

The slow lane

David Whitley explores the Murray River region on a slow-paced self-drive

It doesn't take long driving along the 'mighty' Murray River to realise that it is more than just Australia's longest river. As it snakes its way from the Australian Alps, creating most of the border between the states of New South Wales and Victoria, it gives life to a vast network of farmland and vineyards.

Humans have used the Murray River to transform the land around it, shaping Australia's industry and agriculture in the process. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that a road trip that starts out being about nature ends up packing in an awful lot of heritage, too.

MELBOURNE TO ALBURY

How far: 202 miles

See: Getting to the source of the Murray is nigh-on impossible without an expeditionary crew and a helicopter pilot willing to fly into deep mountain wilderness. But once out of the Australian

Alps, the twin cities of Albury and Wodonga are the first major settlements along the path.

On the way from Melbourne, there are a couple of interesting detours. The King Valley is home to several excellent wineries – Brown Brothers being the most famous – that are open for tastings and often lavish lunches.

Meanwhile, Glenrowan is home to several little museums about Ned Kelly, Australia's most notorious bushranger, and some handsome 19th-century architecture.

Just outside Albury, near the base of the Hume Dam, is an unexpectedly moving site. Bonegilla Migrant Reception and Training Centre was where more than 300,000 European migrants were sent when they arrived after the Second World War. Some of the old shacks host displays on what life was like in the camps, the prejudices immigrants faced and their impact on the country.



CAR OR VAN

Most of the journey is absolutely fine in a conventional vehicle, although a four-wheel drive is going to be required if you want to get off the main roads and down some of the tracks in the national parks. Should a campervan adventure be preferred, there are plenty of holiday parks in and around the Murray River towns. Two weeks' hire of an intermediate car, picking up in Melbourne and dropping off in Adelaide, should cost about £600.

ANTI-CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The River Deck Cafe, Albury; Corowa Whisky and Chocolate; paddle steamer *Emmylou* on Murray River, Echuca; the Beach Huts, Middleton; kayaking on the Murray River PICTURES: Shutterstock; Destination NSW/Alexandra Adoncello; Robert Blackburn; Visit Victoria/Mark Watson

Stay: The contemporary Mantra Albury is within walking distance of Albury's main shopping streets. Studios cost from £81.

mantra.com.au

ALBURY TO ECHUCA

How far: 142 miles

See: The river is quite serene to stroll alongside. It's a slow-flowing, lugubrious beast lined by silver-trunked gum trees and, along the Yindiyamarra Sculpture Walk, several Aboriginal art installations.

The drive to Echuca is punctuated with several wineries in the Rutherglen region, while on the New South Wales side of the river, Corowa Whisky and Chocolate caters to dram lovers and the sweet-toothed inside an atmospheric converted flour mill.

Echuca, at the closest point on the Murray, was once the hub of the river trade, with paddle steamers chugging wool and food up and down the Murray-Darling system. Its remarkable wooden wharf isn't quite as long as it once was, but the paddle steamers still depart from there – albeit now carrying pleasure cruise passengers. Viator sells cruises starting at £22.

Stay: The apartment-style Quest Echuca is a short walk from the historic port and handsome old pubs, and facilities include washer-dryers in the rooms plus a small pool. Rates start at about £85.

questapartments.com.au

HOW TO SELL

The trip can be made into a loop circuit from Melbourne – avoiding one-way fees on car hire – if customers come back along the coast. This has the advantage of including the more conventional touring route along Victoria's Great Ocean Road.

Sydney can be used as a starting point instead of Melbourne. It's 344 miles from Albury along the most direct route, but short extensions allow for stops in the Southern Highlands, capital city Canberra, and the Snowy Mountains.

Add a few days in Melbourne and Adelaide, and turn the trip into a balance of city life and country exploration.



ECHUCA TO MILDURA

How far: 234 miles

See: The Murray is a messy beast, with several anabranches leaping off from the main channel, creating a series of floodplain islands. Gunbower Island is one of the largest, and combines gorgeous eucalypt forest with tranquil riverside beaches that fishermen happily sit on for the day.

Farther north, the Yanga National Park harks back to the golden era of wool, and its gigantic shearing shed rattles in the wind like it's being attacked by ghosts. Displays inside show what a mammoth task it was processing thousands of sheep.

Crops took over, and Mildura was where the irrigation of the Murray started. Around the city, pretty much every fruit you can think of is grown, giving rise to plenty of good wine. It's also the jumping off point for some fascinating national parks. To the south, the Murray-Sunset National Park shows off typical wild mallee landscapes and more than a few red kangaroos. The neighbouring Hattah-Kulkyne National Park is home to birdlife-heavy wetlands, lake systems and sand dunes. Murray Offroad Adventures combines them both in a half-day tour, costing about £93.

To the north, however, is true outback. The Mungo National Park is home to an enormous multi-coloured sand lunette stretching around a dry lake bed. It's also where the oldest Aboriginal remains have been found – and the guides from Mungo Guided Tours explain how the finds dramatically changed the world view of indigenous Australian culture (from £67).

Stay: The Quality Hotel Mildura Grand is a sprawling, historic affair opposite the railway station, and has several restaurants. Doubles cost from £59.

milduragrand.com.au

MILDURA TO GOOLWA

How far: 261 miles

See: Goolwa, around an hour's drive from Adelaide airport, is at the edge of the Coorong, a dreamy lagoon system, where pelicans are in abundance, seals honk

But it's in a kayak, low to the water and sidling up to the birds, that we're given the most magical closing chapter to this iconic river route

near the tidal barrages and migratory birds from Siberia feed on the sandbars. It's also where the Murray River ends, filtering into the ocean through a narrow gap between two sand dune peninsulas. Walks across the peninsulas head out to magnificent long beaches where cockles can be plucked out of the sand with bare feet.

There are two ways to tour the laid-back, sunny, blissed-out Coorong – by cruise boat or kayak – and Viator sells both, from £53 and £72 respectively. But it's in a kayak – low to the water and sidling up to the birds, as the Murray's journey comes to an end – that we're given the most magical closing chapter to this iconic river route.

Stay: The Beach Huts at Middleton offers villa-esque accommodation in striped huts themed on Australia's greatest beaches. Prices start at £92.

beachhuts.com.au TW

WHERE TO EAT

Local produce is the hallmark of the Riverina region, and there are several high-quality restaurants to try out along the route of the Murray. In Albury, the **River Deck** is a fine place for breakfast in a riverside park, while **Bistro Selle** throws enthusiastic wine knowledge in with impeccable produce.

The hangar-like **Port53** in Echuca sells several local craft beers, while its menu has French and Cajun influences. The jambalaya is superb.

Near Mildura, the **Trentham Estate** winery has a magical riverside location, and wine-sampling sessions can be combined with a blowout lunch.