worth the effort for the laughter, love and growth they bring at the end of the day.

And despite the clashes and smothering love from my mother and mother-in-law, I wondered if I would trade all my solo travels for that one moment of pure bliss shared with my family — current and new — who will always love me.

I decided I would, in a heartbeat.

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