

Magical Murray has a flow-on effect

How's the serenity? **JOHN WHISTLER** indulges on his own floating castle

ROW, row, row your boat gently down the stream, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream...

Well, it wasn't quite like that for us as we plied the waters of the River Murray.

Our mode of transportation was a little more refined than a simple wooden dinghy and a couple of oars.

Rather, we indulged in probably the nearest thing to a floating hotel.

Picture this and be envious: A houseboat powered by a couple of whisper-quiet 90 horsepower outboard motors (okay, so who cares about motors); five queen-size bedrooms; a colour TV and CD/DVD; air conditioning; a kitchen that puts most to shame (mine, at least) with all the mod cons such as an oven, dishwasher, microwave, fridge – and that's just on the lower deck.

Upstairs you get the fully carpeted covered deck, complete with a bar area and sun lounges – along with great views as you cruise along the river.

Past gawking holidaymakers who can't fail to be impressed by our imposing vessel.

Past a backdrop of vivid red cliffs and a never-ending fringe of green willows on the river banks.

Past inquisitive shack owners who wander out to give us the once-over.

How good is this? You almost feel like royalty – although these days I suppose that depends on whether it's the Windsor mob or our Mary's!

Houseboats have come a long way since my first jaunt on the river some 20 years ago on something akin to a corrugated iron shed on a couple of pontoons.

My recollections – a bit hazy, now – are of half a dozen young blokes with just a change of clothes, several cartons of beer and some meat trays (almost an afterthought), all enjoying a long weekend of swimming, barbecues and, amazingly, surviving without causing too much harm to ourselves.

This time around, though, there were no men behaving badly as I reacquainted myself with the Murray in considerably more style.

My wife and I luxuriated in our craft, named *Anytime*, which is based at Alura Houseboats at the old Customs House upstream from Renmark.

This is God's own country – a secluded section of the River Murray between Lock 6 at Murtho and the border. Snaking through the Mallee, the waterway is, in many places, dwarfed by towering cliffs, large gums and cosy little inlets almost hidden by the thick fringe of willows.

And, of course, there are the ubiquitous pelicans, which fly gracefully overhead and then skate in for their carp à la carte or any other fish that pops its head up.

Even better is that Alura, with its "fleet" of six houseboats, is the only operator for 220km so, besides the occasional interloper cruising through, you've got the place pretty much to yourself.

The trick is to find a nice spot and simply suck in the views and the solitude.

If you've stashed a canoe on board, you can explore the many tiny capillaries that feed into what is the lifeblood of South Australia.

Paddling into these nooks and crannies can be quite an adventure.

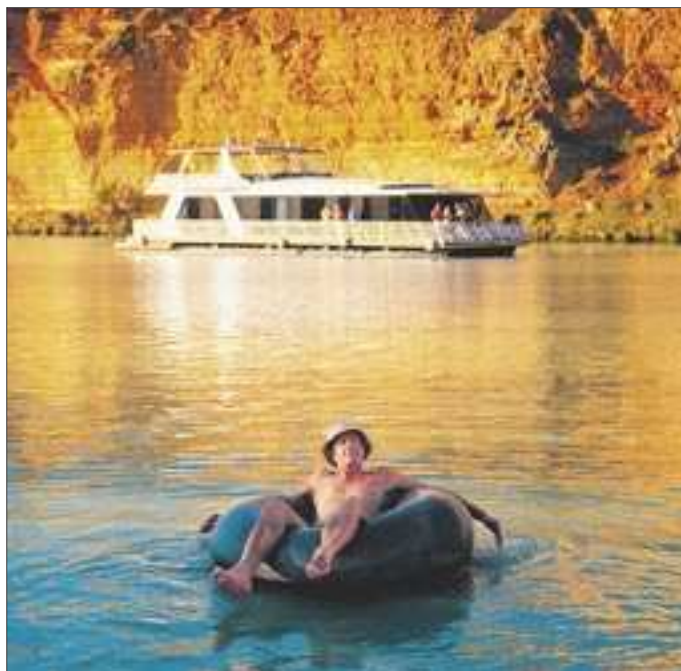
Squeezing through narrow bends almost hidden by the drapery of hanging willow branches as well as reeds can suddenly open up to reveal lagoons and riverbanks festooned with a carpet of wildflowers and grass – just the spot to catch yabbies for lunch washed down with a nice bottle of local wine.

To really enjoy the Murray and its many characteristics – and characters – you need to set aside at least a week.

Tying up next to other houseboats is a great way to meet people – whether they're locals or visitors from overseas – and share some of their experiences over a barbie washed down with a few beers.

If you're a bit of a history buff, you won't be disappointed, either.

The Customs House is a river landmark and has quite a colourful past.



NEVER TYRE OF THIS: Drifting past the Murray River's Big Bend.

Pictures: SA Tourism Commission



RIVER LURE: Coasting down the Murray on the *Anytime*

After the 1850s gold rushes in Victoria and NSW, several colonies were looking for additional revenue, so they decided to charge duties for goods entering their colonies.

It was a nice little earner so, in 1884, the South Australian government jumped on the bandwagon – and a boat – and headed up river to look for a suitable site to intercept and slug steamers entering local waters.

A spot near Chowilla station – named Port Murthoo – was chosen. And the Customs House and store remain today, a sort of wayside inn with a range of provisions and beverages – both alcoholic and non-alcoholic.

If you're a houseboat novice, don't be daunted if you haven't navigated one before – you get an hour's lesson and are shown all the bells and whistles (which is important if you're doing a U-turn or reversing to warn other river users).

Oh, and another river rule: don't forget to stay on the right or you could find yourself staring in the face of Murray Princess's captain!



A STEAK OUT: Enjoy a barbie with the ultimate view

The Lowdown

GETTING THERE: Alura Houseboats marina and general store is at the Customs House, a 20-minute drive from Renmark and a three-hour drive from Adelaide.

WHEN TO GO: November to April but book early. Winter on the river is less cluttered – and there's nothing better than a campfire on the riverbank.

DETAILS: Seven nights in high season on the *Anytime* is \$3920 and \$3195 in low season. For three nights, the cost is \$2690 (high) and \$2240 (low). The tip is to share the costs with other couples. Phone 1300 55 77 06 or see www.anytimehouseboats.com.au



MURRAY DREAMING: Exploring Aboriginal sites along the Murray River