

DESTINATION MURRAY RIVER



A paddlesteamer cruise offers a stunning snapshot of one of Australia's most storied waterways, writes *Janet Howie*.

WE'RE cruising on the Murray, where no one's in a hurry. Such a line would simply not be accepted in the PS Emmylou poetry competition, which has only two rules - poems must be original and "Murray" must not ever be rhymed with "hurry".

Apparently everyone would, if they could, and it's easy to see why. Our four nights aboard the wood-fired paddlesteamer around Echuca offer a leisurely snapshot of the mighty Murray and its mighty fine scenery. As some remark, with tongues only slightly in cheek, it's the serenity, it's the vibe.

And it's the company; not just the other guests but also the crew of four, for whom nothing is too much trouble when it comes to our comfort. This service begins before we even leave the river bank, with a coach transfer from the secure car parking site or train station if coming to Echuca by rail.

In the half-hour bus ride to the departure point at Torrumbarry Weir, our driver Ross talks of the new levee built at the height of last year's flood emergency in the town.

It's a topic that comes up quite often during the week, both volunteered and asked about, and the impact of the lengthy crisis remains apparent.

Indeed, the 2022 flood peak of 94.98 metres, recorded on October 27 at Echuca wharf, sits third on the all-time list, according to a prominent chart near the steam engine of river levels since 1867.

Once aboard the Emmylou, we meet skipper Warren, engineer Jeff, chef Greg and front of house Kris, and receive some sensible advice about literally watching our steps.

It is here also where we learn of Wednesday night's poetry competition, and its rules. We have more than 48 hours to muse on our verse, thankfully, so for now we can explore our temporary home.

Named after American country singer Emmylou Harris, the paddlesteamer pays homage to a bygone era without actually having been part of it. Constructed in the early 1980s after a 19th-century style, PS Emmylou is 30 metres long and 10 metres wide, steel hulled and timber decked. Her oldest element is the steam engine itself, built in 1906 and used to run a sawmill in north-west Victoria for 58 years.

After a couple of decades in storage, it was then installed in the Emmylou where Jeff keeps a constant eye on its operation. His talk on day three of our cruise notes the vintage engine is classed as an explosive item and actually has no real safety

features, so human monitoring is a must.

Using a tonne of wood a day and 250 litres of river water an hour, the engine allows Emmylou to reach a top speed of 12 kilometres per hour. The boat can accommodate 16 passengers across eight cabins but there are only nine on our midwinter trip, three couples and three solo guests.

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We brave the night air for a ghost tour led by Bec and Jerry, both in period costume.

There are some experienced travellers among them and impressive knowledge of boats in general. One person had cruised on the Emmylou two months ago, enjoying it so much they have now returned, with a third trip in the planning as well.

Nine proves a good number that suits group and individual conversations, and allows us more space in the cosy saloon when it's wet and cold on deck. Because our time on the Emmylou does coincide with inclement weather that forces a couple of changes to the itinerary. But the crew keeps

us well informed and, hey, we knew what a winter cruise could bring, so nobody seems particularly bothered by the alterations.

Cruising itself isn't affected by rain, so we have ample opportunity to experience the charm of paddlesteamer travel. The chug, chug, chug rhythm set by the big side wheels and 117-year-old engine becomes a familiar accompaniment to our days.

The Emmylou has three levels: the main deck, upper deck and top wheelhouse, where Warren is always ready to receive vis-

TRIP NOTES

Getting there: Complimentary return V/Line train fares from Melbourne to Echuca are now included in all Murray River Paddlesteamers cruises. Secure undercover car parking is available at \$25 a night, with complimentary coach transfer to and from PS Emmylou.

Cruise options: Choose between the three-night Discovery (from \$1690 per person), the four-night Explorer (from \$2300 per person) and the seven-night All the Rivers Run (from \$3980 per person). Private whole boat charter and private golf cruises are also available.

What's included: Luxury air-conditioned cabin with private ensuite; all onboard meals including morning and afternoon tea; onshore tours; chef prepared regionally inspired meals; selected wine and beer with dinner service; espresso coffee, tea, soft drink and bottled water; Wi-Fi throughout the boat.

Explore more: psemmyloucruises.com





Clockwise from far left: PS Emmylou; the boat's engineer Jeff; an aerial view of the river and the vessel; a rainy day at Perricoota Station; sky views from the boat; PS Canberra (below); one of the cabins. Pictures: Visit Victoria; Janet Howie; supplied



We learn the gums, though mature, would not be exceptionally old because of clearing that took place when Murray River transport was at its peak. And the willow trees, not native, once served as navigation aids to indicate the river channel during flooding, reducing the risk of boats inadvertently heading overland and becoming stranded when the water subsided.

Snippets like these remind us the river has been used for far more than just recreation. The first paddlesteamer traversed the Murray in 1853 and 20 years later there were more than 240 boats trading along the river.

