BOURKE – WEATHERING THE STORM – By Stephanie Jackson

An introduction to the colourful and diverse characters of the Australian outback town of Bourke, north-western NSW

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A deluge of negative publicity routinely rains down on the NSW outback town of Bourke, and travellers pass the word around that it is a place to be avoided, for here, rumours contend, there is a threat of violence, of robbery, and of being accosted by drunken and aggressive aborigines. The town unquestionably has its share of social problems, but Bourke is regularly on my travel itinerary, and each visit is a memorable one, thanks to the welcoming and hospitable people - both black and white – who, with pride not shame, call this dusty town on the edge of the outback their home.

Most are eager to chat about their community in a passionate attempt to counter negative perceptions of its aboriginal population, and they will point you in the direction of the most interesting places to visit.

You might see boarded up pubs, a broken shop door or window, and a derelict house here or there. But if you are touched by a hint of gloom – or even fear - at your first glimpse of Bourke, don't turn around and make a hasty retreat, for with your eyes and mind open, you will inevitably discover there is more to Bourke than the winds of fear.

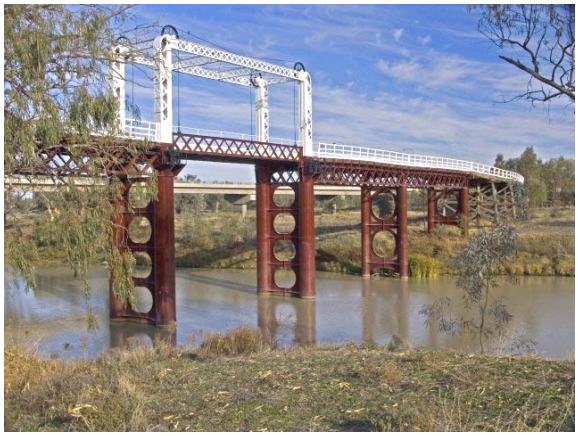
Wander from the town's centre and you might stumble into "the reserve", an urban area that is the sole preserve of aboriginal people, and where a few burnt out cars and vandalised houses epitomise the negative aspects of the town that are prominent in many people's minds. Some of the reserve's residents offer a less than hospitable welcome to uninvited visitors, both black and white, and the response to the intrusion in 2006 of an uninvited television crew was a storm of protest that saw a barrage of stones and bottles pouring through air drenched in verbal obscenities.

Even for Bruce Turnbull, an aboriginal who left Bourke to study for a law degree but returned to the town that he regards as "the best place on earth", the reserve is a 'no go' area. He readily admits that it is the anti-social behaviour of a minority of aboriginal people, fuelled by feelings of being alienated from society, that has created the town's adverse reputation. But his beaming smile and positive vision of the future rapidly obliterate any hint of despair as he talks with passion about the town, about his people - the Barkandji, and about his work of encouraging young men, those at the forefront of social disruption, to respect both their traditional culture and their modern day community.

Call into his office in the heart of town and he'll tell you not only about the problems Bourke faces and his optimistic dreams, but also about Mount Gundabooka National Park where his ancestors once lived and hunted; of the caves where the local Ngemba people sketched fragments of their daily existence on rugged stone walls; and of the Darling River that has played an integral role in aboriginal lives since the dreamtime.

Born from streams that flow across the flood plains of western Queensland, the Darling, in her wildest moods, inundates the landscape with her murky waters that can temporarily become 80 kilometres wide. Seasonal floods routinely caused chaos and devastation until high levee banks were constructed to protect the town.

But today, cringing from the effects of drought and from the demands of irrigators who have changed the face of the once arid plains that lap at the town's perimeter into an oasis of greenery, the Darling is little more than a lazy stream.



The paddle steamers that once made a laboured journey along the river and returned to southern ports weighed down with the golden fleece that brought wealth to the outback, have been relegated to the pages of history.

Today, only the Jandra with her cargo of tourists shatters the river's calm waters. And as this modern day paddle boat chatters along her meandering route at a slow and leisurely pace her captain, John Mahony, has plenty of time to chat. After 45 years in the merchant navy, he made a dramatic decision to start a new life in the outback. His first glimpse of Bourke was, he recalled, a culture shock that almost sent him scurrying back to the coast, but the outback, even to a man with the sea coursing through his veins, offered unexpected pleasures.

With his eyes scouring the murky water ahead for any sign of danger, he'll tell you, as he steers the Jandra's course, about the weir that holds back a 47 kilometre stretch of water; about the best spots for fishing and picnicking; and about the brief history of the Jandra that was constructed by a local farmer from plans drawn in the dust on the floor of his packing shed.

