

By paddle-steamer along the mighty Murray

JEREMY BOURKE

**T**o skipper Warren Hardiman, the experience of handling a shallow-keeled paddlesteamer is like “an empty milk carton floating on a puddle”.

It's some puddle we're on. In Australian lore, our longest river is never anything other than the mighty Murray, and after drought-breaking rains this year it's a lovely cushion for PS Emmylou, the only wood-fired paddle-steamer in the world offering regular overnight cruises.

But it still requires an artist at the helm, and Warren makes constant tugs at Emmylou's wheel to get around at least 75 bends and innumerable snags between the vessel's home port of Echuca, Victoria, and our destination of Perricoota Station six hours downriver and just inside NSW. By road it's 28km and by river still only 61km. But neither Emmylou nor its 16 passengers are in any rush. On this two-night cruise, chilling out is non-negotiable.

No offence but Emmylou looks much older than its years. It was conceived in 1980 by enthusiasts seeking to create a vessel that could accommodate overnight passengers and incorporate the best aspects of the golden age of Murray paddle-steamers. These boats were once true workhorses, hauling cargo along the colonies' busiest highway; in the 1870s Echuca was the third most important port in Australia after Sydney and Melbourne.

Emmylou was authentic enough to feature in 1980s miniseries *All the Rivers Run* starring Sigrid Thornton and John Waters. It was built around a genuine antique, a 1906 Marshall engine discovered in a shed on a NSW farm where it once powered a sawmill. It's astutely attended to by engineer Dale, who provides a diet of redgum and beer cartons.

At Echuca's historic wharf, with paddle-steamers of various styles and vintages moored along the bank, Rohan Burgess, one of Emmylou's owners, likes to “introduce” guests to their cabins. Ours doesn't take long to get to know. It's cleverly designed to fit two single bunks overlapping at right angles, leaving maybe a square metre of floor space but oodles of storage underneath plus, in the context of this bonsai of bedrooms, a generous bathroom. There are eight ensuite cabins in total, topping out at the queen-sized Emmylou Suite. All were refurbished in 2018 in tasteful white, taupe and grey. The native flora fragrances of the toiletries evoke our setting, into which we venture on this sunny Friday afternoon.

At first it's all monotone, river and forest merging into a grey-green melange. But that changes every time Emmylou rounds a bend. There are cosy nooks fore and aft on both decks, so guests can follow the sun. Emmylou even has a promenade deck, but at only 60 or so steps, forget about maxxing out a fitness



Clockwise from main: PS Emmylou plies the Murray; skipper Warren Hardiman; stoking the engine; passenger refreshments; Emmylou's queen suite



tracker unless it's recording calorie intake because scones, jam and cream appear as a precursor to more great tastes.

There's a story at every turn of the Murray, but our skipper doesn't shatter the calm too often with snippets. Just outside Echuca he does announce the junction of the Campaspe River on the Victorian side, so named by explorer Major Thomas Mitchell, who was something of a classicist. Campaspe, Hardiman tells us, was Alexander the Great's favourite concubine.

The vessel is quieter than expected. The swish of the redgum paddles neutralises the thrumming of the engine and it's easy to pick up the sound of wood being chopped in the forest that flanks us on both sides. There are occasional modern developments, more so on

the NSW side, as Victoria generally forbids building within the old survey measurement of three chains (60m) of the bank.

From a redgum sapling wedged into the bow, Emmylou flies the Murray Flag, an unofficial ensign for the river for almost 170 years. No photograph or sketch exists of the original flag, so today there are several versions, all educated guesses based on a lone published description of “a red cross with four horizontal bars of blue ... being charged with five stars as emblems of the Australian colonies”. Plus a Union Jack.

At dinner, social distancing creates an almost Valentine's Day vibe, with eight tables for two strung around the perimeter of the dining salon. Chef Greg Andrew's offerings are substantial: savoury bruschetta, a porter-

house steak that provides an annual iron intake in one hit, and a deconstructed crumble of poached pears with toasted almonds and cream. The wines from the Echuca-Moama region are sterling examples of their respective styles, such as a rich chardonnay from St Anne's, an organic semillon from Restdown, and a Cape Horn cabernet with yummy blackcurrant notes.

We tie up at Perricoota Station at about 9.30pm, and wake in the morning to a chorus of screeching corellas. Hardiman leads a tour of this former sheep station and citrus orchard, which was established in 1843 and extended in the 1860s by two Cobb & Co owners to accommodate the company horses.

