

# 2019 - 2020 Annual Report

Murray River Region Tourism Ltd. ABN 12 150 739 647

www.visitthemurray.com.au www.murrayregionaltourism.com.au

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## **Chair's Report**

Murray Regional Tourism (MRT) continues to be the key cross border driving force for supporting and growing the visitor economy across the Murray region.

The strength of the region's visitor economy is a shared responsibility with many industry and government stakeholders working together to position the region for success by providing high quality and memorable visitor experiences.

These partnerships have never been more important than the past 12 months and I would like to acknowledge our 13 local government partners, two state agencies in Visit Victoria (VV) and Destination NSW (DNSW), regional tourism organisations and Destination Riverina Murray (DRM) along with the range of other State and Federal government entities with whom we work.

The year has been defined by two halves, the first extremely positive with record visitation, expenditure, employment and the second of tragic consequences with the combined impacts of Australia's most active bushfire season along with the devastating impacts of the global coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19).

In the challenging position we find ourselves there is still some cautious optimism for the future, and I am pleased to provide the outcomes of the 2019-20 activities, achievements and financial results, in this year's Annual Report.

Our focus for the year has remained on continuing to drive and grow visitation, length of stay and expenditure for the region and it is pleasing to highlight the positive results achieved across the Murray region.

For the year ending March 2020 the region welcomed record visitation with 6.5 million visitors enjoying the wonderful array of experiences that include nature based, food and drink, golf, arts and cultural, river offerings and great country hospitality throughout our fabulous region. Having diverse and attractive tourism products is essential in assisting our vibrant marketing efforts.

These visitors spent a record 11.4 million nights in the region up over 13 percent on the previous year and contributed over \$2 billion in direct expenditure which was up 7.5 percent and importantly supported over 18,000 tourism related jobs.

Following the COVID-19 global pandemic in March this year the region's performance suffered a severe decline with the positive ground gained over the preceding nine months masking the direct impacts of the last quarter which has resulted in the region welcoming a total of 5.3 million visitors for the year ending June 2020, a 15 percent decline for the comparative period in the previous year.

The flow on effects resulted in the reduction of direct expenditure of over 18 percent down to \$1.63 billion together with a considerable reduction in employment.

Australia is gaining control of this pandemic and we will recover, and in doing that, think about how we can and should change things. The social contract has changed and the collaboration that has always been a part of our success is now widely acceptable. Interestingly, it took a pandemic to achieve this.

## Chair's Report (cont.)

COVID-19 disruption continues to challenge boards, organisations and governments and for all of us in the visitor economy we have to look at the whole coronavirus circumstance that's caused a discontinuity and ask what opportunity does that present.

Importantly, the pre COVID-19 results provide a strong foundation from which the industry and community can rebuild and remain competitive with the support of government and our collective partners.

# In addition to the strong visitation performance, we have continued to focus on the implementation of the strategic objectives across our four pillars outlined below:

- Product Development
- Advocacy & Leadership
- Regional Marketing
- Industry Development

#### Of particular note are the achievements to highlight across the respective areas which include:

- The launch of the new digital platform that has been a significant advancement for the organisation, region, stakeholders and the visitor. The platform has facilitated a significant uplift in visitation and user experience and resulted in six destination sites being developed and I thank all those involved in this innovative project
- As part of completing the Visitor Services Transformation strategy an implementation plan was developed and provided to our partners. This has created a pathway for both whole of region and destination specific strategic opportunities to be implemented aligned to available resources
- Significant input to the Victorian Regional Tourism review and advocacy for NSW and Victorian state government funding on behalf of our stakeholders and industry
- Crisis management and response support across bushfire, blue green algae and ongoing cross border work in relation to COVID-19
  - Brand refresh for the Murray that provides the foundation for the collective efforts for all partners across the region together with our two State tourism organisations
    - Murray Best Shared cooperative marketing campaign which was delivered in partnership with DNSW and DRM with the support of our stakeholders and industry which provides a framework for future whole of region campaign delivery
      - Extensive public relations activities in partnership with Visit Victoria, DNSW and DRM which continues to deliver outstanding results for the region
        - Implementation of a range of dedicated training and capacity building activities both directly through our organisation along with facilitation through relevant industry related partners.

It has been more important than ever with the ongoing COVID-19 crisis to continue to review and adapt our financial and governance systems. The Board undertook a review of the strategic plan and some scenario planning to minimize our risks so that we are prepared. Mitigating risks is an exercise in protecting the business in the longer term as we learn to live with coronavirus.

