

Traveller Victoria

DESTINATION
ECHUCA

Hero of yesterday

On the Murray River, **Sue Wallace** climbs aboard the restored paddle steamer, now a luxury bed and breakfast.

The Murray River glistens in the moonlight as we stand on the top deck of the restored paddle steamer, Hero, listening to the gentle sounds of the waterway when Abba's *Mamma Mia* pierces the night. The song blasts across the river banks at Echuca and seems to get louder by the second.

The trouble is we aren't quite sure how to shut it down and it is nearing midnight.

We rush downstairs and drawers are pulled open to find six remote controls and we start pressing buttons madly, sure the Echuca police will appear any minute telling us to turn the music down – which we would, if we could.

My husband, who prides himself on IT know-how, is by now also a little rattled as "Mamma Mia here we go again" reaches a climax and just when we are wondering what to do next he hits a button and silence is restored at the Onion Patch, where Hero is moored. It seems we accidentally set a button to trigger the DVD, *Mamma Mia!* at midnight.

All quiet at last, we sink into our comfortable bed in our cabin on this luxury bed and breakfast, lulled to sleep by the sound of lapping waters.

Hero's early life

Hero has a wonderful history. It was built in Echuca in 1874 by George Linklater, the same shipwright who built the world's oldest operating paddle steamer, the PS Adelaide, in 1866.

It had a long and varied life working on the Murray River as a tow boat and hawking steamer towing laden barges of wheat, flour, wool, copper ore and building materials. It also serviced out-back stations and towns along the Murray River from as far up as Tocumwal, down to Narrandera

on the Murrumbidgee and Bourke on the Darling carrying firewood during the war years.

Hero finished its working life towing laden barges of sawmill logs at Boundary Bend before catching fire and burning at its mooring in 1957.

Hero's new life

In 1983, Strathmerton engineer and boiler maker, Gary Byford, who owns Byford Engineering, was driving beside the Murray with his wife, Irene, visiting the river's little-known shipwrecks for fun. Byford spotted Hero, a burnt, twisted wreck in a muddy grave, from the river banks at Boundary Bend and discovered its engines and hull were still intact.

So, intrigued by the story of Hero, Byford, who had always loved paddle steamers, decided with the support of Irene and his family, to restore it to its former glory.

Several unsuccessful attempts were made to raise the ship until eventually, in February 1998, the hull was raised, loaded onto a semi trailer and transported to Echuca.

Hero underwent a complete and meticulous restoration with a view to being part of Echuca's tourist industry.

Today it is a five-star luxury paddle steamer and, where possible, everything has been replaced as close to the original, with the steam engines and boiler rebuilt to exact specifications. Even old-fashioned rivets were specially made.

Hero was relaunched in Echuca on September 16, 2000 – 126 years to the hour since its first launch in the Murray at Echuca. It now offers "Enchanted Journeys" along the Murray, luxurious bed-and-breakfast accommodation and caters for weddings and charter work.



The 28-metre paddleteamer, which weighs about 100 tonnes, has three luxurious cabins.

The experience

We board Hero about 2pm and are shown to our comfortable cabin, a mix of old-world charm and chic luxury. We immediately feel at home and soon fall under the romantic spell that seems to go with historic paddle steamers.

In our cabin there are a brass antique double bed with fine crisp linen, cedar chest and restored wall-mounted Victorian Railway wash basin. Red roses in a crystal vase and chocolates are extra touches.

The plasma television, CD and DVD player are concealed in a cupboard and even the toilet is a conversation piece – it's a Willow patterned bowl, ordered from England.

The shared bathroom, mid deck, features an old-fashioned claw foot bath, pressed metal walls and a separate shower.

Downstairs there's a stately dining room with polished glasses and glistening silver.

A polished mahogany table takes centre stage and you can dine in or sit out on the deck under cover.

We visit the wheelhouse and stand at the wheel and I can't help thinking what former captains would think of Hero now.

In the morning we are woken by the call of kookaburras and rise to watch the river traffic, which includes kayakers, small boats and commercial paddle steamers.

Our personal chef arrives to prepare a gourmet breakfast with an impressive menu.

There's a choice of juices, followed by Bircher muesli with wild berries and yoghurt. Scrambled eggs with herbs and smoked salmon; and eggs benedict with baby spinach, avocado and ham drizzled with hollandaise sauce and sides of bacon, mushroom and cherry tomato is next. There are also fresh fruit salads and tea or

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THE LANGHAM
Melbourne



Rivers run ... (from left) Hero, built in 1871 and relaunched in 2000 in Echuca, is now a bed and breakfast; the cabins have stayed true to the fashions of the 1800s.

river towns and was at one time the state's most substantial inland river port. Today, many historic buildings remain, including the heritage listed wharf and Steam Packet Inn Hotel.

The town is also home to the world's largest collection of genuine Murray River paddle steamers still operating.

Relive those days on the river

To get a feel for Echuca-Moama's rich port history, take a tour of the port. It still operates much as it did in the 1860s, with shipwrights and steam engineers working away. The tour includes a visit to the Star Hotel to discover the tunnels that provided an escape route for those who enjoyed an illegal drink or two. There were once 79 hotels in Echuca.

The Cargo Shed Museum highlights great stories about shipwrights, steam engineers and river boat captains. Guided tours are \$12 for adults and \$8 for children.

