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By Bus Through the Barossa

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By Steve Murray

While city touring is a fun way to understand a region's urban life, a trip into the surrounding countryside delivers more nuanced insights into the real lives of its people. For Adelaide, capital city of South Australia, that trip would be into the Barossa Valley.

The valley is only about 40 miles from Adelaide, and a drive east and north of the city along a roughly clockwise route can cover its major attractions in a day. An outing here affords refreshing glimpses of rolling hills and vineyards, opportunities to taste regional wines and a deeper appreciation for the resourceful settlers who made Australia.

The winding road out of Adelaide first follows the River Torrens through the thick red gum and pine trees of the Torrens Gorge. The river was an essential prelude to the city. Adelaide was established in 1836, only a month after the river – with its reliable water supply – was discovered. The signature river parks of Adelaide are owed to the River Torrens.

The road next turns north toward Williamstown and Lyndoch, and tours typically make a short side trip from Williamstown to check out the Barossa Reservoir "whispering wall." Engineers at the turn of the 20th century built the retaining dam wall in an innovative parabolic shape for strength, but the public soon discovered that this shape came with some extraordinary acoustics. Visitors scramble to each side of the dam to hear whispered conversations from their friends on the other side, 460 feet away. Tour groups produce a multilingual mixture of messages across the wall that continues right up to departure

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Lyndoch, one of the oldest towns in Australia, is farther north at the junction of Lyndoch Valley Road and the Barossa Valley Way. The bucolic town serves the needs of surrounding wineries and also is also a bedroom community for lucky Australians who drive to work in Adelaide each day. It's a good rest stop before continuing up to the wineries of Tanunda and Nuriootpa.

The Barossa Valley is one of Australia's oldest and largest wine-producing regions, home to more than 50 wineries. Although the Barossa is best known for its Shiraz, several grape varieties are grown in this warm, dry "continental" climate. Although the valley was also settled by English immigrants, the Barossa was largely developed by German Lutherans from the eastern Prussian region of Silesia (now modern Poland) who were fleeing religious persecution at home. Several hundred farming families arrived through Adelaide in the 1840s, moved into the valley and transformed it into the important wine center that it is today.

It took the farmers time to recognize that the valley was friendlier to wine grapes than to crops. They became vintners by trial and error, but they learned quickly and well. In 1844, three years after South Australia was declared a province, a case of the region's wines was delivered to Queen Victoria.

Tanunda and its wineries have a distinct German character, while nearby Nuriootpa is more English. Both towns are worth a stop for tours, tastings or a leisurely lunch. Because the warm valley temperatures are best suited to grapes that yield full-bodied wines, Barossa vintners originally focused on fortified and blended products.

The valley became known for its Shiraz and Grenache. Shifting wine tastes gave the Barossa some economic ups and downs, but when Shiraz again became popular in the 1980s, the valley thrived and many new boutique wineries were launched.

Today most Australian wineries have at least some presence in the Barossa Valley. Quality Cabernets, Rieslings and Chardonnays are also made here, but the grapes for these wines may be supplied from other parts of Australia.

AD FEEDBACK

Wine is the biggest attraction of a Barossa Valley visit, and many wineries offer tours to explain their production processes. While advance reservations may be required for independent travelers, a friendly guide is always waiting at the scheduled arrivals of tour groups. A stroll between rows of stainless-steel tanks, a tight squeeze into cool rooms of oaken barrels and a short lesson in fermentation chemistry always finish in a welcoming wood-paneled room with an unhurried wine-tasting session. Experts suggest wines for both the beginner and connoisseur and point out the distinctions of their local products.

The first winery stop sets the mood for the rest of the day, and if it isn't already lunchtime, it's probably getting close. Meals are served at many wineries and include must-try Australian dishes, such as kangaroo, complemented with the wines of the house.

Mengler's Hill is a spectacular vantage point from which to take in the entirety of the valley and its gold and green fields, and the sheep wandering near the hill give a pastoral feeling to the Barossa. Although it might be a perfect introduction to the valley, its location to the east of Tanunda makes the lookout a

better stop after the winery visits when the expansive view provides a mellow memory of the Barossa experience.

The Onkaparinga Valley Scenic Drive leaves the valley to the south and meanders through a continuous thread of smaller vineyards and farms until arriving at Hahndorf, just southeast of Adelaide. This is the oldest German settlement in Australia, and residents are careful to maintain its history.

Settled in 1839, the town is a popular outing for Adelaide residents drawn to its rural European atmosphere. Elm trees planted by early settlers line the main street in front of German exposed-timber fachwerk buildings. This is Australia, however, where an Aboriginal art gallery or gift shop can be found squeezed between a bakery and a tearoom. For anyone arriving in mid-afternoon, Hahndorf is a place to unwind with a sidewalk snack while rubbing shoulders with other day visitors and locals.

The return to the city is only a short drive through wooded hills. A day in the Barossa Valley gives Adelaide a character it didn't possess in the morning, though, and the city looks much different coming back.

WHEN YOU GO

Most Barossa Valley bus tours stop at two wineries, but in-depth wine-tasting trips are also available. A guided tour, designated driver or overnight stay is advisable for serious wine-samplers.

Half-day tours are available from as little as about \$60, but these trips might feel rushed. Full-day itineraries range from \$90 or \$126 if they include Hahndorf. Children are generally half price. Overnight trips, including lodging, start at \$350.

The seasons in the Southern Hemisphere are reversed from those in the north. Australian summer is December through February, while its winter is June through August. These are also the rainiest months.

General information about the Barossa Valley can be found at Adelaide Hills Tourism: www.adelaidehills.org.au.

Barossa Valley Tourism: www.barossa.com

Steve Murray is a freelance writer. To read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.

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