

Darling River Run: Motorbikes are Being Prepared!



The Darling River (left), fed by heavy rains in Qld, joins the Murray River at Wentworth

In Australia, the Darling River is one of those iconic rivers that captures the imagination through its history, folklore and contemporary politics.

Its headwaters rise in southern Queensland - in an area now known as the Darling Downs. If you trace it back to its furthest source through its longest contiguous tributaries, it's the longest river system in Australia at some 2800km. Most sources say the point of its designation as the Darling River is the confluence of the Barwon and Culgoa Rivers just west of Brewarrina in NSW. From there the river flows some 1400km through the far northern NSW town of Bourke, then south west through Wilcannia and the Menindee Lakes to its confluence with the Murray River at Wentworth in south western NSW, becoming our third longest river. Several sources, probably with tourism in mind, prefer to follow the river further along the Barwon to Walgett in northern NSW as a starting point of the Darling River Run.



Murray Darling Basin

The Darling and Murray Rivers are the principal components of the Murray Darling Basin, a catchment area that covers about 14% of mainland Australia. It contains over 40% of all Australian farms, which produce wool, cotton, wheat, sheep, cattle, dairy produce, rice, oil-seed, wine, fruit and vegetables for both domestic and overseas markets. It has an important place in the cultural heritage of all Australians and includes many significant natural heritage features. Needless to say, the control and distribution of its water resources engender fiercely contentious disputes among politicians, farmers, pastoralists, environmentalists and the public.

Undertaking the Darling River Run, however, is more about imbibing the folklore of the river: its earlier history, its role in opening up more of Outback Australia, its seductive lure to discover the mysteries of the early pioneers and, indeed, the indigenous people who were nourished by it for thousands of years before the Overlanders and paddle steamers.



Crossroads on the Darling River Run

From the late 1830s, the Overlanders, driving their cattle and sheep from across NSW, had to cross both the Darling and the Great Darling Anabranch to reach South Australia.

The earliest mail runs emanating from Adelaide were reaching Wentworth in the 1860s along the north side of the Murray and over the Anabranch. First on horseback; then two-wheeled carts; and finally stage coaches. It wasn't long before the mail runs were stretching from Wentworth along the banks of the Darling to Wilcannia.



Darling River at Bourke

By the late 1800s and into the 1900s, the Darling River was a major transport 'highway' for shallow-draft paddle steamers dragging wool barges behind them; and carrying their cargo to the railheads of Morgan or Murray Bridge. Bourke, Wilcannia and Wentworth were major, bustling port town.

Eventually, other more reliable means of transport replaced the steamers. The recurring problem was the inconsistency of the river

flow. When the rains were plentiful, the river flowed and even flooded to the extent that steamers could travel "across country" to the wool sheds. In other years the river became a dry ribbon winding through the scorched plains of the NSW Outback. The change could occur so quickly that steamers were sometimes stranded on dry land.

The Murray-Darling river system was one of the most highly populated areas by Australia's indigenous people prior to white colonisation. There is archaeological evidence at Lake Mungo adjacent to the Darling that Aboriginal people had settled there as long as 40,000 years ago; excavations along the lower Murray revealed 8,000 years of habitation, as well as clear technological development. Indigenous-built fish traps can still be seen on the river near Brewarrina.

While the river struggles to run freely as droughts strangle it and water users demand too much of it, it still stands out as a great mythical serpent beckoning the traveller to the vastness and mystery of the "wild west" Outback. The Darling River Run is the key to that experience.



Darling River near Pooncarrie

The Australian poet, Henry Lawson, paid this tribute to the river:

The Song of the Darling River
1899
Henry Lawson

The only national work of the blacks was a dam or dyke of stones across the Darling River at Brewarrina. The stones they carried from Lord knows where—and the Lord knows how. The people of Bourke kept up navigation for months above the town by a dam of sand-bags. The Darling rises in blazing droughts from the Queensland rains. There are banks and beds of good clay and rock along the river.

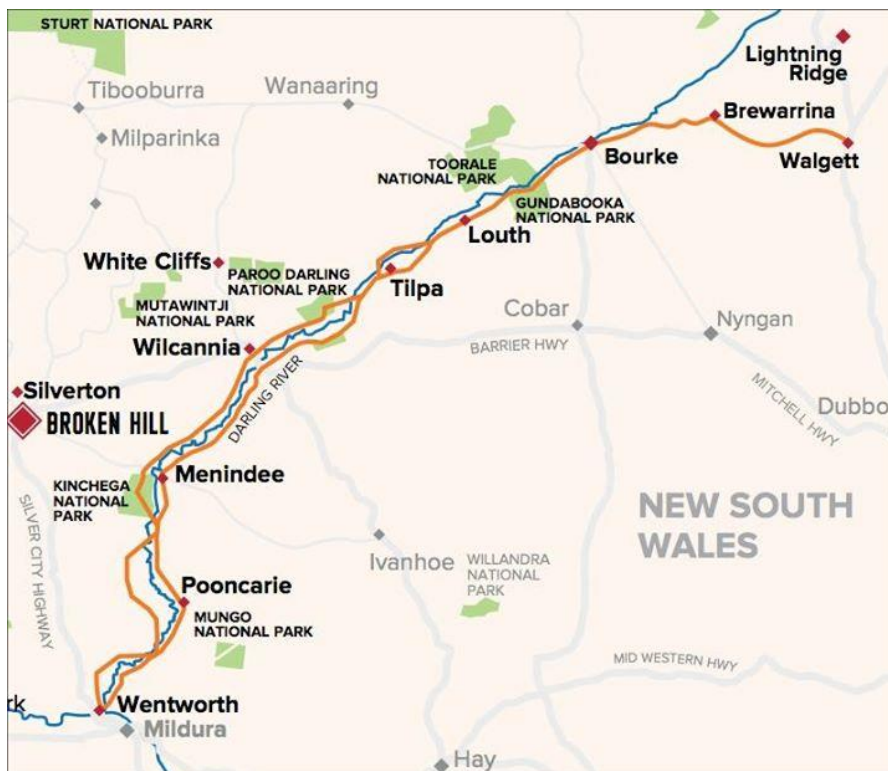
THE SKIES are brass and the plains are bare,
 Death and ruin are everywhere—
 And all that is left of the last years flood
 Is a sickly stream on the grey-black mud;
 The salt-springs bubble and the quagmires quiver,
 And—this is the dirge of the Darling River:

I rise in the drought from the Queensland rain,
 I fill my branches again and again;
 I hold my billabongs back in vain,
 For my life and my peoples the South Seas drain;
 And the land grows old and the people never
 Will see the worth of the Darling River.

I drown dry gullies and lave bare hills,
 I turn drought-ruts into rippling rills—
 I form fair island and glades all green
 Till every bend is a sylvan scene.
 I have watered the barren land ten leagues wide!
 But in vain I have tried, ah! in vain I have tried
 To show the sign of the Great All Giver,
 The Word to a people: O! lock your river.

I want no blistering barge aground,
 But racing steamers the seasons round;
 I want fair homes on my lonely ways,
 A peoples love and a peoples praise—
 And rosy children to dive and swim—
 And fair girls feet in my rippling brim;
 And cool, green forests and gardens ever—
 Oh, this is the hymn of the Darling River.

The sky is brass and the scrub-lands glare,
 Death and ruin are everywhere;
 Thrown high to bleach, or deep in the mud
 The bones lie buried by last year's flood,
 And the Demons dance from the Never Never
 To laugh at the rise of the Darling River.



While we - 5 of us - are aiming for early October 2015, that timing will depend on weather. Road closures are put in place if it is or recently has been raining.