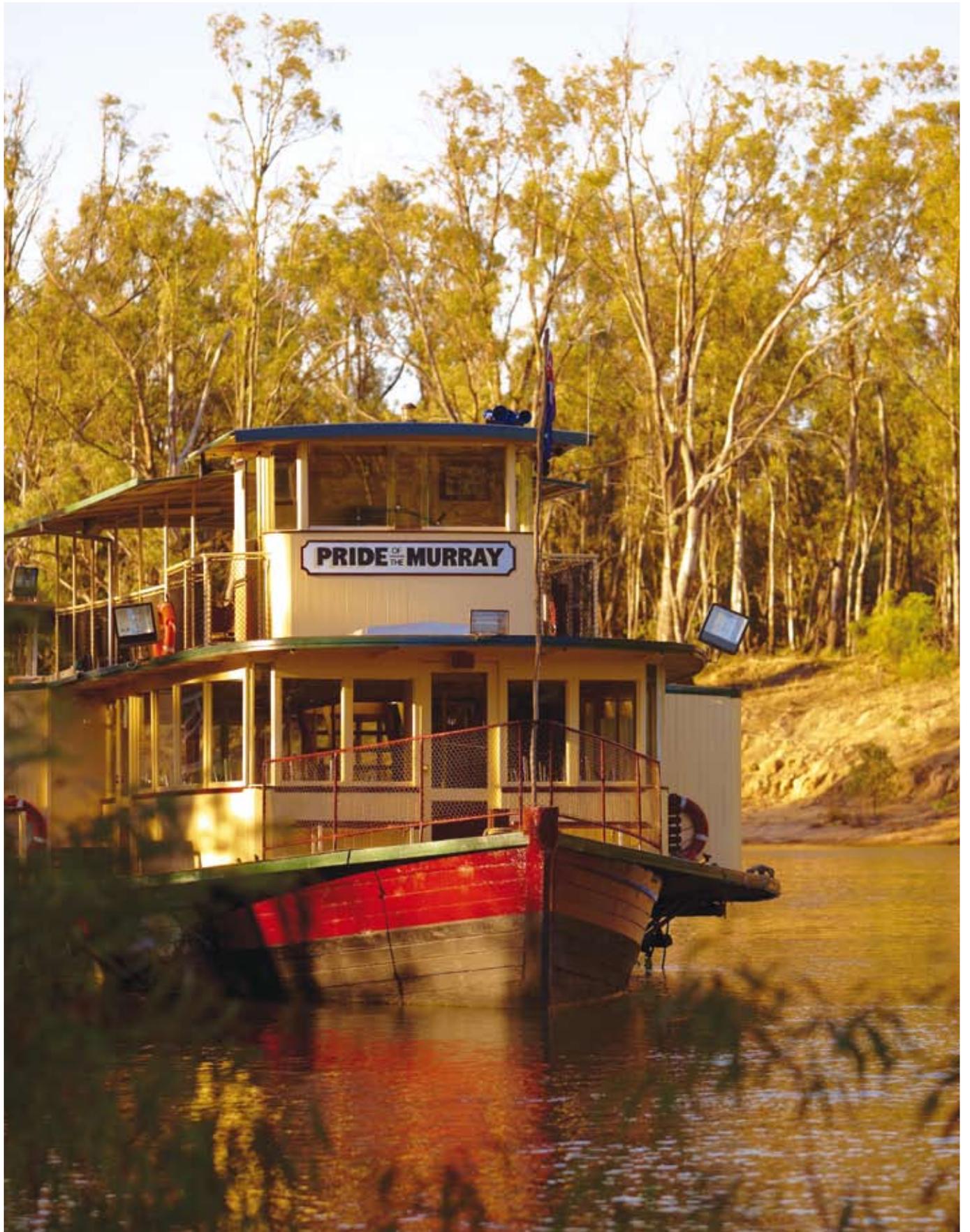


Sweet on the Murray

Paddle-steam your way back in time as *PS Emmylou* leaves Echuca to cruise along the magnificent Murray River. WORDS: EWEN BELL



DESTINATION





Previous page: The majestic *Pride of the Murray*.

Above: The dramatic Echuca sunset on the Murray River.

Left: Andrew at the helm of *PS Emmylou*.

