



### MORE TO THE STORY

The Murray River Walk makes a poignant stop at the site of the proposed Chowilla Dam, which almost became reality in the late 1960s. With the Snowy Mountains Scheme well under way in NSW, the South Australian government, led by premier Tom Playford, sought its own major project to secure more water for the state. The dam wall would have been 5.5km long, flooding an area of 1372sq km and inundating what is now the Chowilla Game Reserve and the Chowilla Regional Reserve. The project was eventually, and sensibly, scrapped

when costs skyrocketed and after it was revealed that salinity levels would rise catastrophically downstream, potentially wiping out horticulture in South Australia. How close the dam came to getting built can be seen from the Murray River Walk trail, which pauses at what would have been the base of the dam wall. Earthmovers shaped the cliff face to locate the dam; roads and a railway line were constructed. The view looks out over the pastel-coloured delta that holds the cultural history of millennia, which could have been the unlikely site of the Chowilla Yacht Club.

**RICKY FRENCH**



Strolling along the low-gradient delta, above; Desire houseboat, left; boat guide Mick, below left



of 40 vertical metres we climb over the bottom of a 2.5 million-year-old seabed, the floor of ancient Lake Bungunya, and finally up honeycomb-textured sand blown in from the continental shelf during the last two ice ages. The morning call of a singing honey-eater chirps encouragement. On the clifftop we gather and wait for the sun to spill its warmth over the land, our faces and of course our constant companion, the broad and noble river, gold-tipped, raked by the breeze, silent and shimmering in the sun.

The majority of the journey is more understated, but no less engrossing. We walk on oxbows and islands, which gives a remote feel. Tony says walking on the banks gives a new perspective of the river. "To be on the bank, looking at the water, you can see how people lived and worked. You're walking on a landscape a lot of people have made use of."

We see countless red gums showing the unmistakable carved scars of Aboriginal canoes and shields. We see middens, the remnants of old fireplaces, rocks finely shaped into cutting tools. We take off our boots and roll up pants to ford streams, pile into a strategically stashed canoe for a more serious crossing, cross derelict sheep bridges. An evening campfire on the final night is a fitting tribute to the history and the enduring spirit of the Murray.

Our presence is as ephemeral as spring rains but the experience is everlasting. When Desire carries us from the broad and noble for the last time, no signs remain of our group or the remarkable Murray River Walk. We leave no trace, but take away so much.

Ricky French was a guest of South Australian Tourism Commission and Murray River Walk.

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