



WEEKEND AWAY
ECHUCA

Letting off steam

Paddlesteamers, good food and a cosy bed and breakfast provide **Andrew Stephens** with a relaxing getaway.

Echuca is the sort of place – the wharf, the history, the *All the Rivers Run* atmosphere – that sings not only of 19th century muddy frontiers but also of the quaint and cosy.

Even as the paddlesteamers of today choof along the Murray and cheerfully toot their comings and goings, the mind tends towards Devonshire tea, snuggling up and relaxing.

One of the loveliest things about the Steampacket Inn is its nearness to Echuca's port. This fine, old building built in the early 1870s is nestled on a corner of the esplanade just opposite the entrance to the wharf area. This ensures a lazy stay, if desired.

Echuca touts itself an attractive place to visit to escape the depths of a Melbourne winter: the sun reputedly shines more often (heard that one before), the temperatures are a little warmer during the day and there is a lovely glow about the place.

Alas, we leave Melbourne on a sunny day and it is drizzling by the time the train hits Seymour. It is cold and moist for our three-day stay in Echuca and so we are forced to take refuge in restaurants, cafes and our cosy room at the Steampacket. Ray and Irene Boquest run this cute little bed and breakfast in precisely the way all such places should be managed: they are welcoming but unobtrusive, efficient but very friendly and make a stay trouble-free.

Our first-floor room is on the wharf side of the building (riverside is also available) and it is snug, bordering on small.

One entire lazy afternoon (and another late morning) is spent lolling on the soft queen-size bed reading magazines, dozing and gazing out at the cloudy skyscape, which would suddenly turn frosty blue with sunshine.

The tall, lace-curtained windows are perfect for such idling; we don't use the television but the coffee and tea provisions are welcome.

We don't spend all our time indoors, of course. Echuca's port has much to offer, although we find the museum (\$12 entry) an untidy place whose potential is sadly unrealised.

The promise of "working" steam machines that we pay to see is met on the day we visit. A much better investment are the paddlesteamer trips heading up or down river (depending on the water levels, which locals insist are always low).

We take the Emmylou on a 90-minute cruise and enjoy even more the friendly atmosphere on the one-hour trip aboard the Canberra, a smaller, cuter boat.

We have fabulous food at Oscar W's, Leftbank and the delightful Black Pudding deli, but are equally impressed with the excellent breakfast spread that Irene and Ray put on in the parlour at the Steampacket each morning.

Coming downstairs into this cosy room – set



Quaint ... the Steampacket Inn mixes modern comfort and period charm.

with lots of tables for couples or families – is like entering quaint English tearooms. There's a tea and coffee station, a dresser arrayed with a great selection of cereals and breads and another dresser with muesli, yoghurt, delicious fruit compote and fruit salad.

Irene sets it all out in charming old crockery and tureens, while the motley tea cups and saucers are delightful one-offs. When you are ready, she takes your order for a cooked breakfast of bacon and eggs.

There are only 10 rooms and a loft apartment at the child-friendly Steampacket and we find it a quiet and peaceful place to stay. Our room is typical bed and breakfast style – lots of creamy colours, cushions and lacey bits – but the soft furnishings perfectly match the era of the place.

The Steampacket has character and our room had lots of it, down to the lovely Queen Anne chairs and bedside tables, the lamps, the lofty ceilings and the high, comfortable bed.

The ensuite is very compact – you couldn't swing a cat – but functional and with all the essentials. But we would have dearly loved a bath (and some wardrobe space), but this isn't a spa sort of place. Instead, we are happy to loll about

or sit on the mismatched sofas in the charming lounge room upstairs that looks out towards the river and the tops of the beautiful river red gums.

VISITORS' BOOK

Steampacket Inn

Address 37 Murray Esplanade, Echuca.

Bookings 5482 3411, 5482 3408 (fax) or email enquiries@steampacketinn.com.au.

Getting there 250 kilometres north of Melbourne.

How much Weekend for two including breakfast from \$135-\$185 a night.

Summary An atmospheric B&B in the heart of the historic district that is cosy and friendly.

The verdict 16

The score: 19-20 excellent; 17-18 great; 15-16 good; 13-14 comfortable, well-run. All weekends away are conducted anonymously and paid for.