The town of Echuca has done well to retain its tradition of steam-driven riverboats. It has not only kept the magic of steam alive but the town has never been more charming to visit.

Downtown and downriver there are sweet treats to be found for Murray-bound travellers.

Just a few months ago the latest, and perhaps the loveliest, riverboat finished restoration. You would think there were already enough paddle-steamers on the river, until you see *PS Hero* decked out in duck egg blue on a still summer's morning. The boat rests gracefully at her dock, warming up the boiler and waiting for her passengers to board. Smoke escapes from the stack and, with some steam and a blow of the whistle, announces her impending departure.

Whistles are not just for fun on the river. In the late 1800s there were more than 200 boats working the Murray and a captain used his whistle to signal other boats his intention to go astern or dock.

Day cruises come and go from Port of Echuca, with the first boat scheduled to depart at 10am. Like something out of a Henry Lawson poem, the kookaburras crank up their laughter as *PS Emmylou* steams upriver. In the following hour, other boats take their leave: *PS Canberra*, *PS Pevensy*, *PS Hero* and *Pride of the Murray*.

You can stand on the riverbanks and watch another one leave every 15 minutes; it's like watching a postcard come to life.

Evening is the most romantic time to be on the water – and the coolest. *PS Emmylou* keeps a steady 6 knots on her way upriver at dusk, carrying a full load of guests for the dinner cruise. On board, the wine list is just as sweet as the ship, with locally produced Pink Fronti by Morrisons and Marsanne at Cape Horn.

Sunset fills in the gap between entree and mains, with warm colours filling the banks of the Murray and the horizon beyond. Once the sun is nearly done the galahs and sulphur-crested cockatoos screech their final objections and head to bed.

ON THE MURRAY RIVER

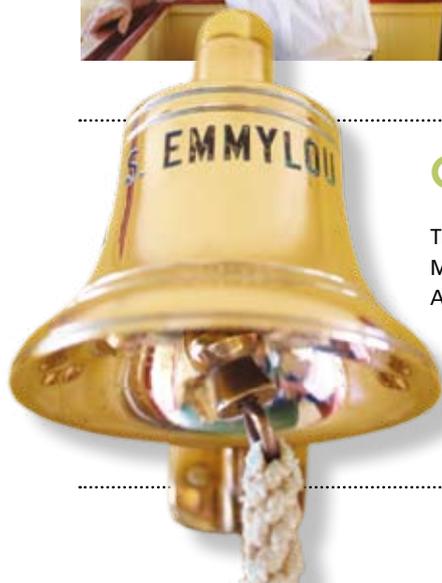
The twin towns of Echuca-Moama are halfway between Albury and Mildura, and are host to annual jazz festivals in summer and blues festival in winter. Visit www.echucamoama.com.

Sunset steamboats

A three-hour evening cruise on *PS Emmylou* includes a three-course, à la carte meal for \$95 per head. Call 03 5480 2237 or visit www.emmylou.com.au.

Where to stay

Quest Echuca has serviced apartments in a great location near the Port of Echuca, starting from \$175 per night. Visit www.questechuca.com.au or call 03 5481 3900.



DESTINATION

Below right: The Esplanade in the charming heritage district of Echuca.

Bottom right: The first light of day shining on the port.

Bottom: The *PS Canberra* leaving port.

Next page: The talented crowd-pleaser, Rocky the corella.

Captain Andrew Cook is a regular on *PS Emmylou* and grew up near the banks of this river. He's seen it flood and watched the affects of drought, but he's never seen it without water. This year the river is flowing at the usual level for summer, the Echuca section being well fed by other rivers in the region.

Local legends

Cook was a shipwright in Echuca, making paddleboats for the Murray. Now he enjoys sitting back and steering *PS Emmylou* through the bends. Watching the sun retreat behind towering river red gums from the deck of a century-old steamer is one of Australia's unique

