

All aboard the floating mansion on the Murray

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There's one big problem with the luxury Boatel houseboat, a two-storey, 22m-long floating chalet. Once you board, you'll find it very difficult to leave.

By CHRISTINE MIDDAP



The pride of the All Seasons Houseboats fleet.

Here, would you like to drive?" Sean Bromley asks, easing out of the white leather captain's chair. I take the polished silver wheel, glance at the bewildering array of buttons and gauges on the dashboard and scan the broad, comforting expanse of the Murray. It's clear this mighty river can accommodate a two-storey, 22m-long, 60 tonne boat – even with a newbie in charge.



A lounge room with a view.

We're travelling at about 8km/h and as we drift to the right I understeer then overcorrect, oversteer then overcorrect, setting a pattern as I get a feel for things. "You can always tell when it's a new person," Sean laughs. "You see them zig-zagging up the river." And so we zig and zag a bit further until we set a straight-ish course through gentle bends and I come to trust that this luxury floating hotel – the biggest thing I've ever driven – is responsive and forgiving.



One of the luxurious bedrooms aboard the Boatel.

The river is mirror-calm on this hot blue day. Mildura is behind us; a long, empty stretch of water ahead. One other houseboat chugs past, its inhabitants ogling and waving. To be on this boat is to learn to cope with staring, pointing and spontaneous photography.

At this point, Sean, the co-owner of All Seasons Houseboats, having taken our travelling party through the dashboard dials, the maps and rules, the stopping, starting, safety and mooring, and having seen we could manoeuvre it, would leave us to motor along for three, four, five nights or longer.



The captain's seat.

We'd admire the river with its green gum-lined banks breaking to dramatic red cliffs, of course we would: it's the Murray, Australia's longest river. But really what we'd want to do is tie up at a secluded spot, crank up the in-built sound system, sashay up and down the grand internal staircase like a celebrity on the red carpet, try out the three leather chesterfield sofas in the upstairs sky lounge, fight over the five bedrooms downstairs (go for the one at the end; they all have king beds and ensuites but this has a bath as well) then gather at the upstairs cocktail bar for pre-dinner drinks. Feasts would be prepared in the vast kitchen and eaten at the 10-seater dining table; then it would be a sundowner on the deck and a swim. The next day we'd stop at Trentham Estate to laze under trees by the water's edge and work our way through the vineyard's Italian varietals and a-la carte menu.



Trentham Estate. Picture: Vicky Lamonby

At either end of your trip you'd want to allow a few days to explore Mildura. I'm only briefly in town so after our short run up the river I stay tethered at the riverside park near town. The changing light and river life provide endless entertainment: swimmers and rowers bookend the day, boats and paddle-steamers at other times. In between come the swans and pelicans, cormorants windmilling their wings in the trees as the heat subsides and the setting sun performs her light show.



Plated food at Stefano's cafe

The cool of dawn is a good time to join the locals on the walking trail beside the river with regular breaks at cafes and coffee huts. Mention Mildura and most foodies will think of Stefano De Pieri, the celebrity chef who introduced us to the culinary wonders of this region on his TV series A Gondola

on the Murray. To walk under the sun-dappled, vine-lined terrace at the landmark Grand Hotel and descend to his eponymous restaurant in the cellar is to know something special is in store. There's no menu; the five courses change according to what's fresh that day so you know it will be delicious: house-made ricotta; a soufflé-like sformato with zucchini and gorgonzola; tagliatelle with asparagus; Murray Cod with broad beans ...

The restaurant is filled with a mix of locals and tourists, a welcome sight after a long Covid winter hit this border region particularly hard. For months the famous paddle-steamers and houseboats were ordered off the river. Sean and his wife Jodie, who operate 15 houseboats, used the time to renovate, upgrade. And the tourists are coming back. Boats are booking fast; anyone wanting to rent the one-of-a-kind Boatel will need to book now – for next winter. The Bromleys are building another luxury houseboat, this one with six bedrooms and a spa. There's no cruising the Med right now – so more people are realising it's time to drift down the Murray.

HOUSEBOATING ON THE MURRAY

- Perfect for: Special occasions.
- Must do: Explore Mildura's riverside walkway and the 15ha island between lock 11 and the weir, stopping to read about the region's history. Kayak, swim or tour the famous Murray River.
- Dining: In Mildura, Stefano's at the Grand Hotel for a five-course set menu; and the highly rated The Province by Matt de Angelo for modern Italian. For breakfast, Café 1909 on the riverfront, or Stefano's café. For lunch, the cellar door at Trentham Estate, 15km from town.
- Getting there: Mildura is in northwest Victoria. There are daily flights from Sydney and Melbourne; the closest capital city is Adelaide, 4.5 hours' drive away.
- Bottom line: Five-bedroom Boatel starts at \$3900 for three nights (low season). Other houseboats start at \$1000 for three nights.

allseasonshouseboats.com.au; visitvictoria.com.au

CHRISTINE MIDDAP



EDITOR, THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN MAGAZINE

Christine Middap is the editor of the Weekend Australian Magazine. She has worked as a journalist and editor in three states, Tasmania, Qld, and NSW, and at The Times in London. She is a former foreign correspo... [Read more](#)