## Chair's Report (cont.)

Through our diligent financial modelling and planning, I am pleased to report the organisation contained our operating costs and delivered a positive performance across the financial year which will ensure we are well placed to support our stakeholders and industry as we look to recover in the future.

Additionally, the Board developed a specific 12-month COVID Recovery Strategic plan that provides a framework with key priorities for the organisation that together with our stakeholders we can collectively focus on. This plan will constantly be monitored and reviewed to ensure the business continues to be flexible and adapts to the everchanging operating environment in which we find ourselves.

MRT continues to benefit from our energetic, dedicated and highly skilled Board and I thank them for their continued support and commitment to the region over the past twelve months. My fellow Board Directors provide constant inspiration and share a vision for our region that ensures our success.

On behalf of the Board I would also like to acknowledge the strong contribution of our Chief Executive Officer, Mark Francis, in these extremely demanding times, together with his small and passionate team of Donna Russell, Nancy Minicozzi, and Rachel Minogue.

Our cross border approach is only as strong as the sum of the parts, and the foundation of the organisation is to build on our collaboration to ensure the region's ongoing success.

It is always a privilege to work with my Board colleagues, our CEO and team, stakeholders and our industry partners. Together we will work on the Murray region visitor economy recovery program, as we continue to rebuild the sector on the back of COVID-19 to ensure the industry can once again grow and prosper.

I am incredibly proud and very humbled to be involved in this fabulous region where the mighty Murray River plays such a vital part as a lifeline to so many communities.

**Wendy Greiner** Chair Murray Regional Tourism



## **Board and Team**

## Murray Regional Tourism Board



WENDY GREINER Chair



GREG ROBERTS Deputy Chair



JOHN MCCLINDEN Local Government Appointed Director



NATASHA CALLEWAERT Skills Based Director



JOHN DALTON Skills Based Director



PHILIP SMITH Skills Based Director



CAMERON SUTTON Skills Based Director



MARK FRANCIS Chief Executive Officer

## Murray Regional Tourism Team



DONNA RUSSELL Marketing Manager

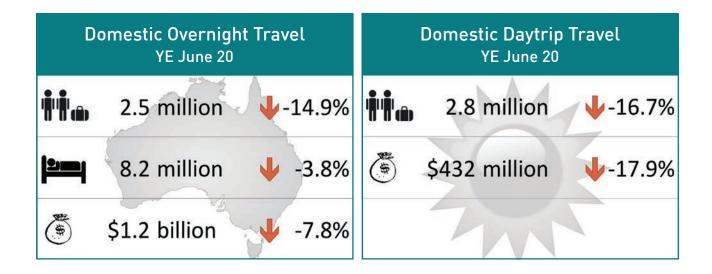


RACHEL MINOGUE Digital Project Manager



NANCY MINICOZZI Administration Assistant

| TOTAL TRAVEL |               |    | International Overnight Travel<br>YE March 20 (change on YE March 19) |              |               |               |
|--------------|---------------|----|---|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| <b>.</b>     | 6.4 million   | -> | 0.2%  | ii.          | 59.4 thousand | 1 🔶 -14.9%    |
| <u>ا</u> سط  | 10.3 million  | 1  | 5.2%  | <b>ا</b> صدا | 1.5 million   | → 0.0%        |
|              | \$1.9 billion | 1  | 7.0%  |              | \$78 million  | <b>1</b> 3.9% |



## Advocacy and Leadership

## Highlights



### Goal

To provide clear direction for growth and development in the Murray region through strong leadership, advocacy and industry engagement.

### **Strategic Priorities**

- Invest in research which has shared benefits for our regional partners and stakeholders.
- Create opportunities to access funding and investment in key strategic projects for the region.
- Ensure water management within the river system considers the direct impact it has on visitation to the region.
- Increase the profile of telecommunications capacity gaps within the region and the adverse impacts on business and the visitor experience.

### Key Outcomes

### Strategic Research

Our strategic research program remains a highly valued and important element of our work, providing our industry partners with current information to make informed decisions. This research also forms the foundation for our advocacy work with both the Victorian and NSW governments. It demonstrates why they should invest in the visitor economy and highlights tourism's economic value to the Murray region.

