

MORE THAN JUST MILDURA

**THE MALLEE'S SUNSET COUNTRY PUTS ON A SHOW**

Just 101km south of Mildura begins what is known as 'sunset country'.

Locked in-between the Murray-Sunset National Park and the Wyperfield National Park, this stretch of Mallee outback is the wide-reaching stage for red-orange sunsets watched by locals finishing up a day on the farm, as well as visitors from an ideal campsite vantage-point.

The steady stream of people who travel the well-sealed Mallee Highway often know to visit during spring-time when the sunset's technicolour light shows are complemented by over 100 varieties of wildflowers, including a number of native orchids.

This is wheat country, first settled in the mid-1800s by a number of hard-wearing farming pioneers. Blankets of green or parch-brown (depending on the season) pastoral runs sit in-between hip-high patches of Mallee scrub. This land is dry, summer-time hot and often blisteringly windy.

Railside skyscraper-tall wheat silos still pinpoint each of the sheep and wheat-built towns that dot the Mallee Highway from Ouyen to the South Australian border. Although, a number of these Mallee Highway towns, such as Galah, Boinka (pronounced 'bow-ink-ah') and Linga, today contain little more than the once operational silos.

Ouyen is the gateway to the Mallee's sunset country. Situated on the junction of the Mallee and Calder highways which connects Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, Ouyen is the Mallee's metropolis. The city-heart shopping strip along Oke Street (pronounced 'oak') is a mix of decades-past country shops and modern facilities catering to the demands of the steady stream of visitors.

A large number of visitors come for The Great Australian Vanilla Slice Triumph ([www.ouyenvanillaslice.com.au](http://www.ouyenvanillaslice.com.au)). The event began in 1998 based on the suggestion from the then Premier of Victoria and vanilla slice fan, Jeff Kennett. Today, thousands of people flock to the township each September for the carnival-like event offering slice tasting, market stalls, live music, local patchwork displays and the Mallee Art Show.

The large bakery in town says serves dozens queued around display cabinets of large helpings of home-style hot and cold food, including forearm-sized chocolate éclairs.

This 97 year-old Mallee town is tourist-friendly. Across the road from re-vamped The Fairy Dell Café, the well-trafficked Mallee Bakery and the triple-fronted Geary's Furniture (offering a "free measure and quote" for blinds), the

clean and modern Ouyen Community Park offers touring vans a place to park, a new corrugated iron BBQ shed area, picnic benches and new toilet facilities.

Next door to the Ouyen Community Park is the town's pride and joy – the Roxy Theatre. 'Friends of the Roxy' have amassed grants totalling half \$1million will rebuild the semi-tropical theatre which closed down in 1971

From Ouyen, the Mallee Highway travels to Galah, to Torrita, to Underbool, to Linga, to Walpeup (known as 'Walpy' to the locals), to Boinka, to Tutye, to Cowangie (racing car champion Larry Perkin's hometown), and finally to Murrayville before the highway heads over the South Australian border to Pinnaroo.

Despite dwindling populations and often desperate droughts, each township works hard to maintain an individual identity and community-driven spirit. Underbool is gateway to 'the Pink Lakes country'. Linga provides access to the popular Murray-Sunset National Park. A tapestry called 'Walpeup 1989' can be found in the Walpeup Hall (pick up the keys from the local milk bar). Murrayville's State heritage-listed railway station is now craft shop, and many old shops built in the early 1900s still line the main street.

The sunset region also offers a number of outback walking trails; the Linga walking trail; Schubert's Walk in Walpeup; and, Pine Hill Walk in Murrayville. Established in 1997, Walpeup's Dryland Garden contains dryland plants which can tolerate low rainfall conditions. The Nhill Track passes through the Big Desert State Park's large variety of the Mallee's in-season wild flowers.

Historical reminders of the sunset country's pioneering past can still be found along the highway, including the ghost towns: the historic graveyards in Boinka; the Pioneer and Early Settler Memorial in Underbool; the information picture-boards in the Murrayville gazebo and bus shelter at Cowangie; the National Trust listed corrugated iron Torrita Hall; and, the Bush Nurse Cottage, Baker's Oven and the world-class Kow Plains Homestead ([www.kowplains.com](http://www.kowplains.com)) in Cowangie.

Over the past couple of decades, land-loyal locals worked together to restore the former Mallee cypress pine home of Dugald Macpherson. The original Kow Plains 1860s original hut, 1870s homestead, wells, trough and 'privy' were restored log-by-log, from a few photographs taken in the early 1900s.

Led by the tireless and tenacious Jocelyn Lindner, with the help of Canberra-based heritage architect Pip Giovanelli and funding from Heritage Victoria, Kow Plains Homestead opened to the public (admission is a gold coin donation) on 20 October 2001. It is today a significant tourism drawcard at the centre of the Mallee Highway stretch, well-deserving of the UNESCO Asian Pacific Heritage Awards 'Honourable Mention' it received in 2002.

"And there was little old us on the UNESCO website, in-between all those temples!" Jocelyn Lindner says with bemused pride, walking past the UNESCO plaque mounted beside the cookhouse's front door. "We are very proud of ourselves."