



TRIP BACK IN TIME

IMAGES : ROBERT MCFARLANE

plants. Coorong roads frequently wind away from the main lagoon before a small rise can send the road curving back towards the main, larger watercourse, where languid pelicans patrol for fish.

With this delicate landscape our chosen destination, Peugeot's new economical and environmentally sensitive diesel 207 Touring provided the perfect transport and heading out of suburban Goodwood in Adelaide, with my sister Kathryn at the wheel, it took less than two hours to reach the Coorong. A shortcut through the backroads of the Adelaide Hills to the freeway at Hahndorf provided a vivid reminder of the suspension skills that have earned much of Peugeot's rallying reputation. In tight, often blind corners, the 207 Touring was exceptionally stable and comfortable with the 1.6-litre turbo diesel engine willing and responsive.

The Touring wagon is the third incarnation of the 207 to go on sale in Australia and follows the hugely successful launch of the hatch and coupe convertible CC. Two models are on offer – an 88kW/160Nm 1.6-litre petrol automatic XT priced from \$28,990 and the \$29,790 80kW/240Nm 1.6-litre turbo diesel manual XT HDi that *Driven* took to the Coorong.

As well as being physically longer than both the 207 hatch and the previous generation 206 Touring to enable a big load space of 428 litres with the split fold rear seatbacks in place – or a huge 1433 litres with both rear pews folded flat to the floor – the interior also offers a very light and airy cabin thanks to the standard glass panoramic roof.



AS THE FINAL RESTING PLACE FOR THE WATERS OF THE MURRAY RIVER BEFORE IT DISGORGES INTO THE SOUTHERN OCEAN, THE COORONG IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S SOUTHEAST IS A VERY DELICATE ENVIRONMENT THAT NEEDS TO BE HANDLED WITH CARE. FOR THE VISITOR WHO TREADS LIGHTLY HOWEVER, THERE ARE RICH REWARDS FROM THE QUIET SUBTLE ENVIRONMENTAL BEAUTY TO A HISTORY OF HABITATION THAT STRETCHES BACK THOUSANDS OF YEARS. FOR A TASTE OF THE EUROPEAN HISTORY OF THE AREA, POLTALLOCH STATION OFFERS A GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST AND SOME OF THE MOST HOSPITABLE ACCOMMODATION IN THE STATE. **ROBERT MCFARLANE** TOOK THE NEW 207 TOURING FOR A TRIP BACK IN TIME

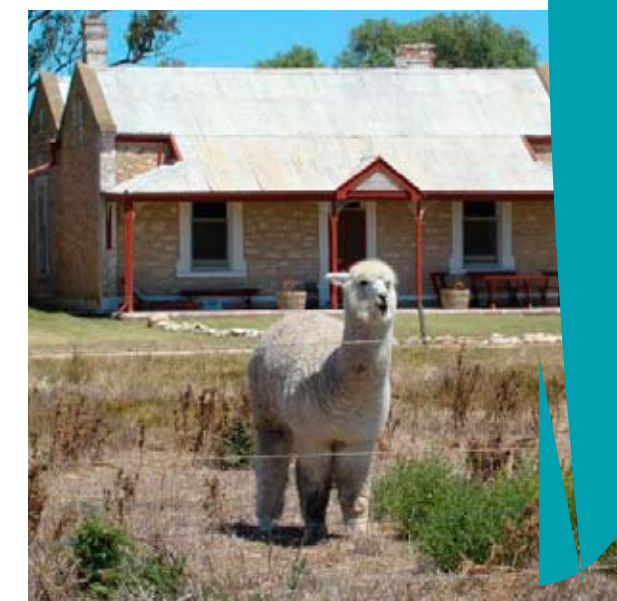
The Coorong is now firmly part of Australian's popular mythology, both as the setting for the poetic 1976 film *Storm Boy*, based on Colin Thiele's 1963 novel and the extraordinary, delicate lagoon that stretches over one hundred kilometres from the Murray Mouth to the southern coast, shielded only by sand dunes from the Southern Ocean.