### During the year we delivered the following research programs:

- Murray region and sub region visitation quarterly reports and profiles
- Bushfire economic impact assessment
- Detailed source market visitation and purpose of visit report
- COVID-19 economic impact assessment
- COVID-19 anticipated visitor economy recovery report

#### Crisis Response

During the year the region was hit with bushfire, blue green algae, dust storms and COVID-19, all of which had significant impacts on the tourism industry. As part of our crisis response framework, we continued to provide leadership and support to our local government and industry partners in responding to these crisis events and forward planning for recovery.

As part of our work, we activated the region's Crisis Management Committee in conjunction with our local government partners, engaged with industry through workshops and surveys, enhanced our communications processes and improved engagement with emergency services agencies to better represent the industry.

In addition to commissioning specific research, we also played a lead role in development of the Victorian Economic Recovery Strategy, Victorian Tourism Industry Council Visitor Economy Taskforce, Murray Socio Economic Activation Taskforce and Southern NSW Bushfire Regional Recovery Committee.

### **Other Activities**

#### As part our advocacy and leadership role we also:

- Facilitated regional workshops and the Victorian Government's engagement with stakeholders and prepared a detailed response to the Victorian Regional Tourism Review, ensuring the Murray region and the cross-border approach are embedded in the state's future strategic approach.
- Successfully secured long term funding support for the region from the NSW Government in partnership with local government and Destination Riverina Murray this partnership remains critical to delivering our goals and objectives for the region.
- Continued to lead various whole of region strategic development initiatives.
- Developed regional responses to a range of government reviews and strategies.
- Supported both local government partners and the private sector with state and federal grant applications to secure investment in key strategic infrastructure projects.
- Advocated on key issues impacting the visitor economy including workforce development and planning, river management and telecommunication blackspots and service deficiencies.
- Participated in a range of government working groups representing the visitor economy including the Victorian Tourism Industry Council's Destination Policy Committee.

## **Regional Marketing**

## Highlights



42,201

Leads to industry from The Murray – Best Shared marketing campaign



232,202

Views on visitthemurray.com.au



**22** Media stories with reach over 10 million and exceeding \$600K Advertising Value Equivalent



**\$1,429,301** In bookings via

bookeasy.com.au

Journalist and influencer familiarisations



**350** Golf leads gained from Presidents Cup promotion



**65** Professional content and editorial images created



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International Mentoring Program participants

### Goal

To be a dynamic marketer of the Murray region in partnership with key shareholders and the industry.

### **Strategic Priorities**

- Consolidate use of the regional digital platform as a conversion tool.
- Facilitate integrated partner programs which create leverage and improve return on investment.
- Implement an always on digital marketing campaign for the region and share the learnings with stakeholders.

### **Key Outcomes**

### New Consumer Website

In August we launched our new consumer website **www.visitthemurray.com.au**. The new website combined with an improved approach to developing seasonal content has achieved excellent outcomes as follows:

| METRIC         | 30 JUNE 2019 | 30 JUNE 2020 | IMPROVEMENT     |
|----------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Users          | 70,849       | 74,580       | <b>↑</b> 5.27%  |
| Sessions       | 84,650       | 93,668       | <b>10.65</b> %  |
| Page Views     | 128,845      | 232,202      | <b>1</b> 80.22% |
| Organic Search | 37,448       | 46,461       | <b>1</b> 24.07% |
| Bounce Rate    | 67.16%       | 54.46%       | <b>↓</b> 18.91% |
| Exit           | 65.34%       | 39.75%       | <b>↓</b> 39.17% |

### The Murray – Best Shared Spring Campaign

Delivered in partnership with Destination NSW and Destination Riverina Murray, The Murray – Best Shared spring campaign which was our major campaign for the year. The campaign aimed to:

- Strengthen the appeal of The Murray as a short break destination amongst younger travellers
- Ignite consideration for younger audiences to visit The Murray
- Gain market share within the target audiences
- Increase visitor spend.

Launched in August and running for eight weeks, the campaign adopted a blend of paid media (digital and social) and public relations activities to reach target audiences. As part of the campaign shoot we created 65 professional content / editorial images and four videos, as well as hundreds of raw images and hours of raw video for future use.

### The campaign proved highly successful with high level results as follows:



## Regional Marketing (cont.)

#### **Public Relations Program**

This year we worked very closely with the public relations (PR) teams at Destination NSW and Visit Victoria to secure and capitalise on PR opportunities.

The Murray – Best Shared campaign PR program reached 10,372,030 people and achieved an Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE) of \$529,644. PR activity included 6 media familiarizations (famils), one social influencer famil, two content partnerships and 134 media and social placements.

