



TAKING THE WATERS

MOREE'S HEALING ARTESIAN SPRINGS ARE THE CURE FOR MODERN LIFE. MELISSA SWEET MAKES A SPLASH IN A SLICE OF OLD EUROPE IN THE OUTBACK.

The first wave of smugness hits as we approach the check-in desk at Sydney Airport early one winter's morning, and sail past the line of people queuing for the plane to Hamilton Island. No such hassle awaits those bound for the lesser-known holiday destination of Moree, a wealthy agricultural town about 630km north-west of Sydney, and we congratulate ourselves on avoiding the hordes.

Not that everyone had shared our enthusiasm. Why on earth would you want to go there? That was the typical puzzled reaction of friends when we announced our plans.

It is surprising how many people haven't heard of Moree's wonderfully warm artesian waters. They were first tapped with a bore in 1895, and a public pool complex has operated on that site ever since.



BATHING BELLE: Melissa kicks back and relaxes in artesian heaven.



SHEER POETRY: Moree's bush poet, Ron O'Mullane, swims at the complex every day.

It's changed a lot from the days when men and women were strictly segregated but retains the no-frills feel of an old-fashioned municipal swimming pool. There are two communal baths, running at 37 and 39 degrees during our visit, and an Olympic pool that is heated during winter.

According to Moree Hot Mineral Baths' operators, the waters gushing into the complex are thought to have last seen the light of day around one million years ago, when they fell as rain in south-eastern Queensland. They've been flowing ever since through the porous rocks of the Great Artesian Basin and picking up the minerals and salts which make for such a blissful soak.

Our four days in Moree provide ample opportunity for pondering – as we 'take the waters' at all hours of the day and night – what is so special about our choice of holiday.

It is not only the magical sense of escape that arrives when you lie back in warm water, watching the mist drift off into the freezing temperatures above, and gaze into the stars of a crisp winter's night or the soft light just before dawn (most days the baths open from 6am till 8.30pm).

It is also the sense of satisfaction that comes from discovering a bargain – while the spa experience in plush resorts can cost hundreds of dollars, you can enjoy a luxurious soak in Moree for around \$5, or even less with a multiple entry ticket.

Moree is also special because it is where a little bit of Europe meets the outback. We can't understand most of the announcements over the speakers because they are in various languages, reflecting the baths' popularity with those of European heritage.

When I ask one woman where she is from, she instinctively replies "Italy", before correcting herself. Actually, she has lived in Sydney for 36 years and brought up her children and grandchildren there. She and her husband are regulars at the baths, which help the shoulder injury he sustained working on their flower farm.

Gordana Klicic, formerly of Bosnia, has

"THEY'RE A REMINDER OF THE POWER OF THE COMMUNAL EXPERIENCE."



taken a 17-hour bus ride from Geelong, and is glad to have found some relief for her aching back. She's also enjoyed socialising. "It's very friendly," she says. "Everybody looks for company and for talking. I have spoken to people from Turkey, Greece and Italy. I have also talked with Australians."

And that is the real beauty of the baths: the way long-standing regulars mix with the new arrivals: it's a far cry from the days when the pools hit the headlines for refusing entry to Aboriginal people, a ban which came to end in 1965. These days, the vibe is most definitely multicultural.

Sometimes it feels as though you are watching a European plaza, where the locals are content to sit around all day, chewing the fat about nothing in particular.

"I like it best when you get the Serbs and the Croatians singing the national song," says Ron O'Mullane, Moree's own bush poet. "It's lovely to hear them singing rather than fighting."

Ron swims and soaks at the complex every day "rain, hail or shine", and is sure that is why he looks so trim and fit at 74. "Really, this is a melting pot," he says. "You are never lonely."

Most visitors come for the water's healing properties – many swear of its benefits for complaints such as arthritis and ageing – but the baths are also good for the spirit.

They're a reminder of the power of the communal experience. At a time when so much of our public space and activity is being privatised, the simple act of sharing the waters with a bunch of strangers seems somehow profound.

And it is a rare treat to be able to enjoy gentle contemplation, without advertising or marketing pitches screaming for your attention and dollars. The only commercial push is the announcement, every morning, that soup is now being served in the canteen – for the princely sum of \$1 (including a bread roll). It seems a poignant reminder of a time when the world was not ruled by shareholders.

It may not be to everyone's taste, but our little group was delighted that the ambience

- ▶ Moree is about nine hours' drive from Sydney and six hours from Brisbane. There are also 13 flights landing each week from Sydney.
- ▶ Visitors have more than 20 motels and caravan parks to choose from, with most accommodation pitched towards budget travellers. There is one four-star motel (The Albert).
- ▶ With wide pavements, tree-lined streets, a handful of upmarket boutiques and gift shops, an art gallery and many heritage buildings, it's a pleasant town to wander around.
- ▶ There are some very decent cafes and restaurants, as well as several pubs offering standard counter meals. The RSL has a bowling green, and there is also a golf club.
- ▶ Nearby attractions include wineries, bush walks and guided tours to what is billed as "the largest and most productive pecan farm in the southern hemisphere".
- ▶ For more information, contact the Moree Visitor Information Centre: (02) 6757 3350.

is definitely daggy. Many of the regulars are comfortable to flop around in dressing gowns and clearly feel no pressure to make a fashion statement.

Nor is there any sign of the body beautiful mafia. Fuller figures are most definitely the vogue, and nobody seems the slightest bit self-conscious about this.

Indeed, the only chill in an otherwise soothing holiday is the news that Moree Plains Shire Council is planning a multimillion dollar redevelopment of the baths. What a shame if they are turned into something that resembles every other architect-designed example of modern blandness. Here's hoping they retain that special character that made us feel so smug about choosing Moree, and not Hamilton Island, for our holiday. ■