THE AUSTRALIAN

TRAVEL

Exploring the Murray River from Mildura by houseboat

All you need is courage, a car licence and to be aged over 25 to cruise Australia's longest river on this floating palace.

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It's midmorning and the Murray River is shimmering olive green as it shuffles through the sun-kissed Sunraysia district in northwest Victoria. I'm two hours into my tenure as riverboat captain, watching the river unfurl from the wheelhouse of Elevate Luxury, a houseboat that happens to be worth more money than any house, boat or conceivable combination of the two I could ever dream of owning. I still can't believe they're letting me drive.

My appointed first mate Rob squints at the digital mapping screen charting our real-time progress upstream from Mildura. "Say, what do you suppose these skull and crossbones symbols mean?" he asks. I spit my coffee and jerk my head up, suddenly sighting a cluster of drowned river red gums dead ahead, protruding from the water like a jagged reef. All morning my state of mind has teetered between calm and calamity.



Elevate Luxury plying the waters of Australia’s longest river.

Channelling my inner Mark Twain, who worked as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi in between penning articles, I deftly steer the 60-tonne houseboat through the horseshoe bend, before handing over the helm to Rob so I can scribble down a note: “So beautiful. Love seeing what’s around the next bend. Wish we were here for a week.”

A week would do you well in Mildura, which is not only the houseboat hub of the Murray but a seductive city in its own right, with wide avenues and a redeveloped riverfront boasting 20ha of parkland. “Tropical North Victoria” is the city’s new tongue-in-cheek rebranding, despite pedants pointing out it lies some 1500km shy of the tropics. There’s no disputing the sunshine is incessant, and the summer heat can be ferocious. Winter is the underrated season, when fog floats above the river at dawn, houseboat hire prices are down and the Murray might be yours alone.



Open-plan living area on Elevate Luxury also has a bridge.

Less than a year old, Elevate Luxury won gold for All Seasons Houseboats in the "unique accommodation" category at the 2024 Victorian Tourism Awards. The name references not only the five-star fit-out but its fully enclosed glass elevator, which makes both levels accessible for anyone with mobility issues.

The boat is powered by an 18kW rooftop solar system (with back-up generator) and propelled by two 300hp outboard motors. All six bedrooms have king beds (which can be split into singles), private ensuites, satellite televisions and split-system airconditioning and heating.

One of the bedrooms is fully accessible for wheelchairs and can accommodate a portable bed hoist.

A sweeping timber staircase leads to a spacious, open-plan lounge and kitchen with marble benches, a Smeg oven, 12-seater dining table, wine fridge, cocktail bar and a gas log fireplace. Bi-fold doors open to a fully-carpeted sun deck with soft, outdoor lounges and a barbecue and grill. Welcome swallows dart across the deck each morning, catching insects on the wing, and in the afternoon it becomes a perfect perch to preside over the passing river traffic. Expect a few looks.



All guestrooms have king beds.

A swim deck at the stern allows you to slip into the river without wading through mud, or you might choose to soak in the eight-seater spa. Keen anglers might snare a prized Murray cod or a despised carp, along with silver perch, yellowbelly and trout.

Aside from the designer, half-moon sofa (by Coco Republic) virtually everything else – furniture, flooring, cabinetry, the stereo system, the pillows – is built or sourced in Mildura, part of All Seasons' commitment to supporting local suppliers. There's simply nothing like it on the Murray.

Itineraries are yours to design. Heading upstream, it's popular to make for Monak Wine Co, passing Psyche Bend Pumps (the original irrigation pump house, built in 1891) and tying up for the night at Red Cliffs for a stunning sunrise backdrop. Downstream weaves to Wentworth, where the river merges with the milky brown waters of the Darling, the vividly contrasting confluence best viewed from a lookout tower on the NSW side.



Trentham Estate Winery on the Murray River. Picture: Visit Victoria

My friends and I only have one full day on the river, which unfortunately means remote mooring is out. We make it as far as Trentham Estate Winery, 2 ½ hours upstream from Mildura, where we enjoy a warm climate wine tasting and confit duck leg on the riverside veranda. Three toots of the horn is the signal for nearby vessels who know what's good for them to give us a wide berth as I back Elevate's ample backside out into the current. There's a reversing camera to assist, and an unspoken "bigger boat wins" rule, but if you do get into a parking pickle All Seasons will whisk someone out on a jet ski to take the wheel.