Campaign highlights included:

- Content partnership with QantasLink Spirit magazine in conjunction with Visit Albury Wodonga, Echuca Moama Tourism and Visit Deni, delivering two three-page editorial print features
- Content partnership with Nomadasaurus adventure travel bloggers showcasing the region's nature and food and drink offerings, delivering two blogs, 72 Instagram posts and stories, six Facebook posts and eight Twitter tweets
- Print feature in Australian Traveller magazine and on their website as part of their 100 Ways to Holiday Here This Year promotion with Tourism Australia.

Outside of dedicated campaign activity, other significant PR achievements included:

- Four live weather crosses (three full program and one segment) showcasing Albury Wodonga, Echuca Moama and Yarrawonga Mulwala to a national audience on Channel 9's Today show
- Two 9 News weather integration pieces featuring Yarrawonga Mulwala and Swan Hill
- Qantas magazine inclusion highlighting the Boatel in Mildura as part of their 52 travel ideas feature
- Multi page feature in Caravan World showcasing the region from the Upper Murray to Echuca Moama
- Eight feature stories on www.campermate.com.au promoting the region from the Upper Murray to Mildura Wentworth.

#### **Consumer Shows**

In December we partnered with Visit Victoria to showcase the region to a domestic and international audience as part of The Melbourne Lounge at the Presidents Cup golf event in Melbourne.

A selection of the region's golf courses were featured in the lounge's large scale imagery and profiled in the statewide A Golfing Great brochure. We also had the opportunity to promote the region to approximately 40 golf professionals via a presentation at the Professional Golfers Association (PGA) breakfast and build a database of 350 golf enthusiasts for future marketing activities.

## Regional Marketing (cont.)

#### **Business Events**

During the year we continued to generate brand awareness and support the region's business event sector in partnership with Business Events Victoria and Destination NSW's Regional Conferencing Unit.

Through these partnerships, business event facilities and services were promoted to corporate, government and association event employees in the ACT, NSW, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria via sales calls and attendance at the Asia Pacific Incentives and Meetings Event (AIME), Regional Victoria Showcase, Corporate Professional Assistant (PA) Summit and Association Forum National Conference.



## **Industry Development**

### Highlights



### Goal

To improve the quality of tourism experiences in the Murray region through industry education and support.

### **Strategic Priorities**

- Use technology to deliver high quality training programs matched to identified industry gaps.
- Centralise engagement with stakeholders and operators to protect the organisation's intellectual property.
- Develop the leadership capacity of the region through training and awards programs.

### Key Outcomes

### **Tourism Manager Forums**

Our quarterly Tourism Manager Forums continued to be an effective means of engaging with our local government tourism leaders to share information and facilitate region wide projects.

> We made several enhancements to their format this year including empowering tourism managers to nominate to be the forum host destination, adding famil activities to increase tourism managers' knowledge of other destinations in the region and incorporating more collaborative workshop style sessions into the program.

> > While our first forum for the year was held in the traditional central location of Echuca Moama, subsequent forums where held in Mildura and Deniliquin. Thank you to Mildura Rural City Council, Mildura Regional Development, Wentworth Shire and Edward River Council for supporting these forums. Our final forum for the year was held via video conference due to COVID-19 restrictions.

## Industry Development (cont.)

#### Industry Education and Training

Our Communicating with your customers in hibernation and reactivation webinar series achieved record attendance with just over 120 participants tuning in to each webinar and receiving much positive feedback from tourism operators.

The webinar series was a key part of our COVID-19 reactivation program, providing businesses with important tips for communicating with their customers in the hibernation and reactivation phases of the COVID-19 pandemic and helping them reset, restart and restore their business.

#### **Tourism Awards**

This year we supported 20 tourism businesses, including 6 new entrants, in the national, state and regional tourism awards, achieving 10 gold, 6 silver and 2 bronze awards

