

Murray magic

A four-day experience on the Murray River floodplains near Renmark combines 40km of stunning, wildlife-rich walks with living on a luxury houseboat.

STORY BRIAR JENSEN

“That’s not something you see every day,” guide Max Rush chuckles from the helm of the open pontoon boat as a western grey kangaroo dogpaddles across the river like a motorised log, ears twitching. Exhausted, it clutches exposed tree roots on the bank, mustering the energy to leap up.

Max, with fellow guide Shae Quigg, is ferrying guests from Renmark, SA, to the start of the four-day, three-night Murray River Walk. The trip heads upriver beyond waterfront homes to wooded swamps, drowned forests and striated ochre cliffs. Cruising close to shore, you can spot koalas in the treetops as whistling kites circle overhead, a squadron of pelicans skims the water and darters dry wings atop fallen logs.

It’s an immersive introduction to the biodiversity of the Murray River, which simultaneously exhibits evidence of flood and drought, life and death, boom and bust – an ecosystem caught in the crossfire of human impact and climate change – a multi-threaded story unravelled over the coming days.

More river expedition than point-to-point hike, the trip combines 40km of walking with cruises to and from the ‘mothership’, the 26m solar-powered luxury houseboat *High River*, which moves to a different secluded location each day. Five ensuite cabins cater for up to 10 guests and floor-to-ceiling windows in the lounge-dining area ensure the river takes centre stage.

Part of the Great Walks of Australia portfolio, it’s rated easy, making it a great introduction to multi-day walking, and non-walking partners can remain on the houseboat. It’s operated by advanced eco-certified Murray River Trails, established by environmental scientist and wetland ecologist Tony Sharley. Tony grew up on the Murray and has a lifetime of experience in water policy and wetland management – he did his year 12 geography project on how the 1974–75 floods affected tourism in Renmark. “I want to share my lived experience,” he says. “I want to show people the peace,

serenity and beauty of the river and give them a greater understanding of its fragility and how to protect it.”

Totalling 2,508km from its source in NSW, the Murray travels through Victoria to its mouth at Goolwa, SA. Murray River Walk focuses on a 65km section north-west of Renmark towards the Victorian border. On a map, this stretch resembles the snaking trail of a scribbly gum moth, its serpentine course leaking streams, creeks, swamps and billabongs that make up the riverine floodplains, part of the 30,000ha Riverland Ramsar Wetland of International Importance.

To avoid summer heat, walks run from May to September, so mornings often include fog frosting the river before dissipating into an ethereal mist that pearls cobwebs and drips from leaves. The milky Murray morphs with the light from sage-leaf green to pottery-clay grey, or as one guest says, “Murray River mercury”. It’s slow-moving, it’s yearly flow equivalent to one day of the Amazon, but it’s been disrupted over the past 100 years by dams, weirs, irrigation extraction and severe drought, and is now closely monitored with water level and flow reported daily.

Majestic river red gums proliferate along the banks and Shae weaves a path among them. It takes four people with outstretched arms to encircle one enormous, burlled beauty, indicating it’s several hundred years old. Some trunks are inked with past flood lines well above head height; others have succumbed to reduced flooding, their skeletal, bleached limbs providing hollows for parrots and other critters. Yet, close to the water, supple young saplings sprout skyward and, pressing an ear to a trunk, you can hear water coursing up its vascular system. Many are tagged for monitoring by the Department for Environment and Water.

These are the homelands of the Yirawirung people and numerous trees display scars from the creation of bark canoes and coolamons, and there are ring trees, whose branches were tied together when young to create circular shapes to mark boundaries or significant sites. Kites whistle a backing track to honeyeaters, scrubwrens and

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*High River cruising the serpentine Murray near Headings Cliff.
Photo Murray River Trails.*

O U T D O O R S



PHOTOS: MURRAY RIVER TRAILS



High River ties up at a different location each night.



BRIAR JENSEN



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Azolla fern floats beneath river red gums; guide Max Rush talking about wattle; dinner of sous vide kangaroo; 'Peaceful Creek', named by the guides in Chowilla Game Reserve; the sacred kingfisher is one of many Riverland birds seen on the tours.

myriad other birds. Max points out azolla ferns floating like an autumnal carpet on still water, parasitic harlequin mistletoe cascading from host gums and the unkempt, whippy native shrub lignum that provides habitat for birds when dry and fish when flooded.

Invasive carp now threaten native fish like Murray cod that also suffer from the loss of habitat cleared during the paddle-steamer era. While authorities investigate methods of carp control, Murray River Trails is funding fish hotels, timber pyramids that mimic log jams, offering shelter and egg protection to native species. Cruising beneath the Chowilla Creek environmental regulator, a type of weir designed to raise the river level when required so it reaches parched flood plains, Shae explains the Murray–Darling Basin Plan of 2012 allocates a percentage of water to the environment to sustain the wetlands.

Walks meander beside the river, creeks and annexed oxbows up into mallee farmland, bringing unexpected discoveries and vistas: an orange-peel glow on the horizon during a pre-dawn walk to Headings Lookout, the remains of a World War II Japanese internment camp at Woolenook Bend, ingenious fish ladders at Pipeclay Weir, deathly silhouettes of black box trees lost to drought and spice-striped sedimentary cliffs aglow in the setting sun.

On the houseboat, there's time to watch birds such as the threatened regent parrot through the spotting scope, take a refreshing river dip or soak in the spa with a chilled beverage before a three-course dinner of SA produce

designed by chef Andrew Fielke. The likes of Murray cod chowder, duck à l'orange with lemon myrtle and quandong pie are served with lesser-known Riverland wine varietals.

On the final day, *High River* traverses Lock 6 to Wilkadene Woolshed Brewery, where guests reminisce over lunch on the deck. All agree it's been more than a relaxing walk in nature; it's been an insightful journey. As Maureen Martin of Ipswich says, "Our Indigenous people said the Murray–Darling was the lifeblood of the country, so after all the negative press about water being taken for agriculture, it's refreshing to learn about the positive initiatives impacting the future health of the river." 🦋

