

MY TOWN

GOOLWA

It's just 80 kilometres south of Adelaide but this small town at the mouth of the Murray has no time for the hustle and bustle of the big smoke. In fact, the people of Goolwa are on a mission to get us all to slow down. **Max Anderson** meets six laid-back locals. Photography by Claudio Raschella.



PHIL BALL

SURF INSTRUCTOR

"I've been surfing here all my life; I started when I was seven and now I'm 62. Goolwa's surf can be extremely good and extremely frustrating. It's all about the weather and, like a lot of southern Australia, the weather changes very quickly. Today, for instance, the onshore winds are turning the surf to mush but in a few hours it could come good again.

Goolwa has great sandbar breaks and because the beach is so long – it's about 20 kilometres from Middleton Point to the mouth of the Murray River – you get plenty of breaks to yourself. It's perfect for beginners, with soft and gentle whitewater close to the beach, which means youngsters can stand while they're learning out in the surf.

Of course, a lot of what I teach at Ocean Living Surf School [olsurfschool.com.au] is about safety – I'm a fully qualified lifesaver. The Goolwa Surf Life Saving Club was voted South Australian Club of the Year in 2017.

I teach about 1000 people a year, from age five upwards. I usually get kids standing on their board in their first two-hour lesson. After that I tell them, 'Now it's up to you to continue your studies – I want you to surf every day.'

My oldest beginner was 72. He was out all day and came back with knees like jelly. But when he finally stood up, he threw his hands in the air and yelled 'Yahoo!' before falling over backwards. He said, 'That's it. I'm happy now. I can tick that off my bucket list.'

I love the wildlife here. Early in the morning, I see birds flying to The Coorong lagoon and it's the most glorious sight. Out the back, we sometimes have whales come alongside the boards. And no word of a lie, I recently saw a dolphin jump clean over the head of a surfer.

As for sharks? Well, I've only seen one shark in the water – and he was a car salesman from Victor Harbor."

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MARGARET GARDNER

SLOW-MOVEMENT ADVOCATE

"Cittaslow is a movement that started in Italy in 1999 and literally translates to 'slow city'. It's about communities taking the time to consider their environment, heritage and food producers, as well as slowing down, living well and improving quality of life.

In 2007, Goolwa became the first Cittaslow town outside Europe and over the past 12 months it's really become part of the community. There are only about 7000 people in Goolwa but more than 160 individuals, families and businesses are Cittaslow members [cittaslowgoolwa.com.au].

In Goolwa, we're big on volunteering, recycling and keeping our beach and streets clean. On the second and fourth Sunday of the month, we have the Cittaslow farmers' market. From October to April, we have an event called At the Wharf, where people get together with friends, dance to local bands and drink local wines. And in November, we have our annual Smoke Off, where teams compete to produce the best smoked meats and fish.

Valuing the town's history is a big part of Cittaslow and Goolwa has a lot of history. It's where the Murray River meets the sea so paddle-steamers would unload their cargo at Goolwa Wharf and a horse-drawn train would transfer it to ocean jetties at Port Elliot and Victor Harbor. Today, Goolwa Wharf is one of only two places in the world where you can board a steam train and a steam-powered paddle-boat."



OLAF HANSEN

PIPI PROMOTER

"Twenty years ago, I was a chef in South Australia's Clare Valley. I've travelled all over the world but the first day I laid eyes on Goolwa, I said, 'Wow, I reckon I could stop here.'

I started two restaurants in Goolwa. Both of them are still going but after 35 years in hospitality, I'd had enough and went into semiretirement at 60.

The bike came along two years ago. The idea was Tom Robinson's, the director of Goolwa PipiCo. [goolwapipico.com]. He said, 'Hey Olaf, I've got this bike and I'm going to put a barbecue on the front. I want someone to ride around on it promoting pipis. You want to do it?' Stupidly, I said yes.

I guess I'm like their ambassador. It's a lot of fun, especially when I do festivals. I wear my Hawaiian shirt and a broken straw hat and people really love it. The pipis – or cockles, as they call them here – are barbecued then I toss them in butter, lemon, tarragon and garlic. I tell people they're 'Goolwa oysters' because you slurp the meat out of them like an oyster.

Goolwa PipiCo. harvests about 400 tonnes of pipis a year from the company's lease on The Coorong. Amazingly, they still bring them up by doing the 'cockle shuffle'. You know the shuffle? It's like doing the twist in the wet sand – you sink up to your ankles, start twisting and the pipis come to the surface.