Similarly, if you don't feel like cooking you can send for a private chef. For our final night we welcome on board local Italian chef Curtis Harper, who whips up a four-course meal with paired wines. We feel utterly spoiled.



PS Melbourne was built in 1912.

If this floating luxury apartment lacks one thing, it might be a touch of soul. Visitors craving something more rustic, romantic and rattling can jump aboard a sunset cruise on Mildura's only operating paddle steamer. Built in 1912, PS Melbourne started life as a "snagger," a maintenance vessel tasked with hauling fallen trees from the river, before being converted to carry passengers in 1965. Out of service since the pandemic, it was made shipshape and returned to regular cruises in January by Echuca shipwright Adam Auditori.

The original steam engine forms the fiery heart of the ship. Guests gather round as it clatters and clangs, pistons driving a huge crankshaft that spins the paddle wheels, showering the windows with spray. In the bowels below, a crewman tosses chunks of red gum into the boiler, stoking the raging furnace with an iron bar. The flames paint our faces the same colour as sunset, and the river becomes a mirror, reflecting the orange sky and the shadowy smudges of trees, like an exquisite impressionist painting. The Mildura riverscape is set to be even more comprehensively illuminated by British artist Bruce Munro, whose Trail of Lights installation — featuring 12,550 "firefly" lights — opens on April 4 on Lock Island, and is expected to draw more than 100,000 visitors over two years.



Murray Offroad Adventures at Little Lake Spectacle.

You can’t come this far and not at least dip your toes into the outback. I take a literal approach on a half-day tour with Murray Offroad Adventures, removing my shoes and walking barefoot across the salt-encrusted surface of Little Lake Spectacle. Salt crystals crack and inky mud oozes up between my toes. I wash my feet in silky puddles and shield my eyes from the blazing sun bouncing off the blindingly white lake bed. Emu chicks scurry along the road as we enter Murray-Sunset National Park along the ominously named Last Hope Track, the verge pockmarked with wallows dug by kangaroos seeking relief from the heat.

Crossing into Hattah-Kulkyne National Park, the landscape becomes lush and birds fill the sky. Operators Peter and Jeanie Kelly explain how since 2012 water has been pumped from the Murray River to mimic natural floods. As a result, Peter says the population of regent parrots — a threatened species that nest in river red gums — has more than quadrupled.

Our route back to Mildura plunges into the heart of the horticulture district. Citrus still dominates, but almonds are now the largest single crop in the region, with the Sunraysia region contributing about 70 per cent of Australia’s production. “Cherries are also huge right now,” says Peter, “and goji berries are kicking off, too.”



Kar-Rama hotel, a former motel in Mildura that has been revamped.

Swish new accommodation has also sprouted in the city, with the ageing Kar-Rama motor inn transformed into a bold, boutique hotel by Melbourne hospitality group, 1834 Hotels. The property has 34 light-filled king rooms, a retro-inspired lobby building with a modern workspace, a licenced bar and a circular, sunken lounge fronting a butterfly-shaped outdoor pool.

There’s no onsite dining, but that hardly matters as it’s only a short stroll to Mildura’s restaurant strip, where I have a reservation at Andy’s Kitchen, quite possibly the best pan-Asian restaurant in regional Australia.

Palm trees are stencilled against the crystalline sky, the first stars scintillate and the faint scent of ripening fruit infuses the balmy air. Just a regular evening in tropical north Victoria.



Mod-cons on board include a gas fireplace and lift.

In the know

Mildura is six hours' drive from Melbourne and 4 ½ hours from Adelaide. Fly Qantas from Melbourne and Sydney, or Rex from Melbourne. All Seasons Houseboats has a fleet of 16, some pet-friendly. Elevate Luxury sleeps up to 12 people, from $5000 for three nights. A car licence is required to drive the boat, and drivers must be aged over 25.

Murray Offroad Adventures runs a variety of tours, including a six-hour Murray-Sunset National Park outing that includes visits to salt lakes; adults $180.

Kar-Rama has rooms from $249 a night.

Ricky French was a guest of Visit Victoria and Visit Mildura.

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