

MORE THAN JUST MILDURA

THE MILLEWA – A PIONEERING EXPERIENCE

Over 40km west of Mildura on the Sturt Highway live the proud wheat farming descendants of the Millewa region's early pioneering families.

The region was settled in the 1920s as an experiment in close settlement dry land wheat farming. The settlement comprised of near 700 farms at its peak but dwindled to 200 by 1945 due to limited water supply. Today, farms are larger due to the 1948 land reallocation, and only the towns of Lake Cullulleraine, Werrimull and Meringur remain.

But life has changed very little since the Simpsons, Hiscocks and the Kellys first settled in the Millewa. Wheat is still the region's economic backbone, wildflowers cover the land surrounding the 100-or-so wheat farms from July to December, and Lake Cullulleraine is the close-knit community's place to kick back and relax on a sunny long-weekend.

A walk among the wildflowers at Yarrara Reserve, Mallee Farm Tours (by appointment), a Saturday night bistro meal with local farmers at the Werrimul Hotel, or a day spent at the unique Millewa Pioneer Park, all provide a rare insight into a rural pioneering community.

The Millewa's pioneering descendants established the Millewa Pioneer Park (millewapioneerpark.org.au) on 12 hectares of local bushland in on the Millewa Road just outside of Meringur in 1986.

Set in rugged mallee scrub, the park is a well-designed reconstruction of a turn-of-the-century village settlement. Dozens of the Millewa's original buildings and farming equipment, generously donated by local families and government organisations, sit along smooth pathways.

Locals donated rare spare time and skills to build Millewa Pioneer Park's impressive and professional facilities: such as the thatch hut covering pictures of native birds; quality brickwork beneath the sub-surface cellar; and the barbeque area filled with three giant communal tables made from old cable reels.

A free map, developed with the support of the Department of Sustainability and Environment, provides direction around the well-signed outdoor museum: starting from the information shelter at No.1 to the Horse drawn caravan at No.40 behind the blacksmith's shop. The park has everything a young wheat farming settlement would need: a telephone exchange; the All Saints Anglican Church; a government building; the Meringur (ex-Kurnwill) school; a country railway station; and, a police lock-up.

Many of the buildings, such as the Simpson family's pre-war pioneer cottage with the heritage garden at No.18, are full of everyday Millewa life items such as old kids' toys and an ageing ice-cream maker. The Simpson cottage hessian walls have been white-washed the old-fashioned way, and each morning PJ the Resident Caretaker sweeps the dirt floors.

"We had 100 school kids (from Irymple Primary School) come through here yesterday," PJ says as he climbs into the back carriage of the train resting at No.24. "It's part of their studies. They had a great time."

The three train carriages, and at least half a dozen of the park's other building, display a number of black-and-white images of the Millewa's old pioneering families. The ladylike Dorothy Hiscock, PJ's favourite, is pictured daintily digging out a giant mallee stump. 'Bathing Beauty Contest' shows a row of pretty Millewa girls in swimsuits standing in line along a Lake Cullulleraine jetty in 1940.

Regularly topped up with Murray River water, Lake Cullulleraine waters are still popular with pretty Millewa girls in (somewhat smaller) swimsuits. The lake is a site for wide range of water sports, such as skiing, rowing, sailing, and canoeing, as well as waterside barbeques and camping by the willow tree-lined shores.

"Families and kids have a ball out here because it's safe," says Glenys Bowden, co-manager of the 40 year-old Bushman's Rest Caravan Park. Set on an expanse of Mallee scrub, the six houses, handful cabins and grassy tent lots in this dog and cat-friendly park are often full and thriving during summertime, public holidays and long weekends.

"It's nothing fancy, but people keep coming back – some for 27 years," Glenys says as she walks through the rows of established caravan sites, some with little gardens, in slow and easy Lake Cullulleraine time. "It's a relaxed kind of place – you just sit here and unwind."

Night-time meals consist of on-site cooked barbeques, a home-cooked take-away dinner from the Lake Cullulleraine corner shop, or a counter-meal from the Werrimul Hotel on a busy and friendly Friday or Saturday night.

Built around a colossal wheat silo, and home to the region's school, post office and pub, Werrimul is the largest of the three towns. At the centre of the Millewa region, and surrounded by the Murray Sunset National Park, the Murray River, Mildura and the South Australian border, Werrimul is the spot to stock up and re-fuel before moving on to the next Mallee outback destination.

The small town of 50 people sees and serves a large number of travellers on their way to nearby attractions such as the 30,000-hectare Ned's Corner Station, and the Murray Sunset National Park, the second largest national park in Victoria.

"A busload came from Alice Springs recently," says Debbie Jenkins while wiping down the Werrimul Hotel bar. "An apparently a group is coming for a Golden Grain Weekend (Slow Food Mildura) dinner next week."