Back when Tom bought his first fishing licence in 2002, he was selling 90 per cent of his pipis to fishermen to use as bait. Today, he's selling 90 per cent to restaurants all over Australia and around the world. So everyone's happy – except the fishermen because the price of their bait has gone up!"

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JULIET MICHELL

HOTELIER AND CHEF

"My partner, Deb Smalley, and I wanted to start a bed and breakfast. In 2003, we came down to Goolwa from Adelaide and bought a derelict pub, The Australasian, which opened in 1858. But it was a bigger project than we thought – the planning and restoration ended up taking six years.

While Deb was researching the history of the place, she came to me and said, 'Did you know about this?' It turns out that I have a great-great grandfather who was the mayor of Goolwa and he had held meetings in this building. With that connection, I guess it was meant to happen.

The Australasian Circa 1858 [australasian1858.com] became something much bigger than a B&B; in fact, I've had to step into the role of chef. I've really enjoyed that – especially making desserts – perhaps because I used to be a jewellery designer, which is all about detail.

Goolwa is unique in that it has both the river and the sea so there's a lot for our guests to discover, including the wine region of Langhorne Creek. We're across from Goolwa Wharf so I think we're more river people. Deb used to sail with her dad when she was younger and every now and again she has these grand plans to buy a houseboat and head up the Murray. But we're just so busy."

BAIN PEDLER

SKIPPER

"The Veenstra family has been running cruises from Goolwa to The Coorong for 50 years [coorongcruises.com.au]. I've been with them for 42 years, working as a captain and guide ever since I got my skipper's ticket in 1979.

The Coorong is the largest permanent breeding ground for pelicans in Australia and an important site for migratory birds. As part of the cruise, we see Aboriginal middens that date back thousands of years and we do an interpretive walk through the dunes and a bush-tucker trail. After that, visitors pretty much have a 150-kilometre-long beach all to themselves.

There's a breach in the sand dunes about 10 kilometres from Goolwa – that's the Murray mouth. Sandbars and high tides make it pretty challenging for skippers and that's why the paddle-steamers unloaded in Goolwa: the mouth was just too dangerous.

The region was made famous by *Storm Boy*. I remember them filming the original in the main street in 1976. Forty years later, we found ourselves ferrying the crews out to The Coorong to film the second version [to be released this year].

I'm only ticketed to skipper boats on the river, not the ocean, but that includes paddle-steamers like the *Oscar W*, which still operates off the wharf. I love the old paddle-steamers. Compared to modern vessels, they're slow, cumbersome and hard to turn with their big barn-door rudders. But you'll never see anything more beautiful."



ANGELA ANDREWS

DISTILLER

"I started out as a year 6 teacher in the Riverland region [of South Australia] and then I was a teacher librarian. Now I distil single-malt whisky so, no, it's not exactly a typical career path.

My husband, Gareth, and I moved to Goolwa to start a family in 1996. We always wanted to brew English-style ales so we taught ourselves all-grain brewing. In 2006, we opened The Steam Exchange Brewery at Goolwa Wharf.

Back then, we had one of only three craft breweries in South Australia; we're now one of 39 so we decided to diversify into whisky. I learned how to make single-malt last year and Gareth did a course with Bill Lark in Tasmania in 2011. I believe there are only a dozen women distillers in Australia but most of them are making gin – and I'm pretty sure none of them used to be a librarian!

We still make beer but now the shed is called the Fleurieu Distillery [fleurieuidistillery.com.au]. It's a railway-goods shed, a lovely heritage-listed space that was built in 1879. It's the perfect place for people to kick back on a summer's day.

Whisky has given us new opportunities. The moment you bottle beer, it gets a shelf life; the clock starts ticking so you can only sell it locally. When you bottle whisky, the clock stops, which means we're able to export it. We released our first whiskies in 2016 and we're already getting inquiries from as far away as Texas.

We have almost perfect ageing conditions here on the wharf. The sea breezes at night cause huge fluctuations in humidity and temperature, which helps the spirit move through the wood of our old port and sherry barrels. Our whisky has a lovely salted-caramel complexity. We think the saltiness might come from the sea air – so we're literally exporting a taste of Goolwa.

We've got two boys, aged six and nine. It might be a bit unusual to have a mum who's a whisky distiller but they love life here – they're always taking off on their bikes, going to the beach, getting in the canoe and learning to surf and sail. They're certainly not going to grow up like suburban or city kids!" ●

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