

Magic on the Murray

A MULTI-DAY WALK AROUND THE SINUOUS BENDS OF THE MURRAY RIVER LEADS TO ANCIENT EUCALYPT FORESTS, OCHRE-HUED CLIFFS AND A TOUCH OF RIVERBOAT LUXURY

WORDS: Marie Barbieri

The winter sky is a blanket of blue. The air is crisp and cool. And there are three fit bodies standing on the deck of the Renmark Hotel. I'm joining the Murray River Walk team, based at the port of Renmark in South Australia's rural Riverland.

The world's third longest navigable river carves through Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. But our four-day/three-night guided walk and cruise experience will focus on the Riverland Ramsar Site of the Murray River: a diverse wetlands area. And there will be a houseboat named Desire. >>

Main image: Sunset over the Murray River in South Australia



Clockwise from top: Footsteps through time; vistas and reflections; the old stock bridge; and the golden oranges of the Murray River

DAY ONE

After guides, Sam and Drew, introduce themselves to our itchy-footed group of seven, Sam unravels a map of the route. Our luggage is whipped away for separate transfer to the houseboat, so we hop into the launch for a 40-minute transfer to where our boots will begin their walking.

Leaving Renmark, Sam points to PS Industry docked on the bank. She spent her youth removing snags from the river and assisting in lock and weir

Above: Spotted! A chance encounter with kangaroos

eastern great egret retracts its neck. Further on, a group of pied cormorants all face the same direction, as if stone sculptures in a garden centre. Beyond them, black swans grace the still waters before a squadron of Australian pelicans land like fixed-wing aircraft — their webbed undercarriage dramatically running on water before they tuck back their wings as if nothing had happened at all. Acrobatic welcome swallows then arrive at great speed keeping up with our boat.

Exiting the launch at Woolenook Bend, we begin our walk, bordering a red gum-lined creek and horseshoe lagoon. The light is splendid, with the trees casting subtle shadows on the peaceful waters.

We pass salty samphire and old man's saltbush, and evidence of feral pig diggings where a river mussel has been unearthed. Above, a silhouetted white-faced heron stands on a branch.

Sam halts, crouching, peering through bare branches of lignum. It's only when I notice the white fur of twitching ears that I see the two wallabies. I'm happy.

"Is that algae?" asks a walker in our group. At the creek feeding the oxbow, Sam asks us to take a closer look. Doing so reveals the thousands of tiny leaf-like formations floating on the water. "That's Azolla: a native aquatic fern," says Sam.

Tracing cut-outs of the old Murray, we see the silky, silvery eremophila bush, also called emu bush. Sam hands us its fallen seeds, which emu love to eat. It produces delicate flowers during summer. Native willow also joins the diverse botanical gallery. >>

Houseboats tuck beneath weeping willows as Australian white ibis fly by

construction. Matt mentions 'The Big Flood' of 1956, which caused floods in all three states. In Renmark alone, waters rose to more than nine metres, causing evacuations, and lasted for seven months. The Harry Clark fountain in the park symbolises the seven major tributaries of the Darling River system, and commemorates the survival of the devastation.

Along the riverbank, houseboats tuck beneath weeping willows as Australian white ibis fly by. Passing Ral Ral Creek, partially submerged leafless trees colour with yellow rosellas and red-rumped parrots. Beneath them, an Australian darter bird airs its wings as an

AWARD-WINNING OPERATOR

Tony and Susie Sharley set up the family-run Murray River Walk in 2016. It joined the Great Walks of Australia group during its first year of operation. And in late 2019, walked itself into the South Australian Tourism Awards Hall of Fame, earning its third award for eco-tourism and environmental stewardship.



Above: Marie takes in the marvel that is the Murray River



Above: Hiking the striking ochre-coloured cliffs

Morning tea happens by our makeshift sofa (a fallen log). Unclipping our backpacks, we decant our flasks, tea and coffee, and cake: homemade by Kaila, who will be cooking our meals on the houseboat.

Here, Sam tells us how the resourceful Ngarrindjeri people made string nets out of local pimelea bark to fish and catch moths. Then Drew tells us that in 1965, Riverland winemaker, Thomas William Angove, designed the first wine cask – the airless bag in a box now sold worldwide. I guess you can call that thinking ‘inside’ the box.

Continuing on, we spot in the creek a rare yellow-billed spoonbill. “Note the higher water mark on its tree,” says Sam. “That’s from the 2016 flood.”

Arriving at the 1942 Woolenook Bend internment camp where Japanese internees chopped wood for local

Below: Reflections on the Murray



pumping stations and paddle-steamers, we break for lunch. Here, Drew identifies the excavated hole of an echidna, by its pointed, lopsided shape.

Trudging on, we border the oxbow lagoon’s ephemeral creek. “We fished for yabbies’ here when I was a kid,” says Sam.

At the base of Heading’s Cliff, the landscape changes completely. Squiggly Creek is today cracked and tessellated, but even though it’s bone dry, bordering it are lignums, box gums and acacias. We find hop-bush, garland lily and darling lily, (currently without its white flowers). And close to some giant ant holes, a shingleback lizard suns its scaly back.

Reaching the lofty lookout over the Murray, we see showy daisies. When we spot our houseboat on the opposite bank, our hearts skip.

Scrambling down the red cliff, we’re met by Kaila and jump into the launch, crossing the river to our houseboat home. Leaving our shoes outside, we enter our cosy double rooms (five in total) with floor-to-ceiling windows and beds you could kiss.

