

MORE THAN JUST MILDURA

## WENTWORTH – A THRIVING REGIONAL TOWN

Just a quick 30km north of Mildura on the Silver City Highway is one the busiest, community-spirited regional towns in Australia.

Wentworth is booming. This riverside town – located at the junction where Australia's great Murray (2,530km) and Darling (2,740km) rivers meet – is experiencing a population boom rather than the population depletion trend affecting some rural areas in the country.

The Wentworth locals attribute this boom-time to the introduction of a Community Branch of the Bendigo Bank. Since the official opening by Ray Martin in 1999 (his brother-in-law is a local), local branch profits have been fed back into the community, financing important economic and cultural resources such as the next instalment of the popular 'Maud's Book of Houses'.

As a result, there is so much going on in this bustling town with the village atmosphere.

The Wentworth Services Sporting Club is once again the social hub for both locals and visitors, providing quality food, live music, entertainment, sporting events and accommodation. The club's 18-hole championship golf course is still a popular spot for golfers on tour of the area's well-irrigated greens.

The Ruby's Cargo co-operative sells a range of local-made products, including Maree McLeod's unique 'Woolshed Pantry' pickles, jams, marmalades and relishes all brewed on the family's century-old 'Kelso' property. The shop is also the starting point for the yearly 'Junction Junk' Easter hunt for treasures up for sale in more than a dozen local homes.

There could well be more artists-per-capita in Wentworth than any major city claiming a strong arts and culture identity. Artist Marg Whyte, who is a descendent of the town's first Mayor, is behind the popular 'Wearable Art' section of the annual Wentworth Show held each August. Made out of wool bales, the clothes are surprisingly haute couture.

Other highlights of the 121 year-old show are the Food and Wine Marquee, and the 'Bachelor of the Show' competition where strapping entrants are judged on their ability to iron a shirt, read poetry aloud and make a sandwich.

Wentworth definitely has its own distinct, quirky personality. The bright red Perry Sandhills, where fossils of ancient mega-fauna were found and preserved, are today often used as a back-drop for films and television commercials. 'Ghost hunters' were called into the popular Old Wentworth Gaol in June 2006 and maybe 'sensed' someone called Eddie who was jailed a century-plus ago for stealing a horse.

It's almost as if Wentworth has evolved into the colourful, thriving town it originally set out to be. It was once the busiest inland port in New South Wales (NSW). So promising a site, it was even considered as a potential site for Australia's capital city.

"It's the oldest town in the region, older than Broken Hill, older than Mildura," says Carmel Chapman with Wentworth-pride. Carmel is a staff member\_of the busy Wentworth Visitor Information Centre (VIC) located in the new Council building which is also home to community meeting rooms, the Red Cross opportunity shop and gallery for various art or photography exhibitions such as the travelling '1 in 100 year drought' show.

"Captain Charles Sturt first arrived here 23rd January 1830 and said it to be a wonderful place to live – one river brings the summer rain, the other brings the winter rain.

"He named the Murray River on that day after he turned into the Darling from\_ the Murray at the confluence point", , " Carmel claims with well-read authority before rushing off to help a 60-something couple work out the best route to the 'station country' following the old mail routes. She's one of the best sources around for knowledge on where bitumen roads end and where the dirt roads start.

Many visitors, including internationals, come to the Wentworth area – which includes the smaller towns of Dareton/Coomealla, Buronga, Gol Gol and Pooncarie – to travel outback to visit unique sites such as the Mungo National Park World Heritage Area and Lake Victoria. The Coomealla Sporting Club's championship golf course is popular with visitors to the area, as is Trentham Estate's restaurant and cellar door located a short drive past Gol Gol.

Despite the boom-time, Wentworth still runs on Wentworth-time. Cars meander down wide streets on speed limit. There's no need to rush!

It's a good life. Over recent years, a number of visitors have returned to live. Wentworth property prices have soared. A cottage overlooking the river can cost \$500,000 plus. A house with prime Darling River views was rumoured to have recently sold for nearly \$1million.

A July 2006 advertisement in the local paper, the 'NSW Standard Bulletin', promised a houseboat to be a "heart clutcher" (for just \$150,000 too). For many who visit or live here, this is what Wentworth is all about - a boat, the rivers, fishing, swimming and long days doing not much at all.

"Are you alright for maps and brochures?" Carmel asks the couple as they make their way to head off along the overlanders tracks. "Have a good trip!"