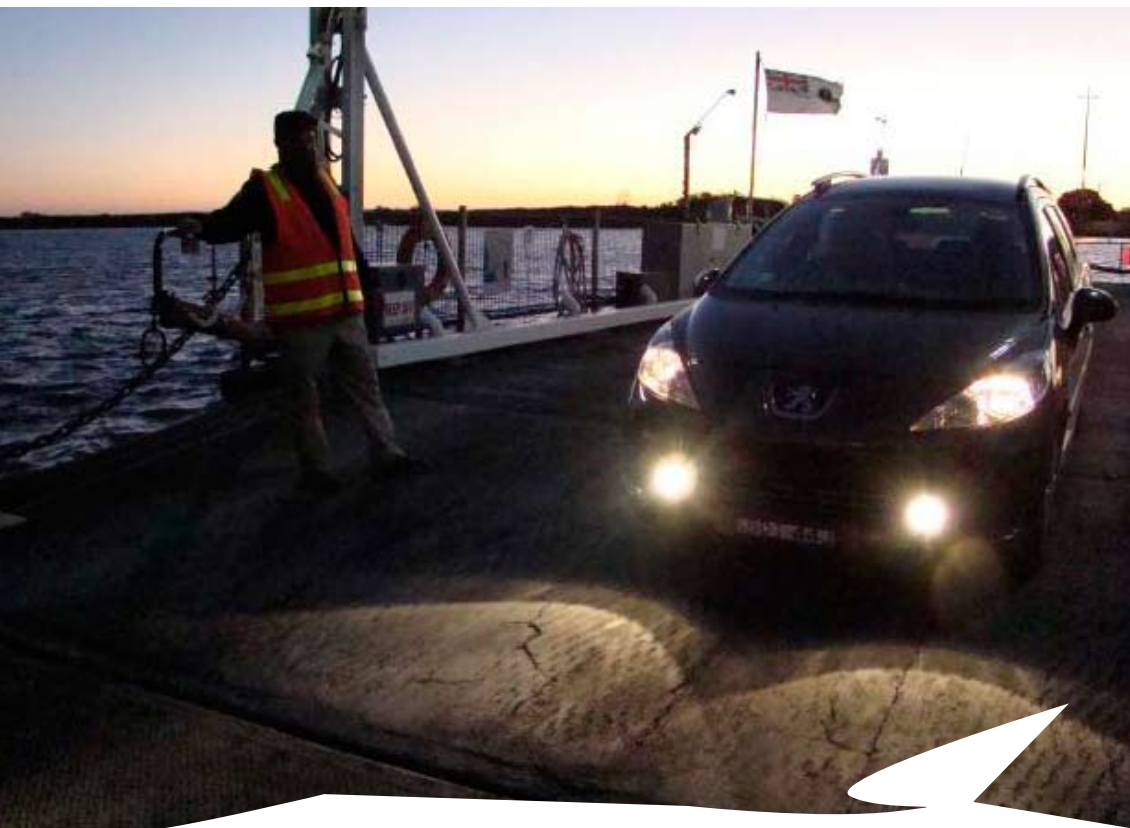
As the Murray River finishes its journey across southeast Australia and empties into Lakes Alexandrina and Albert, it adds cleansing, aerating pressure to the hundred and forty kilometre long Coorong that forms a discrete marine entity. It is an extended aquatic valve that, aided by several artificial barriers called barrages, balances the pressures between the freshwater lakes and the Murray Mouth.

'The Coorong and the lower lakes,' wrote Colin Thiele in 1997, 'provide a kind of

benediction at the end of the River Murray's long journey to the sea. Having meandered its leisurely way from the far highlands of eastern Australia, collecting contributions from the various tributaries on its travels, the river eventually discharges into the wide basins of Lake Alexandrina and Lake Albert. It then pokes about in all kind of inlets and reaches until it manages to escape through a variety of passages towards the Coorong, and so at last through its single outlet into the open sea.'

At first glance, the Coorong is not particularly picturesque with few recognisable, spectacular landmarks – rather its beauty surfaces in sublime, unexpected glimpses. Fields of pastel magenta grass lightly populated by vigilant kangaroos and brush grey emus can give way suddenly to blinding white salt pans lying just beyond dense colonies of native succulent





easily. Each cottage comes complete with a full kitchen with microwave, bed linen (including an electric blanket) and television with DVD and CD capability. It's a simple but well-appointed place to stay and the welcoming feeling extends to the grounds outside each cottage, which are occupied by those, gentle, amusing farm animals apparently designed by committee – alpacas. Paltaloch's more distant paddocks are populated by reclining, sleek, midnight black Angus cattle.