The fine two-storey homestead has royal credentials, having entertained Queen Vic-

## Stalked around globe by virus but free at last

RICKY FRENCH

Travel writers like to think they have a knack for getting themselves in the right place at the right time. Like any reporting, you put yourself where the action is. But sometimes you walk a little too close to the edge, especially when the action involves a highly contagious virus.

Maybe I'm paranoid but it feels like COVID-19 has followed me around the world, stalking me across three continents and pinning me into a corner. After 112 days confined to quarters in Melbourne, I have been freed, but for a while this virus had me on the ropes.

In February, I was skiing in Colorado, just as murmurs of a new illness were beginning to spread. Soon it wasn't just murmurs spreading but the virus itself. The language of travel changed, and “global hotspot” no longer



Lockdown life in Melbourne



DAVID CROSLING

meant a travel destination in high demand. A group of Victorian skiers caught the coronavirus in Aspen and imported it back home. I protested my innocence. Colorado is a big state, I pleaded, and I wasn't even in Aspen. No one seemed convinced.

Weeks later I was skiing in Switzerland near the Italian border, just as Italy descended into corona chaos. I was crammed into a gondola with 80 people, nose to moistened nose, some noses no doubt from Italy. Talk about an extreme sport.

On arrival home even my family gave me a wide berth. I became known as the guy who went to Aspen and to Italy, even though I went to neither. Still, I got pretty close. Wrong place, wrong time.

We all know what happened next: national lockdown and the great sourdough bake-off. But we got on top of things, or so we thought. Domestic travel started opening up again in



### IN THE KNOW

PS Emmylou sails itineraries of one to six nights from Echuca, plus one-hour lunch and dinner cruises aboard Emmylou and sister vessels PS Canberra and PS Pride of the Murray.

- [psemmyloucruises.com](http://psemmyloucruises.com)  
Echuca is 220km north of Melbourne and is at the heart of a thriving food and drinks scene. As well as the region's renowned fruit and dairy offerings, there are wineries, a brewery, a distillery, the excellent Echuca Chocolate Company and even a camel milk farm.
- [echucamoama.com](http://echucamoama.com)
- [visitvictoria.com](http://visitvictoria.com)

his wheelhouse eyrie to chat about the river he has been navigating for 20 years. Because his eyes are constantly on the water, he is an avowed nature spotter and often spies turtles, water rats and snakes, but never a platypus. A first for even this river veteran is the sight of a chap on the Victorian bank playing bagpipes.

On Saturday night we moor, still two hours out of Echuca. After dinner, a campfire is lit on the bank and Hardiman breaks out the guitar and harmonica to treat us to a couple of hours of classics, from John Williamson and Neil Diamond — "I'm a solid, hairy man," he croons — to Neil Young and a rousing Eagle Rock to which we provide the chorus backing.

Next morning, we steam back into Echuca. It has been less than 48 hours on Emmylou, but for many of us it has been a welcome respite from respective levels of COVID lockdown. We've relished lashings of comfort food, absorbed the eucalyptus freshness of the landscape and taken a form of transport that's as Australian as it comes, even if it was named after American singer Emmylou Harris who, the skipper reveals, has travelled on board.

*Jeremy Bourke was a guest of Murray River Paddlesteamers and Visit Victoria.*

toria's second son, Alfred, in 1868. Current owners Barry and Jo Clark are converting heritage outbuildings for accommodation to service the restaurant/reception venue that was once the packing shed for the property's now demolished grove of 22,000 orange trees. What has survived is a stand of impressive peppercorn trees, including the one into which lovelorn cousin Adam crashed and died when Perricoota was a location in All the Rivers Run. The property is lushly green, being prone to "voluptuous floods", and there's plenty of curated rust in the display of farm machinery and tools beside the old shearing shed.

Mid-morning and we cast off, heading back towards Echuca. Hardiman is happy for passengers — one at a time — to come up to

June. Tourism operators were crying out for visitors, visitors were crying to get out. I circled dates in the calendar, booked some trips. We drove to the NSW South Coast and back through the Snowy Mountains. It was wonderful to be on the road again. But COVID-19 must have sensed I was venturing back onto the stage and it returned for an encore. A new hotspot sprang up in Melbourne, right in my suburb (of course). Once again I was a pariah, a filthy Victorian who had ventured north with the plague. Before you could say "quasi quarantine", Melbourne was back in lockdown and I was back on sourdough.

Coming out of lockdown was like being out on parole. Inevitably, my first trip was to that enchanted suburban destination, Bunnings. Freedom was stocking up on home renovation and repair supplies essential for a handyman with skills such as mine. Yes, I bought cable ties, gaffer tape and super glue. It was nice just to go somewhere.