Phone 5482 4248 or see portofechuca.org.au.

Tootling along

We enjoy a 90-minute lunch cruise on the paddle steamer, Emmy Lou, powered by a restored 1906 steam engine.

The Emmy Lou was built in the 1980s in the style of the 19th-century paddle steamers. There is an interesting and entertaining commentary about the legends and history of the port and paddleboat trade. Cost is \$28.50 for a lunchtime cruise – plus lunch costs. It also offers overnight cruises and extended trips.

Phone 5480 2237 or see emmylou.com.

Dine

Oscar W's Wharfside Redgum Grill and Deck Bar offers great views of the Murray and passing paddle steamers. Established in 1997, Oscar's – named after an early paddle steamer – offers

modern Australian fare with an Asian or European twist. The wine list impresses with its explanations of wine styles and an extensive Australian and international wine selection.

At 101 Murray Esplanade, phone 5482 5133 or see oscarws.com.au.

Historic inns

Immerse yourself in the history of the river front with a stay at the Hero's sister property, the Steampacket Inn, a heritage bed and breakfast hotel in the heart of the historic Port Precinct.

The inn was built in the 1850s and was first known as the Steam Packet Hotel, a popular watering hole with river men and stevedores. Today it is a National Trust classified boutique bed and breakfast that can accommodate up to 27 guests. Rates start from \$149 a night midweek, including breakfast.

At 37 Murray Esplanade, phone 5482 3411 or see steampacketinn.com.au.

Food and wine trail

Featuring more than 40 operators, the trail harnesses the riches of the area's local produce and wine with restaurants, cellar doors and wine tours. Wineries include the historic Cape Horn vineyard, established in the 1860s to serve the thriving riverboat trade, and Monichino Wines, opened by one of the first Italian immigrants in the Yarrowonga-Mulwala area, famous for its barbera and sangiovese.

Location

Echuca is on the banks of the Murray River and is 250 kilometres, or a 2½-hour drive, from Melbourne. Phone 1800 804 446 or see echucamoama.com.

Sue Wallace was a guest of Tourism Victoria.

**SUNDAY LUNCH
MERRICKS GENERAL
STORE**

THE Mornington Peninsula's restaurants are like its wine. Occasionally a bad one mars the overall impression and I have paid excessively for both inferior food and mediocre wine. Fortunately, Merricks General Store offers a reliable and reasonably priced alternative to other trendy diners in these parts.

Merricks calls itself a general store despite being a restaurant, which results in a confusing situation for many newcomers. No one helps sort out diners from deli customers or wine tasters. Finally, we're noticed by a hurried waitress. "Yes, that table is free," she says in a rush, pointing to a spot near the door.

With our entrees – duck and rabbit rillettes with spiced prunes (\$18) and gorgonzola pannacotta with baby beets, asparagus and a beetroot pomegranate dressing (\$18) – we drink Quealy Senza Nome Tocai Friulano, a variety rarely grown in Australia, also known as sauvignon vert, a refreshing change from pinot gris. Kath Quealy, of T'Gallant fame, is a partner in the business. The Baillieu and Myer families are fellow owners and vigneron. The wine zings. The entrees sing. Waiting guests bristle.

I choose another entree, finely sliced lamb with white anchovies, pickled turnips, tahini yoghurt and fennel grissini (\$17), while my partner splurges on duck confit, shaved fennel and cabbage salad with roasted hazelnut dressing (\$29). We share a side dish of green beans with spiced almond and preserved lemon (\$10). Glasses of Merricks General Store Pinot Noir, made from Mornington grapes, match well with both. The food is slickly presented and skilfully prepared with high-quality ingredients.

We decide to share a rice pudding with Elgee Park quinces. A nostalgic combination of cinnamon, cardamom, sweet-sour quince and creamy soft rice, it's a comfort-food memory but contemporarily delicious.

Reviewed by Tom Neal Tacker

Merricks General Store, 3458 Frankston Flinders Road, Merricks. Phone 5989 8088. Open Mon-Fri and Sun, 9am-5pm; Sat, 9am-9pm. See mgwinestore.com.au. To stay: nearby options include Lindenderry at Red Hill (lancemore.com.au/lindenderry), Cape Schanck Light Station (austpacinns.com.au) or Woodman Estate (woodmanestate.com).



plunger coffee. It is a great way to start a day of exploring Echuca's historic wharf precinct.

Rates for Hero start from \$400 a night for two in a standard cabin and \$500 for the state cabin, including wine and chocolates and a gourmet breakfast with a private chef. There are three double cabins for overnight accommodation – cruising is an optional extra cost.

Phone 0458 101 874 or see hero.net.au.

Echuca's rich past

Echuca-Moama was a thriving inland shipping port during the 18th century. Today, the historic redgum wharf is about 75 metres long but at its peak in the 1880s it was 332 metres.

During the 1993 floods you could step on to the lower deck of a paddle steamer from the old red gum wharf at Echuca – which is 11 metres above the present level of the river.

More than 200 paddle steamers were built at Echuca-Moama, which is one of Victoria's oldest

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Conditions apply. Subject to availability. Minimum two nights' stay. Valid from Thursday to Sunday. Valid till end of July 2010.
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