

## NORTH TO THE MURRAY

The magic of the Murray, Australia's largest river, sweeps you away in a tourist heaven of balmy weather, water sports, paddle steamers and, of course, wineries. Australia's most important waterway flows from the mountains of the Great Dividing Range in northeastern Victoria to Encounter Bay in South Australia – more than 2700km. It's also an unusual river: for very long stretches it collects no water from the country it passes through.

Many of the river towns carry evocative reminders of past riverboat days, including historical museums, old buildings and well-preserved paddle steamers. The Murray Valley Hwy links them all, but is separated from the river by flood plains, subsidiary waterways and forests of red gum. However, you can take advantage of the fairly frequent tracks (often marked 'River Access') that lead you to the banks.

Those magnificent red gum forests have made the Murray River famous, and provide plentiful bird and animal life plus leisurely riverbank camping. There's almost always 'twin' towns along here: back in the days before Federation (1901), all major river crossings had customs houses on each bank, from which the two states (Victoria and New South Wales) levied tariffs on goods carried across their borders.

Whichever road you take north from Melbourne, the air grows warmer as the country rolls away. By the time you reach the mighty Murray, you are in endless summer (well, it feels like that...). Travel up through the wide spaces of the Mallee, or up the Hume, Victoria's busiest freeway, past pleasant country towns, wineries, galleries, fine food outlets and adventure sports opportunities. Or there's the Hume's little sister, the Goulburn Hwy, which leads you through Victoria's fruit bowl, the Goulburn Valley, a rich agricultural district. The wineries here include the well-respected Tahbilk and Mitchelton.

### WATER WONDERLAND

Have your swimwear and sunscreen ready, your body trimmed and tanned (or not-so-trim and healthily pale), and muster up loads of energy – a plethora of **water sports** is waiting for you. There's **water-skiing**, **wake-boarding**, **kayaking**, **swimming**, or even just floating, regardless of which direction you're headed. And if the rivers and lakes are a bit too *au naturale*, from Wangaratta to Wodonga, Mildura to Nagambie, there are state-of-the-art **aquatic centres** with slides, wave pools, spas and saunas.

Love the water but prefer to stay dry? **Paddle steamers** are steamed-up and ready to burble you along the magic Murray; **canoes** tempt you out onto the Goulburn River; **river launches** transport you to wineries or wetlands; and **houseboats** await for you to stay in, anywhere from Rutherglen to Mildura. Just follow your divining stick and sniff the air – you're headed for water!

### TAKE TO THE SKY

You don't need to feel earthbound, water-bound or bound at all. This is fun country, holiday time, sporting heaven – take to the skies and totally embrace your freedom! If you're adventurous, the air currents around

Nagambie, Euroa and Benalla mean stacks more days available for **skydiving** and **hot-air ballooning** (p340). Reliable weather further north encourages small aircraft to offer you seats for scenic **joyflights**. Everywhere you go there'll be a sky-bound experience waiting for you.

If you prefer your feet on the ground, visit the **Lake Boga Flying Boat Museum** (p328).

### PIONEER EXPLORATIONS

Amidst all this leisure, it's surprising to find such a treasure-trove of history. Of course, **Echuca** (p329) is renowned for its historic wharf and living-history walk along the Esplanade; but homesteads like **Byramine** (p333) also take you back to the past in a truly emotional way.

Learn about the engineering and personal struggles involved in building the irrigation scheme in **Mildura** (opposite). Fascinating! See the river ports where pioneers built punts and fords, bars and stores to assist the transport of produce throughout the region. Be totally immersed in the past at ancient little towns like **Chiltern** (p335) and **Rushworth** (p338), or recall your youth at the costume museum (if you're over 15!) in **Benalla** (p340). Surely the ultimate relationship with the past can be found at the very many **B&Bs** that offer dream-filled nights

in stunning old banks, grand estates, princely farmhouses and towered homesteads.

