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Once upon a time adventure travel was only for the hard-core. An all-or-nothing proposition reserved for the seriously fit and hardy. The realm of people prepared to trek for weeks on end or scale the steepest rock face. These days, being adventurous is much more accessible to everyone. Opportunities abound to wander the unfamiliar, explore the unknown and connect with incredible places.

You just have to scroll through Instagram to notice the global demand for adventurous travel. People crave experiences that resonate on a deeper, more emotional level. We want something personalized, more attuned to local culture, something that inspires us along our path of self discovery.

I recently experienced the magic of combining physical activity, nature, and culture into an adventurous travel experience when I joined a group of strangers on a three-day kayaking expedition along the Murray River. We all had one thing in common: the desire to connect fully with our destination.

The Forgotten Backwaters: Gunbower Creek and Edward River

Catch, Power, Exit and Recovery... repeat. My forearms were tingling with numbness and my shoulder muscles were screaming for relief.

Yet, amongst the weariness and fatigue, my heart sang. Here we were on the final day of our kayak expedition heading downstream along the forgotten backwaters and estuaries of the 'Mighty Murray', listening to the cacophony of frogs, kookaburras

and kingfishers and passing the towering river red gums looming overhead and perched gallantly along the river bank. A white-bellied sea eagle gracefully hovered along above us as our bright yellow and red canoes meandered their way along the river;

splashes of colour amongst the ochre water. It was the most surreal landscape, so quintessentially Australian like we were passing a series of Tom Roberts or Arthur Streeton impressionist paintings.

The current was so strong that we had to steady our boats with our oars and use it to steer away from the multiple logs poking precariously out of the river. As the river flow swept our boat past the tangle of branches, I pushed off the bottom and tried to avoid crashing into the large fallen eucalypt trunk taking up half of the waterway.

What an adventure! The last few days we had been exploring the secret waterways

of the Murray River from Barmah to Koondrook in New South Wales (NSW). A group of keen paddlers doing some serious log hopping, bird watching and navigating in our plastic vessels without a rudder. The Murray River is home to some of the best kayaking and canoeing

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experiences in Australia. Putting aside the adrenalin fuelled hardcore rapids for a minute, and replacing this with the backwaters, creeks and lagoons. The mighty Murray is popular, but the tributaries off it are often near empty. They are, however, extraordinary. It's easy to fall in love with these waters. Towering red gum and box lined forests frame the snagged waters, and are home to an incredible array of birds that enjoy the lush river surroundings. On this particularly warm autumn day, we saw an abundance of bird life on the lagoon – part of the Gunbower Creek – from birds of prey to spoonbills, pelicans and my favourite, the kingfisher. Not to mention the odd 'roo' intruder hopping by on the riverbank trying to match the pace of us paddlers...or was he in fact chasing the shaggy brown feathered emu awkwardly running along the opposite bank. Guess we will never know.

Gunbower Island, near Cohuna, lies on the floodplain between the Murray and Gunbower Creek. It has a water frontage of 130 kilometres, with 20,000 hectares of state forest covering about 80 percent of the island.

Edward River is a peaceful, lesser-known alternative to the nearby Murray River, so it's ideal for paddlers of all experience levels. You can appreciate the tranquillity of a number of national parks from the vantage point of the water, and take in the incredible bushland from a different perspective.

The forests and wetlands draw fishermen, canoeists, campers and walkers. The many varieties of waterbirds are a huge feature, but it is the opportunity to paddle in these forgotten backwaters and hidden estuaries that really appeal to me.

I love paddling. That sense of freedom and adventure hits you within the first few strokes of a paddle. The remote access to spots you can't get to in any other way, the unique views of nature. I love how my mood can dictate whether I choose to attempt adrenalin fuelled racing in the ocean and open water, or mindfully and silently glide my way through the wetlands in a meditative state. In both instances, I consider myself adventurous – just in two entirely different ways.

For me, there is something about the water that automatically calms me down whenever I'm around it. As my paddle takes each dip, I feel a wonderful sense of oneness with nature.

Did you know there are actual studies proving the positive effect of water on one's overall health, which helps to encourage and improve mindfulness? This includes what is called 'Blue Mind', a term coined by TedX guru, Dr Wallace J. Nichol, which is the supporting science that shows how being near, in, or on water can positively impact your overall happiness, mental health, productivity, self-awareness and connection to your surroundings in nature. After a few days gliding along the waterways and exploring the abundant riverbanks that sustain so much life, suffice to say I concur that being near water can indeed improve mindfulness. And it appears I am not alone as the Murray region has invested significant spend into creating dedicated kayak and canoe trails into its tourism mix.

The Murray is already a recognised tourist destination, with 6.1 million visitors spending \$1.8 billion in the region last year. The lure of nature tourism is strong and with many people already paddling the Murray from end to end, significant infrastructure is being invested into the trails and forgotten back waterways to open up the area to the reach of adventurers who want to connect. Take for example, Australia's first all-abilities kayak launcher, which sits on the Edward Riverbank (near the town of Mathoura, NSW) and is a complete game-changer for Murray Regional Tourism. The new kayak launcher allows for a kayak to be lowered into a metal cradle and you step or lower yourself in with handrails along each side to easily pull yourself into the water and... you're off! Genius!

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What these secret waterways of the Murray River offer people are immersive adventurous experiences – to sleep under the stars, to paddle on the water, to listen to the birds and wildlife. It is that connection to a 'sense of place' we are all seeking. You can never outgrow adventure. Real adventure immerses you in a destination, connects you with the environment, nature, a new culture and its people. The magic of the mighty Murray is that it allows you to tap into your inner adventurous and curious spirit, feel viscerally inspired by these hidden waterways, and help you to become more of a conscious traveller.

After all, adventure travel is now for everyone. Disclaimer: The author was hosted by Murray Regional Tourism.



ABOUT Meg Law

Meg is a travel writer, explorer and adventure enthusiast who lives on Victoria's famous coastline: The Great Ocean Road. An avid kayaker, Meg is happiest when paddling down the river or travelling the globe with her husband and two mini explorers.

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