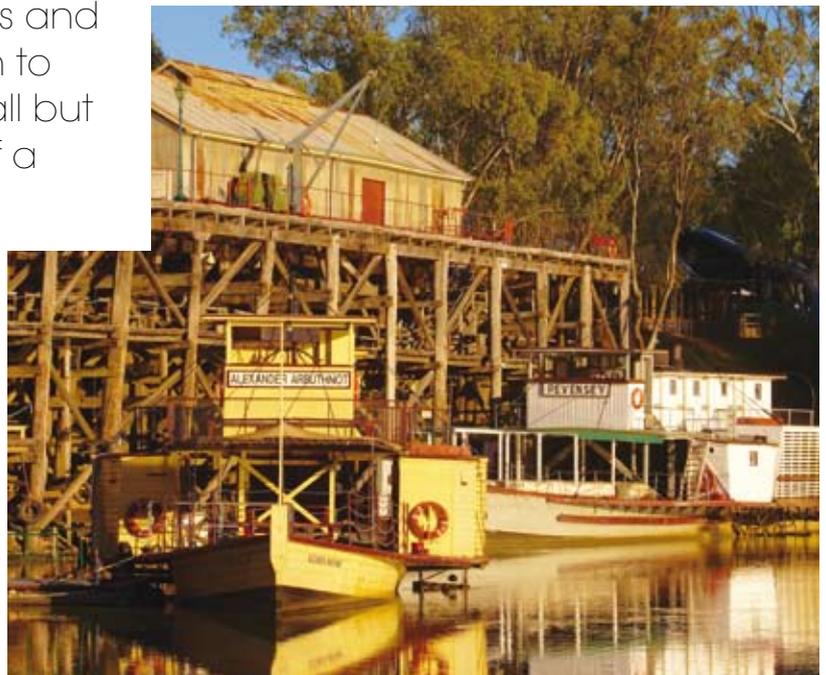
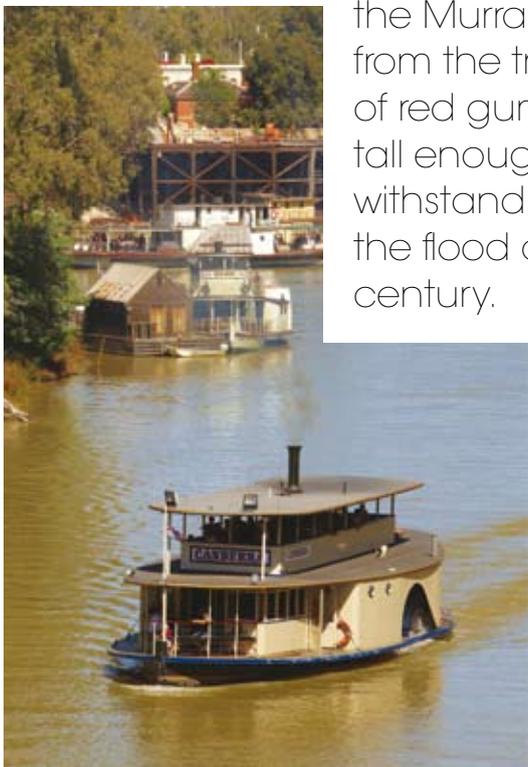
Once there was a dock here that lined a mile of the Murray, built from the trunks of red gums and tall enough to withstand all but the flood of a century.



WING IT FOR INJURED BIRDS

All donations gratefully welcome:

Donations to Buster's busking go towards the welfare of dozens of injured native birds in his care.



experiences. "Why would you want to travel faster than 6kph?" he asks.

Back on shore the Port of Echuca is the heart of a heritage district called the Esplanade. There was once a dock here that lined a mile of the Murray, built from the trunks of red gums and tall enough to withstand all but the flood of a century. Today the streets of the Esplanade are still graced by period shopfronts and horse-drawn carts.

Behind the riverfront is High Street Echuca, and almost too many ice-cream shops. New arrivals to the street are the chocolatier artistry of Echuca Chocolates and landscape photography by Matt Handby. Each of them caters to visitors who want to take away something sweet to remind them of the town.

As indulgent as the treasures of High Street may be, the sweetest treat in Echuca is a man named Buster. He is a generous local who devotes his life to rescuing injured wildlife. Most days you'll find him sharing his playful charges with families on the Esplanade.

Rocky the corella is the local rock star, a chatty and charming little fellow who goes along with Buster's antics, playing dead, cheering footy teams and posing for photos. Like many of the rescued animals, Rocky had lost a leg and Buster nursed back to health with a kind hand. Passengers heading out for a cruise on a riverboat are likely to remember the pantomime with Buster as fondly as the Murray itself. ■

Author travelled courtesy of Tourism Victoria.



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