On the first morning Beth Cowan took us on a brief tour of the station, visiting Paltaloch's shearing shed (a cobwebbed window sill still carried the scrawled tally of one shearer), blacksmith and carpenters' workshops and a small general store for station workers dating back to the mid nineteenth century. Filled with potions and palliatives prescribed by the only nearby pharmacist – at Taillem Bend – the stone cottage was thick with the scent of an earlier, slower century.

One brown bottle offered a still legible, faintly typed remedy for a long forgotten, unfortunate dog – as prescribed by Taillem Bend pharmacist LH Manning, phone Taillem Bend 31: 'Paint the dog all over with a stiff brush leaving a narrow margin around eyes.'

Beth Cowan has kept each workplace in its original condition, consciously making little attempt to add cosmetic tidiness to poignant, workaday tableaux from the nineteenth century. Where cobwebs and dust have gathered over farm implements and carpentry tools, she allows them to stay. After several minutes in each room, a sense of the overwhelmingly hard nature of farm work emerges. But there were also puzzling still life arrangements. One corner carried a large coil of thick marine rope, a small red flag and a boat's rudder.

'That was the result of a bet for a hundred pounds made in 1927 with my husband Chris's great grandfather, Keith Bowman,' reveals Beth Cowan.

'Somebody bet him that he couldn't salvage the Dora Basset, a boat washed ashore on the ocean side of the Coorong. Keith found the boat, laid rails over the sand dunes, and pulled the boat across. It probably cost him a hundred pound in wages, though.'

Beth Cowan is very literate in her family's history at Paltaloch Station, and also the historic presence, and forced dispersal, of the Ngarrindjeri tribe for whom the Coorong is their ancestral home. Later that morning, at her suggestion, we drive south to Hacks Point

and visit Coorong Wilderness Lodge to speak with the indigenous guides. The lodge offers comfortable accommodation and 'wilderness and cultural tours to allow travellers to experience something of the daily lives of the Ngarrindjeri – following ancestral trails...and gathering cockles and crabs.' We are met by Gordon Rigney, an Aboriginal guide, who with great courtesy, quietly relates his experiences (and concerns) regarding the Coorong.

'When we were kids we gathered the swan eggs, but always only took what we needed. Now look at the Coorong. The lakes and the rivers are dying. Nature is going to teach us a big lesson.'

As the day lengthens, the lagoon shines with oblique light and birds appear to fly more slowly. Kangaroos materialise in the dense grass that grows to the edge of the bone coloured, unsealed road we are following along the Coorong's eastern shoreline. At dusk, we decide to take the long way back to Paltaloch, following the road around Lake Albert, past Point McLeay, to the Narrung Ferry. Operating twenty four hours, the ferry is drawn by cable across 'The Narrows' to the base of the historic Malcolm Point lighthouse. Once across it is only eight kilometres back to Paltaloch.

The current drought has been hard on the Coorong and its two lakes. With the added fact that irrigation water is being taken from further upstream on the Murray, the water levels of Lake Alexandrina, as it faces the Paltaloch homestead, are down considerably, exposing much of the homestead's jetty. Though delicately poised environmentally, the Coorong still survives, however, with bird life apparently plentiful and the lagoon still full of excellent Coorong mullet, several of which Beth Cowan prepares for our last evening meal at Paltaloch.

The Coorong is also a world wetlands treasure, being the southern destination for those epic, intercontinental migrations made by northern hemisphere waterbirds. A drive to the Coorong will reward the patient, curious and respectful visitor with a realisation that this is one of the most Australian of places, still guarding its history and beauty with care. [●]

www.paltaloch.com



There is an abundance of space in the rear for passengers or luggage for a weekend or a week away and access to the well-finished load space is either through the separately opening rear glass or by lifting the full hatch.

After a comfortable cruise down the Princes Highway, we eventually reached our accommodation for the night at the historic Paltaloch Station – first established in 1839 – perched on the southern shores of Lake Alexandrina.

Paltaloch proved to be an ideal base for surveying the Coorong, its two companion lakes and country life in southeastern South Australia. Run by Beth and Chris Cowan, Paltaloch offers comfortable, unpretentious country cottage accommodation with fine meals prepared, if required, by Beth Cowan.

Paltaloch Station offers three cottages with differing sleeping capacities. Overseer's Cottage sleeps seven, while Boundary Rider sleeps five comfortably. The third cottage, Station Hand, is the smallest but still accommodates four people

