We arrived on dusk under a moody sky. Outside the hotel were stables, a lock-up and wagons and I half expected a gun-slinging bushranger to saunter out. Originally an isolated frontier pub, the Overland Corner Hotel still has a feeling of yesteryear with its walls of fossilised limestone some 1.5 metres thick and floors lined with pine and local red gum. Today it’s a popular haunt for travellers who enjoy drover-sized meals in a unique setting, a massive beer garden, walls that just ooze history, a museum and a resident ghost. It’s a great place to enjoy a break from camp tucker.

The Overland Corner Hotel in South Australia is the oldest building in the Riverland region. Because of its rich and colourful past, it was purchased by the National Trust in 1965. Built on ‘Overland Corner’ site more than 150 years ago by the Brand brothers who migrated from Kent in England, the pub was once a popular resting place for drovers, cattlemen and steam boat captains.

One of the most famous visits was by the notorious bushranger Captain Moonlight who is said to have ridden into the front bar of the Overland Hotel after locking up the local copper in the nearby police cells. Maybe it’s why the bar lost its licence in the 1890s… It regained the licence 90 years later, but not before it was used as a church, school, dance hall and post office.

Not far from the hotel is the Overland Corner Walking Trail, which is a historic eight kilometre self-guided walking trail past old Aboriginal campgrounds. A brochure can be picked up at the pub. As it was getting late, we opted to drive out to the Murray River where rigs of all sizes can camp out. The hotel is right near the water so you need to take everything, loads of birdlife.

Inside one of the rooms at the pub hangs a spooky picture of the Brand brothers with what looks like a ghost looking over the shoulder of the first brother on the left. The hotel is notorious for its haunted activities and over the years patrons of this historic pub have reported strange noises, old time fiddle music and unexplained goings on. According to the current managers the hotel’s resident ghost is nicknamed ‘George’ and is a friendly ghost known to enjoy playing the jukebox. Whether or not you believe in ghosts the Overland Corner Hotel is a fascinating place. It’s just 700 metres from the Murray River where rigs of all sizes can camp out. The hotel is in the centre of the Riverland region and we stayed at the Lake Bonney Caravan Park. The park has prime position right on the lake with powered sites next to the water and loads of activities to keep young and old amused: a jumping pillow, karts, canoes and paddle boats to hire, and a jumping pillow out on the water, which proved to be a lot of fun.

The lake is named after Charles Bonney who saw it on the first overland trek from Sydney to Adelaide in 1838. Today it’s the centre of Barmera where activities such as windsurfing, canoeing and fishing are all favourite pastimes.

In summer the town’s population swells, but when we visited in September the town was quiet and the lake waters calm and solitary. That is, except for the mass of pelicans and other birds that call the lake home.

The wetlands here abound with wildlife. Head out and walk the beach before 9.30 am and you’ll inevitably see a teeming mass of cormorants, pelicans and other water birds herding fish and having breakfast. Sunsets and sunrises are spectacular over the lake and each evening we strolled down to the pier to watch the sun setting over the water with water birds and water skiers skimming over the surface in the distance.

On the Barmera foreshore there is an excellent playground for young children as well as the Rocky Page Museum Hall of Fame located in Banwell Avenue, which celebrates Australian country music.

The museum was built to honour the late Dean ‘Rocky’ Page, a well known local country music legend and displays the largest guitar in Australia, as well as home to the hand prints of famous names such as Slim Dusty, Smokey Dawson, Reg Lindsay and more than 150 other local entertainers. The museum is part of a plan to one day turn Barmera into the Tamworth of South Australia. In June each year the town celebrates with a country music festival.

Worth visiting is Napper’s Ruins, once the Lake Bonney Hotel, located on the north side of Lake Bonney. The Lake Bonney Hotel was built around 1863 by William Napper and during its heyday was a vital place for supplies. It was built for former workers of Cologla Station and consisted of eleven rooms that included a bar and a dining room that could cater for twelve people – this room was occasionally used as a dance space.