Echuca became the industry's capital, and also the home of many pubs, with 86 licence applications granted in 1876. *Riverboats Remembered*, a documentary shown in the saloon one evening, presents archival footage of paddlesteamers from the 1920s to the 1970s. The river trade was already in decline by then, with rail, road and even planes preferred, but at least one paddlesteamer found its purpose during floods, being used to rescue stranded sheep.

History is a recurring theme in our onshore excursions - umbrellas are recommended as we tour the grounds of Perricoota Station, originally a property of more than 120,000 acres (about 48,000 hectares) settled by James Maiden in 1855.

Today the packing shed, established 1928, is a popular function room while the homestead also gained fame in the *All The Rivers Run* series. On day four we meet Ross again when he and Beth, a skipper of PS Canberra (launched 1913), take us on a bus tour of Echuca, pointing out features from its heyday.

Beth tells us the town's founder, Henry Hopwood, was known euphemistically as "an enterprising fellow", for example, he would shut down his ferry crossings, there-

by stranding travellers who then had to stay at the Bridge Hotel, which he also owned. Even Echuca Historical Society says Hopwood "was noted for arrogant outbursts, stormy quarrels and petty disputes", though he could also show loyalty and kindness.

The society's museum in the former police station (built 1867) is full of interesting glimpses into the town's past, with both indoor and outdoor exhibits. My attention is caught by Bethia Dusting's handwritten letter from 1880 where she encourages her absent husband not to worry about his pregnant wife.

Weeks later her life sadly ended, aged only 19, from complications after childbirth. Her son George grew up to be a river-boat engineer "and we are sure Bethia would have been very proud of him".

Another highlight is an hour-long jaunt in PS Canberra, 40 minutes upstream but the current ensures it takes only half that time to return. After Emmylou itself cruises into Echuca, we brave the night air for a ghost tour led by Bec and Jerry, both in period costume. They tell their eerie stories as we walk the streets and historic wharf; perhaps the low temperature isn't the only explanation for that chill in our spines.

Far warmer are the two campfire evenings on the river bank, especially our night at Layfield Lane. Warren leads an eclectic singalong with guitar and harmonica, classic rock mixing with requests and even a rousing rendition of Up There Cazaly.

While all activities are voluntary, part of the cruise's appeal lies in the general willingness to join in. There are many interested questions and comments about the past as well as contemporary issues like water management.

None of us could fail to notice the rising river; on our last morning, work was needed before we could even disembark when the gangway went under water.

Informally our group samples the *All The Rivers Run* series - how could we not? - complete with popcorn and also enjoys creating s'mores ("some more"), a yummy combination of toasted marshmallows, chocolate and biscuits.

And we can't forget that poetry competition. The standard of verse is high, and the adjudicators quite rightly favour the sincere, evocative and thoughtful above those just going for laughs (guilty).

*There once was a cruise on the Murray,
The poem comp had me a-flurry!
Of rules there were two,
It had to be new,
And you couldn't rhyme "Murray" with ... oh.*

■ The writer was a guest of Murray River Paddlesteamers.

itors and chat as he navigates the Murray's many bends.

Stairs connect the decks, so one does need to take care, and the gangway area is roped off for safety while the crew members prepare to cast off or moor the boat.

A 2018 upgrade means the cabins have ensembles and, like everywhere on Emmylou, no space is wasted. Passengers are encouraged to pack light as big suitcases would take up too much room. But all is clean and comfortable with effective heating, hot water and plenty of linen.

A walk around the paddlesteamer reveals numerous vantage points where you can sit and watch where we're going, or where we've been. The sheltered sunny spots are particularly sought after but the enclosed saloon also offers great viewing out of the wind.

We're being viewed as well. Everyone who passes on a boat or sees us from the shore waves to the Emmylou and hopes to hear a toot. They usually do.

A small collection of books is available

for those who didn't bring their own - one guest conquers *All The Rivers Run* by Nancy Cato during the cruise, highly appropriate as Emmylou features in the 1980s television series of the same name.

Greg makes sure nobody goes hungry during the cruise - quite apart from the complimentary snacks, there are cooked and continental breakfasts, newly baked biscuits and cake for morning and afternoon tea, choices for all meals and everything created fresh each day.

For example, one night the main course options are scotch steak, chicken boscaiola, barramundi katsu and beef ribs while desserts over the cruise include peach Melba, bread and butter pudding, pavlova and apple crumble. All the food and drinks are served with unflagging cheerfulness and efficiency by Kris. As we travel, Warren offers occasional commentary over the microphone on points of interest. River red gums line the banks, some with exposed roots that seem about to topple, yet have been that way indefinitely.



MORE CRUISING AHEAD

Construction has begun on PS Australian Star, a new \$6.75 million vessel that will offer year-round, all-inclusive overnight cruises on the Murray River.

Murray River Paddlesteamers has announced PS (Paddlesteamer) Australian Star will begin operations from Echuca in April 2025.

Measuring 35 metres, the three-deck river ship will accommodate 38 guests and include the company's first elevator for easy access to all levels.