



As one with the landscape on a Murray River walk

RICKY FRENCH

Wendy is taking team bonding to a new level. It's 7am, we're standing on a crumbling cliff face 40m above the Murray River, the wind is starting to sting, breakfast beckons below on the other side of the river, and she's inexplicably bonded her backside to a small gap in the rock. She pushes and pulls but there's no misinterpreting the holdup. Wendy is wedged.

Chuckles flow down the line like scroggin. So unlikely is her predicament that cameras are quickly (some would say cruelly) extracted from windcheaters. Breakfast can wait. It's the high point of our four days together, both topographically and comically, and Wendy's blushing cheeks complement the colour of sunrise already painted across our faces.

With some effort and a round of applause she twists loose of the cliff's clutches. Equilibrium restored, she proceeds without further fuss to the bottom and inexorably towards breakfast.

We're a tight team of nine by this second morning of the Murray River Walk, the newest of the Great Walks of Australia. It's a four-day, three-night walk and cruise along the Murray River and its surrounding wetlands and floodplains, starting at the South Australian town of Renmark and heading upstream to the Victorian border, a total walking distance of 41km.

Weary bodies are rewarded at the end of each day with accommodation aboard a houseboat named Desire. Some of us sit on the edge of the houseboat and soothe tired feet in the Murray, others opt for the decadence of the top-deck spa pool. Boat guide Mick serves a three-course meal of local delicacies every night from a menu put together by Adelaide chef Andrew Fielke. Post-dinner we reflect on the day, share battle stories, bird sightings, readings from the on-board library, and fine bottles of Riverland wine. We retire to comfortable bedrooms with floor-to-ceiling windows framing the river and the cliffs.

It's all the vision of Renmark local Tony



Morning light on the Murray, main; walkers at Headings Cliff, above; river gums, above right



IN THE KNOW

Murray River Walk operates between May 1 and September 30, departing and finishing in Renmark, South Australia. Meals, drinks and houseboat accommodation for four days and three nights are included. Bookings are open for 2018 departures.
murrayriverwalk.com.au
greatwalksofaustralia.com.au
southaustralia.com

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Sharley, our head guide. Tony grew up with the Murray as his playground, fishing and camping on its banks. He had a revelation as a teen when a visitor started asking questions about the waterway and Tony realised he was almost completely ignorant about his own backyard. It ignited what would become his life's work: he's been an environmental scientist, worked in water policy and is now back to show visitors around and pass on his wealth of knowledge. "This river is a metaphor for my life," he says. "It's been a journey."

We cruise up the Murray from Renmark, diverting to take a series of connector creeks and anabranches. Cormorants, egrets, pelicans and ducks set the sky alive as we weave between the red gums. With the walk only operating during the cooler months, it's no surprise we don't see another boat, or indeed any people, for the entire trip. A high river has greened the wetlands, but the welcome drink isn't due to rain, it's the result of careful planning and a series of weirs and environmental regulators that control the flow of water,

implemented under the \$13 billion Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

Stewardship of the river is a major theme of the walk. We see evidence of vegetation recovery in the flood plains, with historically dry areas finally getting a much-needed soaking. It's about replicating spring flooding in the wetlands by periodically inundating strategic areas of the flood plains.

We leave the narrow channel of the creek and reconnect with the Murray, where we can imagine the awe Charles Sturt must have felt in 1830 when he rowed his whale boat down the Murrumbidgee River and was abruptly shot out into what he would famously declare a "broad and noble river". But it's not long before we pull off that broad and noble body of water and pull on our hiking boots.

For the next three days, Tony and second guide Cassandra lead us through red-gum forests, along creeks, between salt bushes, grassy plains and old fence lines; leaving the river but always returning to it. Perhaps the most surprising thing is that we never use a