Just across the road from Napper’s Ruins is the entrance to the Loch Luna Game Reserve and for those who love basic camping amidst pristine nature this is the place to be. Despite its close proximity to Barmera, it still feels remote. There are no facilities here so you need to take everything, but if you love fishing, canoeing and just being near the water you will be in paradise. Loch Luna is a large area of calm, quiet backwaters with narrow creeks, shallow swamps and loads of birdlife.

It costs a small fee per night to camp at Loch Luna, which is paid at the self-registering station at the entrance to the park. Most sites are right by the water and have plenty of room for tents, camper trailers and big rigs.

If you fancy getting out on the water but don’t have your own craft, Loch Luna offers cruises into the back streams and creeks of this beautiful area. The unique Loch Luna is a platform boat that can cruise the river as well as going into the backwaters of the Murray River. Carl, the skipper, knows his history and is an informative and entertaining guide.
For a change of pace and to keep little takers amused head to the nearby Monash Adventure Park (featured in lots of travel shows). We enjoyed a barbeque here and had fun losing our kids in the maze although I think they were more impressed with the chocolate factory shop across the road. As we adults were with the wineries; this is wine country after all.

As you head out of Monash towards Renmark, Thachi Wines is a great place to pick up a drop or two. Or call into the historic Angove winery at Renmark, home to St Agnes brandy and one of Australia’s largest family-owned wineries. If you time it right in Renmark, (the first Sunday of each month), you can step back in time on board the PS Industry, a 100-year-old paddle steamer for a trip up the Murray.

Nearby at Berri we climbed the water tower, which offers one of the best look-out points of the town. Afterwards we drove out to see the mural underneath the bridge that depicts the Aboriginal heritage of the area.

If you enjoy wine tasting and walking, head 20 kilometres out of Barmera on the Sturt Highway at Kingston to the award winning Banrock Station Wine and Wetland Centre. There are three wetland walks that can be enjoyed here, ranging from 2.5 km to 8 km. As we arrived in the heat of the afternoon we opted for the shorter circuit.

Afterwards we enjoyed a cellar door tasting. The tempranillo is especially good. From the restaurant you can enjoy lunch with spectacular views of the vineyards and wetlands below – not a bad way to pass the afternoon.

For those that want to ramp up the adventure, not far from Barmera is Loxton where you can test drive a 4x4. The Barmera Sheep Dog Trials at Lake Bonney Caravan Park is a great place to watch sheep being herded. For us though, there were no more than 300 sheep run through the main course with steep climbs, deep mud and 40 km of tracks ranging from easy terrain to extreme sand, mud and stony climbs. Tony, the owner-operator of the business, has created something for everyone and if you don’t have your own 4x4 he’ll even take you for an extreme drive on the competition track in his V8 Landcruiser. The competition track is where seasoned drivers can test out their skills and their vehicles on a tight course with steep climbs, deep mud and sharp corners.

Back in town, and in a twist on the famed Spanish Running of the Bulls, Barmera is home to the running of the sheep. In 2013, thousands flocked (pardon the pun) to see more than 300 sheep run through the main street. The event is a lead up to the Barmera Sheep Dog Trials and the running of the sheep are held in October each year.

More information
Barmera Tourist Information Centre Phone: (08) 8558 2288
www.bareratourism.com.au

FACT FILE
Getting there
Barmera is 220 km north-east of Adelaide. If coming from Adelaide follow the Sturt Highway A20 to Riverton and follow the signs to Barmera. From Barmera, travel to Mildura along the Calder Highway. From Mildura we turned onto the Sturt Highway.

Where to stay
Lake Bonney Caravan Park, Lakeside Drive, Barmera
Phone: 1800 034 928

Attractions
Historic Overland Corner Hotel – www.overlandcornerhotel.com.au
Banrock Station Wine and Wetland Centre – www.banrockstation.com.au
Loch Luna Cruises – A three-hour cruise includes refreshments and a commentary. Departs from Kingston on Murray foreshore 9.30 am Sunday to Friday. Phone: 0449 122 271 or after hours (08) 8583 0155.

When to go
At seasons are good in Barmera with mild winters and warm summers. The country music festival is held in June each year and the Barmera Sheep Dog Trials and the running of the sheep are held in October each year.

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