While the frustration of confinement was acute for those yearning to travel, I felt especially sorry for business owners. Excep-

tional leisure, travel and culinary experiences don't just happen. Entrepreneurs take risks, research markets, borrow money, strive to create something unique and lasting. It can take a huge leap of faith. Victorian businesses are now back in the game, and they had better brace themselves — thwarted travellers like me have been unleashed.

On November 9, the "ring of steel" came down, opening up regional Victoria. The following day I hit the road. On the Thursday I was up on the Murray River gazing across the water to that forbidden frontier, NSW. I had travelled as far as I legally could, as soon as I legally could.

Next week, fingers crossed, that border comes down, too (technically I think they are leaving the river in place) and a truly special travel experience that seemed as distant as Mars not long ago beckons: Christmas with family. That's if the virus doesn't find me first. Travel writers are supposed to know how to get around, but COVID-19 must surely be the doyen of travel. You just don't want it sitting next to you on a plane.

## FAB FOUR HERITAGE FARMS

A fine crop of properties with fascinating pasts

LINDY ALEXANDER



AMANDA DUCKER

### CHURCHILL ISLAND, VICTORIA

The charm factor of Churchill Island Heritage Farm is set to high. There are shaggy Highland cattle grazing in the paddocks, Cape Barren geese honking greetings to passers-by, and sweeping arbours of gnarly Moonah trees. Just off the coast of Phillip Island, Churchill is the site of the first European settlement in Victoria. The 57ha island features a homestead and a working heritage farm formerly owned by Samuel Amess, mayor of Melbourne from

1869-70. From the heaven-scented cottage gardens to the milking, shearing, whip-cracking and working-dog demonstrations, the island gives a nostalgic glimpse into the state's pioneering history and traditional farming practices. The surrounding waters are part of the Churchill Island Marine National Park. Keen birders will delight in walking the two circuit tracks, where pied oystercatchers, pelicans and royal spoonbills are regularly sighted; [visitphillipisland.com](http://visitphillipisland.com).

### YANGA STATION, NSW

Yanga Station near Balranald in the Riverina is the ultimate ballad to the bush. Even though it has been 15 years since the shears went click, the woolshed still impresses. Built in the 1850s with river red gum beams, the cavernous building and yards could house 3000 sheep and up to 40 shearers at a time. Look closely and you see greasy smears of lanolin on the walls. Once the biggest freehold pastoral property in Australia, the station is now a national park. A few kilometres down the road is the homestead, built using the traditional "drop log" construction technique. Visitors can stroll formal rose gardens and station outbuildings, including stables, a smithy



and gardener's shed. The bookkeeper's office has the original switchboard phone, said to be one of the first telephones used in Australia. It was installed by James Cromyn, nephew of Alexander Graham Bell; [nationalparks.nsw.gov.au](http://nationalparks.nsw.gov.au).



### PENINSULA FARM, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Overlooking the Swan River, this is one of the first farms in the colony. Constructed in 1839 by Wesleyan preacher Joseph Hardey, the broad, white farmhouse is reminiscent of a generous English brick cottage. This is the third house built on the property; the previous two are believed to have been lost to floods. Some of Hardey's furniture is on display (such as his Regency-style

brass four-poster bed) in the restored bedrooms, while family letters and diaries convey what it was like to live in the first half of the 19th century in Perth. Surrounding the cottage are lush lawns and towering oak, olive and mulberry trees thought to have been planted by the Hardey family. To get a true taste of British life in the colony, wander to the Warden's Cottage for a scrumptious Devonshire tea; [nationaltrust.org.au](http://nationaltrust.org.au).

### JONDARYAN WOOLSHED, QUEENSLAND

Despite being one of the oldest and largest shearing sheds in Australia, this landmark west of Toowoomba wears its age well. Yes, there are thick bands of rust on the corrugated galvanised iron roof, and the ironbark timber beams are pockmarked and weathered, but that's to be expected given it has been standing (and continuously operating) since construction began in 1859. More than 23 carpenters worked on the grand design, with an onsite blacksmith crafting the nails. This was the beginning of the wool industry in Australia and by 1873 more than 250,000 sheep were shorn each season. Jondaryan continues to run sheep,



but these days it also sees a different kind of action. The blacksmith shop, Cobb & Co wagons and shearers' quarters provide an iconic backdrop for weddings, line dancing, movie nights and festivals; [jondaryanwoolshed.com.au](http://jondaryanwoolshed.com.au).