Terns, gulls, spoonbills, herons, egrets, ducks, and pelicans flutter from the Jandra's path; black and whistling kites ride the breezes high above; and with a deluge of white plumage, corellas make their screaming departure from the contorted branches of ancient river red gums.

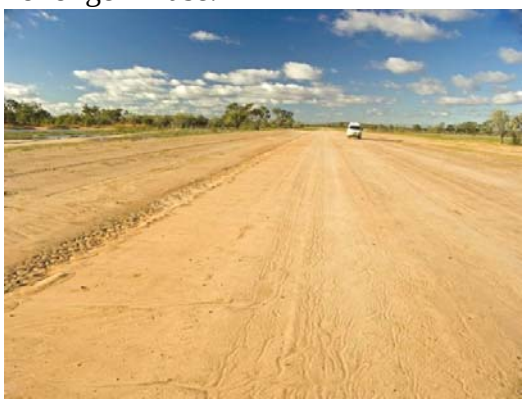
It is the 160 species of birds that call Bourke home that stir the passions of Trevor Shields, the manager of Kidman's Camp, a caravan park near where the Jandra is moored, and if you join him on an early morning bird watching walk along the riverbank, you're sure to be infected with his contagious enthusiasm. He is passionate about the town too, for in his opinion "there's nowhere better than Bourke". It's a town of determined people, he said with a faced wrinkled with that same determination, people who will not allow their town to succumb to the social problems it continues to face, and who will never throw their hands up in despair and admit defeat as other outback communities have done in the face of similar racial problems. "And it's not nearly as bad as the media portray it", he added.

Few know Bourke in more intimate detail than Stuart Johnson who operates the Tourist Information Centre and Mateship Country Tours. His passion for the town is so intense that if you accompany him on his tour you'll barely get a word in edgeways as he chatters on incessantly about the town and its people who, he said, "have intestinal fortitude, and are the guts of the nation". They are, he said proudly, resilient people who have weathered floods, droughts, and adversity in all its forms, people with vision who have transformed the arid outback plains into a vast green landscape, who have seen their crops wither, teetered on the brink of bankruptcy, and yet survived.

With a commentary tinged with humour, he'll introduce you to the Bourke Shire that covers an area the size of Denmark, yet has a population of merely 4,500 people, 75% of whom are aborigines.

In the town with its wide tree lined streets, where immense flocks of galahs flutter from lawns, and red tailed black cockatoos feed on berries of shading white cedar trees, lie the 1868 hospital, the 19th century courthouse that was the first maritime court in Australia, and the 1880 post office where the history of Bourke is revealed in a colourful mural. The winds of change that have blown through Bourke have seen the 29 hotels in which outback travellers quenched their thirst in the 19th century, reduced to only three.

The wharf, where the first paddle steamer arrived in 1859, and the last departed on its historic journey in 1931, has been replaced with a new structure. And the ornate bridge, constructed in 1883 with a central section that was raised manually to allow boats to pass, is no longer in use.



The Darling may today appear as merely a shallow stream, but she continues to bring tenuous prosperity to the town. But it's a prosperity, Bruce Turnbull said, that has come at a high price, for the advent of large scale irrigation projects some 30 years ago has doomed the Darling that the Barkandji people had, for millennia, treated with respect and reverence, to a slow and lingering death.

Stuart Johnson and those who have made the desert bloom see agriculture as the key to Bourke's economic survival, and denounce those who question current farming practices and who blame irrigators for the river's demise as people who are looking to the past with an irrational hue to their passion for the land and for the river.

But while the storm of debate continues to rage, grapes ripen in vineyards: limes, oranges, and mandarins hang among emerald orchard foliage like gaudy Christmas baubles; plantations of jojoba, from which a valuable oil is extracted, thrive; and on cotton bushes that have flooded across the plains, snow white tufts of fibre flutter in the gentlest of breezes.

With visits to the cotton gin, to Bourke's vast orchards, and to the vineyards all on Stuart's tour itinerary, the intimate and fascinating details of outback agriculture that, depending on your perspective, have either brought the outback a miracle or inflicted it with a curse, are revealed.

Man-made attractions play an increasingly important role in Bourke's tourist industry, but it is the people of the outback who are the town's most valuable asset, and you'll find them, both black and white, at the pub, in the shops, in the cafes, in the town's park, and by the river. Strike up a conversation, even with a stranger, and you're sure to hear of the changing rural landscape and the social problems that have seen Bourke routinely lashed by a verbal tempest. You'll discover, too, that beneath the grey clouds of gloom that at times hang over the town, the winds of hope, accompanied by a deluge of determination, are blowing up a storm of optimism across the community. And if you take the time to both look and listen, you'll discover that there is more pleasure to be found in this outback oasis than its distorted reputation would have you believe.