## WINE, WOMEN & SONG

Well, forget the women and song. This is wine, wine, wine country! Head off on Swan Hill's [Golden Mile Wine Trail](#) (p328). Check out [Mildura's wineries](#) (p323), where most of Australia's export wine is produced. Settle in for the long haul at [Rutherglen](#) (p334), where you can catch a festival or two and roll from one gourmet experience to the next. On all sides on your way north, vineyards with cellar-door sales and gorgeous, scrumptious food await to distract you from your journey.

## MILDURA

pop 30,000

After crossing windswept deserts and pale-golden wheat fields, you reach a thriving regional centre. Mildura (pronounced 'Milld-yoo-ra', meaning 'red soil') is a true oasis: a town ready to take you back to the grand old pastoralist era.

Mildura makes full use of the Murray, one of the state's great water-sports playgrounds, where activities include fishing, swimming, canoeing, water-skiing, houseboat holidays and paddle steamer cruises. The Murray region is also a golfer's paradise, with plenty of excellent riverside courses.

Mildura is an amazing tourist destination for people in search of endless blue skies. Foodies, clubbers, shoppers and lazeabouts delight in the resorts, wineries, markets, boutique or budget shopping, and the fabulous eateries known for their famous chefs. The main road, [Deakin Ave](#), is a wide boulevard impressively lined with palms and gum trees, lit-up at night by the neon signs of motels and restaurants. [Langtree Ave](#), one block north, is a shopping mall between Eighth and

Ninth Sts. The [Centro Plaza](#) is an ultramodern, one-stop retail-therapy spot.

The irrigation schemes of northern Victoria support dairy farms, vineyards, market gardens, orchards and citrus groves that provide fresh fruit and supply the thriving dried-fruit industry. The area is also the biggest producer of wine in Australia (most of which is exported). In fact, Mildura is one of the richest agricultural areas in the country. It's easy to forget you're in the midst of Victoria's arid region when you see the lush green golf courses, endless orange groves, orchards and vineyards for which Mildura is renowned.

Sadly, after years of irrigation, soil salinity has become a major problem, one that poses a long-term threat to the economic viability of much of this area.

Mildura owes its existence to the Chaffey brothers and their irrigation systems (see [below](#)). The visitors centre has a brochure called *The Chaffey Trail*. Pick up a copy and follow the Chaffey story.

Stops on the Chaffey Trail include the [Old Mildura Homestead](#) (☎ 5018 8322; [Cureton Ave](#), Old Mildura House Heritage Park; adult/child \$2/free; ☎ 9am-6pm), a cottage that was the first home of William B Chaffey. On the banks of the Murray, it's in a pleasant heritage park which contains a few other historic buildings and has picnic and barbecue facilities.

Nearby is Chaffey's grand homestead, the historic [Rio Vista](#) (part of the Mildura Arts Centre; see [p322](#)). The house has been beautifully preserved; restorers peeled back the walls to the original wallpaper then reproduced it. The interior is set up as a series of historical displays depicting life in the 19th century, with period furnishings, costumes, photos and a collection of letters and memorabilia.

Also emerging from the Chaffey vision were the [Mildura Wharf](#), the [weir](#) and the [lock](#).

## THE CHAFFEY BROTHERS

Canadian brothers George and William Chaffey were famous 19th-century irrigation engineers who set up an irrigation colony at Mildura.

Their promotional scheme was launched in 1887 and attracted more than 3000 settlers to the area. They cleared scrub, dug irrigation channels and built fences, and two massive pumping-station engines were shipped from England.

The early years of the settlement were tough and full of frustrations. There was an economic collapse in the 1890s, rabbit plagues and droughts, and clearing the mallee scrub was a nightmare. George became disillusioned, and in 1896 returned to North America.

In 1889 William built Rio Vista, a grand riverside homestead, to express his confidence in the new settlement. But his wife, Hattie, died during childbirth before it was finished, and their newborn son died five months later. William later married his deceased wife's niece, also named Hattie, and lived in Mildura until he died in 1926 at the age of 70. Happily, he was there to see the Melbourne–Mildura railway line finally open in 1902, meaning the town's future was assured.