

Diamond in the dust

*You don't need a town when you've got a pub
as good as the Packsaddle Roadhouse.*

STORY + PHOTOS ANDREW HULL

There are two ways into the locality of Packsaddle. You can enter from the northern end, where the road leads to the villages of Milparinka and Tibooburra, or from the south, where the next town (and by far the largest in the region) is Broken Hill. The road is the Silver City Highway, and Packsaddle is located where it crosses the Packsaddle Creek, one of a network of ephemeral streams created from rainwater coursing out of the Barrier Ranges to the west, and the Koonenberry Ranges to the east.

Short-lived shadows form at the front of the west-facing Packsaddle Roadhouse complex, as birdsong from the nearby creek heralds another day for the remote locality.

"Our day usually starts around 6.30am with lots of cleaning up of dust," says Mia Degoumois, licensee and hostess of the Packsaddle Roadhouse. "We are always open at 8am, and sometimes it takes us that long to clean up the dust of the day before – but it is one of the things we pride ourselves in, and something that the community values."

Packsaddle was originally sited as one of a network of government stock-watering points located approximately a day's ride apart (16–40km, depending on the terrain), and typically sporting a shanty or bar of some description to provide refreshment for men, as well as horses. In the late 1800s the coach routes were busy with prospectors making their way to the Albert and Mount Browne

goldfields, to the north. Although early routes navigated north-west from the river port of Wilcannia, the road from Broken Hill was later favoured. In addition to gold, tin was also mined in the region.

The first Packsaddle Hotel, believed to have been built in 1887, is said to have got its name from a camel packsaddle that was abandoned by a scouting party from the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition. The saddle was reportedly hung in a tree when the camel grew too weak to carry it. The story goes that it was discovered years later by surveyors laying out the travelling stock route.

As the morning sun warms the landscape, the main artery of the highway begins to pump, and Packsaddle bears witness to a large part of it. Overnight guests who have taken advantage of one of the 16 available rooms will ready themselves and either continue their journey, or commence another day on the roads, amenities, fence lines, properties, or other endeavours that make up the fabric of the working day.

"Packsaddle's not a town, it's just a roadhouse, but it's still the central point for the community for around 100km around," Mia says. "You really see it when we have a Christmas tree and there are 60–90 kids from all the properties around. When you add in the tourists and workers who stop in, it is always busy."

Both the roadhouse and Mia are central to that sense of community. The site encompasses a shed and centre for the State Emergency Service (Mia is the local unit commander), a volunteer ambulance service (Mia is a volunteer ambo), and hosts regular visits and clinics from the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Fuel and water tanks, and the nearby gymkhana grounds (Mia is the publicity officer for the Progress Association) account for the remainder of the physical infrastructure, but the soul of the community stretches much further afield.

In order to get a real understanding of what lifeblood Packsaddle provides, you need to be there in the evening. This is the time when travellers abandon their transport, workers seek refreshment, and visitors hone in on the location for the food, drinks and company. Large barrels and edged gardens separate the car park from the spacious semi-enclosed verandah, furnished with lounges, large



Mia and Arn Degoumois; Packsaddle Roadhouse, on a lonely stretch of the Silver City Highway.





Diesel mechanic Jason ‘Tex’ O’Bryan, from Leeton, NSW, has a drink at the bar; the rustic dining room with its ‘bush chandelier’; Irish backpacker Ashley Dunne ready to serve; the spacious, semi-enclosed verandah.



share tables and chairs for alfresco dining, and at the west-facing, chest-high bar there are stools to sit and watch the stunning colours of an outback sunset.

The bar area is decked out with local pictures and historical artefacts, with country music playing in the background. Adjoining the bar, a doorway opens to a long, well-appointed room with half a dozen tables arranged against both sides of it. Soft light spills through wooden-framed windows, which provide a view westward through climbing roses and hanging jasmine, while the eastern wall is covered with an array of outback paraphernalia, including property stencils, saddles, hats, boots, shearing equipment and even an old packsaddle. At the far end, an enormous fireplace assures wintertime guests of an inviting and cozy place to catch up.

The centrepiece of the ceiling is a long, rectangular bush chandelier, with festooned lighting illuminating an array of old, worn, character-laden hats.

“When I look at these hats they tell me about this place,” Mia says. “Every hat has a story behind it; a story about the people of this place, about the work they do and the hardship they endure.”

Beneath another large, weathered and worn hat, and acting as a surrogate host, raconteur and welcomer, is Arn (Arnold) Degoumois, Mia’s husband and partner in the enterprise. Arn is a bushman who is willing to turn his hand to anything. Born and bred to the life, he spent years on an impressive list of Kidman properties learning the trade of stockman, fencer and all-rounder before meeting Mia near Innamincka. Within a season they were married, and after adding a handful more outback destinations to their back catalogue of ‘homes’, and a daughter and son to their family unit, caught wind of the Packsaddle Roadhouse being for sale and thought they would give it a go.

“That was 16 years ago,” Arn says. “Mia knew what she was doing; I had no idea. I said that I’d be happy to give it a go, but I’d be staying on the same side of the bar as I had always been, and that’s what has happened.”

This may be the case, but the committed work and effort over that time by both of them and their family has transformed the remote site into an important community hub and a well-managed asset for the whole region.

With a willing and eager team that includes all-rounder Leroy Henderson and bush cook Glenice Gilby, and a rotation of backpackers, such as Dubliner Ashley Dunne, coupled with strong family support (their children Jessi and Clinton, who work on stations like their father, come home regularly to support their mother at the roadhouse), Mia and Arn have forged, and one expects will continue to polish, a true diamond in the dust.

