

Cruising the Murray

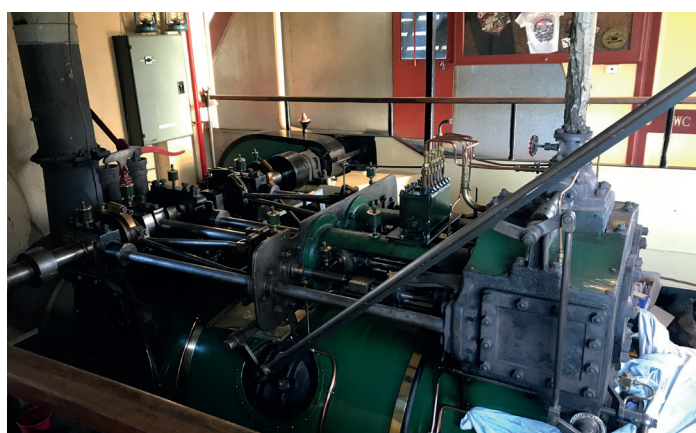
Jay Houhlias

In the early part of July, our faithful North Shore, and indeed the rest of Sydney, experienced more rainfall in five days than in an average month. For that time, I was lucky enough (sorry to rub it in) to experience a Murray River cruise with *Murray River Paddlesteamers*. This included one night's accommodation at *Mercure Port of Echuca* and a four night cruise aboard the *PS Emmylou* with meals and drinks.

The drive down to Echuca was about eight hours, and it felt very cinematic driving away from the dark Sydney tempest and out toward the sunlit plains of the country. I arrived in Echuca mid-afternoon to blue skies. The town is quaint and eclectic, like something you'd see in an old western film except rather than desert, it is surrounded by verdant rivers and fields. I was struck by how trendy and modern the place was, with coffee houses and vintage shops, but then I remembered that I was in Victoria, so all the trendiness made perfect sense. I had an incredibly comfortable stay at the *Mercure*, and the next day I was boarding the *Emmylou*!

The *PS Emmylou* is a boutique beauty, powered by a restored 1906 steam engine and totally refurbished with deluxe cabins and ensuites. It is a sentimental old gal surrounded by outside decks and wooden railings, and inside the dining area was warm thanks to the amazing crew and their sagacious use of the very modern, very convenient, air conditioner.

So, there we were cruising, chugging rhythmically down the river, NSW on



one side and Victoria on the other. As we passed campsites and houses on the river, people would come out and wave happily, and if you didn't wave back, you were considered a bit of a party pooper. Everybody on our cruise waved back.

On our first day we visited *Restdown Wines*, a beautiful organic farm which harvested wine and raised cattle. We were educated on the Indigenous land of country NSW and then treated to a delightful lunch, all with locally grown foods and products.

The next day we went on a *Kingfisher* cruise and got up close and personal with some birds, wild horses and the general environment surrounding the Murray River. The only other time I got more up close and personal with the Murray River was when I jumped in for a swim. The other guests thought I was mad, but I justified my actions with the attitude, 'well you've got to do it.' I don't think anyone shared my incredibly stoic and profound attitude nor yielded to my attempts in getting them to join me. For some reason, 'well you've got to do it', just wasn't enough justification.

Skipper Warren was articulate and informative, spouting knowledge and

interesting facts whenever he felt a pang of inspiration. On our final evening we had a campfire, and armed with a guitar and harmonica, Skipper Warren covered everything from Redgum to Roy Orbison to John Williamson. Chef Greg was an absolute powerhouse in the kitchen, and I was constantly hassling him about recipes and how he cooked certain things. During the cruise, I never finished a meal not feeling full and satiated – and believe me,

that is no small feat. Cabin hand Julie never squandered an opportunity to make perfect of my every wish, and this made me feel completely unselfconscious in asking for my 15 cups of tea per day.

The *PS Emmylou* cruise is something I'll look back on as a time of complete ease and no worries. The snug cabin became a retreat, and the other guests became a part of a little riparian household as we wine, dined, and cruised together. The thing that surprised me the most about the *PS Emmylou* cruise was how little I felt compelled to do in order to enjoy myself. It was the perfect combination of relaxation with no boredom, contentment without the need to do more. We are often caught up in this idea of 'being productive', not realising sometimes the most productive thing you can do at any given moment is sleep, eat, talk, drink wine, and basically be taken care of in the most compassionate and kind hearty manner.

Due to the huge demand, *Murray River Paddlesteamers* is releasing 13 new sailing dates in 2022, creating 57 departures from Echuca aboard the *PS Emmylou*. For more information and to book, visit psemmyloucruises.com or call 03 5482 5244.