#### Australian Tourism Awards

The River Deck, Albury – Bronze

#### **NSW Tourism Awards**

The River Deck, Albury – Gold

Cadell on the Murray Motel Resort, Moama – Silver

Deni Ute Muster, Deniliquin – Silver

#### Victorian Tourism Awards

Riverboats Music Festival, Echuca – Gold and Hall of Fame

Murray Offroad Adventures, Mildura - Gold

Cactus Country, Strathmerton – Bronze

### **Regional Tourism Awards**

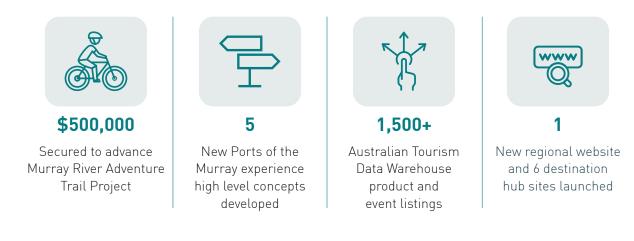
Rich River Golf Club, Moama – Hall of Fame

Cactus Country, Strathmerton – Gold Cadell on the Murray Motel Resort, Moama – Gold DC on the Lake, Mulwala – Gold Deni Ute Muster, Deniliquin – Gold Mantra Hotel, Albury – Gold Murray Offroad Adventures, Mildura – Gold The River Deck, Albury – Gold All Seasons Houseboats, Mildura – Silver Corowa Distilling Co. – Silver Great Aussie Holiday Park, Bowna – Silver Rich Glen Olive Estate, Yarrawonga – Silver

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## **Product Development**

### Highlights



### Goal

To facilitate investment in infrastructure, new products and experiences that revitalise the Murray region's tourism offering.

### **Strategic Priorities**

- Leverage the region's digital assets to increase conversion ratios.
- Assist the development of touring routes and product clusters aligned to product strengths.
- Oversee implementation of the Murray River Adventure Trail Stage One.

### **Key Outcomes**

JIMMY LONG'S

#### **Digital Development**

This year we completed and launched our new overarching **www.visitthemurray.com.au** website, developed in partnership with Berrigan, Edward River, Federation, Gannawarra, Moira, Murray River and Swan Hill councils. The new website structure provides a central content source for the whole region

In addition to having a regional website with destination hubs, content was significantly enhanced by engaging a content writing specialist and improving our search engine optimisation strategy.

The website and hubs have been developed with a visitor centric focus and this approach has proved extremely beneficial with the sites' traffic increasing considerably over the year.

## Product Development (cont.)

### **Experience Development**

We continued to engage with our local government partners and the region's tourism businesses to support product development initiatives including assisting a range of destinations with strategic infrastructure projects and private sector investors with new and enhanced projects.

### Murray Farm to Plate Action Plan

A range of initiatives were delivered that continue to provide opportunities to improve the region's food and drink offerings and create better connections between producer stories and the visitor.

### The range of work included:

- An audit of hero food and drink producers and experiences, providing prospects to leverage state agency and regional activities
- Developing food and drink brand messaging and hero content for integration in marketing programs
- Creating pathways for food and drink producers to engage with commercial buyers and consumers through programs such as the Good Food and Wine Show

### Murray River Adventure Trail (Stage 1)

As a game changing, strategic priority project for the region, the Murray River Adventure Trail continues to be advanced.

With support from the Victorian Government's \$500,000 commitment, GHD was appointed to undertake a comprehensive package of works including detailed design and alignment of the trail, cultural heritage studies, interpretative experience identification and development, marketing strategy development and signage.

This stage is scheduled for completion in late 2020, enabling further consultation with the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments to identify funding for implementation.

### Ports of the Murray River

Ports of the Murray River is a key whole of region strategic project that has steadily progressed during the year. Various local government partners and other stakeholders have undertaken work to develop high level concepts for the:

- Yarrawonga Interpretive Centre
- Tocumwal Aviation Project
- Echuca Moama Bridge Arts Project
- Koondrook Arbuthnot Sawmill
- Wentworth Riverfront Murray and Darling Junction Project

## Product Development (cont.)

#### Visitor Engagement Strategy Implementation

As part of the region's Visitor Engagement Strategy, we developed an integrated implementation plan that creates a pathway for regional initiatives and enables our local government and destination partners to progress identified strategic opportunities aligned to local capacity.

Key projects advanced in implementing the Visitor Engagement Strategy include:

- funding secured for whole of region collateral development and regional brochure stand in Visitor Information Centres (VIC)
- funding secured and procurement completed for dedicated itinerary planning tool on consumer website
- first satellite VIC in the region accredited under the new VIC guidelines at Rochester
- mobile VIC pilot in progress with Moira Shire Council investing in vehicle and associated implementation program
- scoping work commenced for a hub VIC design pilot in partnership with Echuca Moama and District Tourism.





### Murray Regional Tourism Board

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