Our showered bodies’ voracious appetites follow the aromas of homemade food. On plush red sofas in the library lounge we enjoy aperitifs and canapés of emu kabana, Barossa Valley Cheese and lemon myrtle dips.

Kaila serves dinner, synchronised with the sun sinking into the Murray. Designed by native food chef, Andrew Fielke, we enjoy Murray River callop chowder, and a main of kangaroo osso buco with polenta and gremolata. I’m ruined by the time I take the last bite of quandong crumble...

DAY TWO

We’re promised that being plucked out of our cosy

beds pre-dawn will be worth it. So up we get, and head out with torches. By the time we’ve conquered the 40-metre climb to the cliff’s rim, the reward is already there with a horizon gilded in gold. There’s not a stitch of wind or a sound to be heard.

Reaching Heading’s Cliff Lookout, the new day’s liquid sunshine rises behind silhouettes of woolly hats and camera lenses. The sunrise pours warmth into the reflection-filled river valley, and us. So engrossed in its glow, we don’t even notice Drew and Sam setting up coffee and cookies behind us. Magic on the Murray...

Returning briefly to the houseboat, Drew barbeques a breakfast of bacon and eggs. “You must try the quandong and ginger wild jam,” says Kaila, “or the apricot, macadamia and lemon myrtle jam. They’re by Tuckeroo,” So we do. Oh!

Below: Murals at Wilkadene Woolshed Brewery



Once again grabbing our walking poles we head off for further discoveries. Today, Drew talks about Ngarrindjeri Dreaming stories, and how Ponde, a giant cod, created the river with sweeps from his tail. He then leads us to three Aboriginal canoe trees, from which the Erawirunga people from the Ngarrindjeri tribe cut bark to build watercraft.

Our eyes clock mallee ring-neck parrots flitting between branches. River red gum saplings sprout on the lower terraces while the more drought-tolerant box trees grow on higher ground.

After the Millennium Drought, a brief flood (flooding being necessary for healthy floodplains) germinated many new trees along Amazon Creek, which is today filled with pelicans.

We find shade for morning tea where scrumptious homemade banana bread is passed round. My sudden squealing giggles alert the group when I realise I’ve made a discovery. Placing my mug down, I find a secret mug-holder, courtesy of nature. Naturally gouged from a log, it fits just perfectly. Everyone is captivated by my find, pulling out phones to snap. Even our guides had never seen it before.

Walking on, evidence of European pioneering history arrives with the sight of a rusty stock bridge. “At one time, there would be sheepdogs barking and sheep jumping,” says Sam. “They’d sit down when the narrow bridge bounced, and motorbike handles had to come off to cross it.” We step across it one at a time.

Reaching an old-growth box forest, we’re told to forage for saltbush leaves. But it’s a secret as to why.

Come dinnertime, a dried eucalyptus leaf lays by our cutlery. The yabby bisque with lemon myrtle leaves enough room for the massaman beef curry, before >>



Riverland orange pudding puts an end to any tummy space whatsoever.

DAY THREE

I wake to a sky blotted with white puffy clouds between freckles of blue, and an Australian darter bird statuesque outside my window. Fuelled with scrambled eggs (sporting last night's foraged saltbush leaves), we head off from Chowilla Creek.

Tangled tree roots lattice the riverbank. Above, eucalyptus barks come intricately striated – their squiggles, dizzying.

Holding our *Species Checklist* booklets, we tick off our sightings: willy wagtails; white-necked herons, little black cormorants, and even a nankeen night-heron staring at a handsome pied butcherbird. We also

Above (left to right): A cruiseboat named Desire; and touring Wilkadene Woolshed Brewery

Below: Sand dunes above the Murray

spy wallabies hiding in the brush and roos sipping from the river.

Traversing the cliffs at Bunyip Reach and finally reaching Queens Bend Cliffs is a gift to our senses. The striking ochre-hued formations and mustard-coloured sand dunes offer a window into the layers of time. Drew wets a loose piece of clay in his hand, turning the glue-like paste rust orange. "Can you paint my face with is, asks a lady in our group?"

After tracking a mob of emus scaling a hill, our James Bond moment arrives. Shimmering in the distance on the cliff top is what seems to be a table dressed in a white tablecloth, and a human. It's Kaila, who has carried up the cliff Riverland wines and canapés for sunset drinks. It's a quintessentially South Australian experience sampling Riverland treats overlooking the Murray. Relaxation continues at the rear of our houseboat with a bonfire. Slow-roasted lamb and a South Australian cheeseboard follow the baked Murray cod with lemon myrtle crust and wild lime beurré blanc sauce.

DAY FOUR

Our final morning starts by breakfasting on smashed avocado, before a self-guided amble along the riverbank. The launch later picks us up so that we can watch Desire cruise past us on the Murray. We also get to travel through Lock 6, experiencing the drop in river height.

Arriving at Wilkadene Woolshed Brewery, murals colour the shearing sheds and flocks of little corellas fleck the sky. The owner of the historic brewery provides a talk on the art of brewing, before we enjoy our final lunch of Bunyip Reach lamb cutlets, emu and sea parsley chorizo sausages, and halloumi and zucchini fritters. It leaves us only to raise our glasses to our new hiking friends, and to salute the marvellous Murray River. "Cheers!" 🇦🇺



FURTHER INFORMATION

Operating between May and September, the Murray River Walk is a four-day/ three-night full-board experience, with 40 kilometres of easy/moderate walking and 70 kilometres of riverboat cruising. www.murrayriverwalk.com.au