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# THE ISLAND

PEOPLE AND PLACES OF PHILLIP ISLAND AND SAN REMO

## ACTING THE PART

SIMON RUSSELL RUNS THE SANNY SIDE  
CAFE IN SAN REMO, WHILE JUGGLING  
HIS CAREER AS ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S  
ACTING SUCCESS STORIES.

# Big fish in a big pond

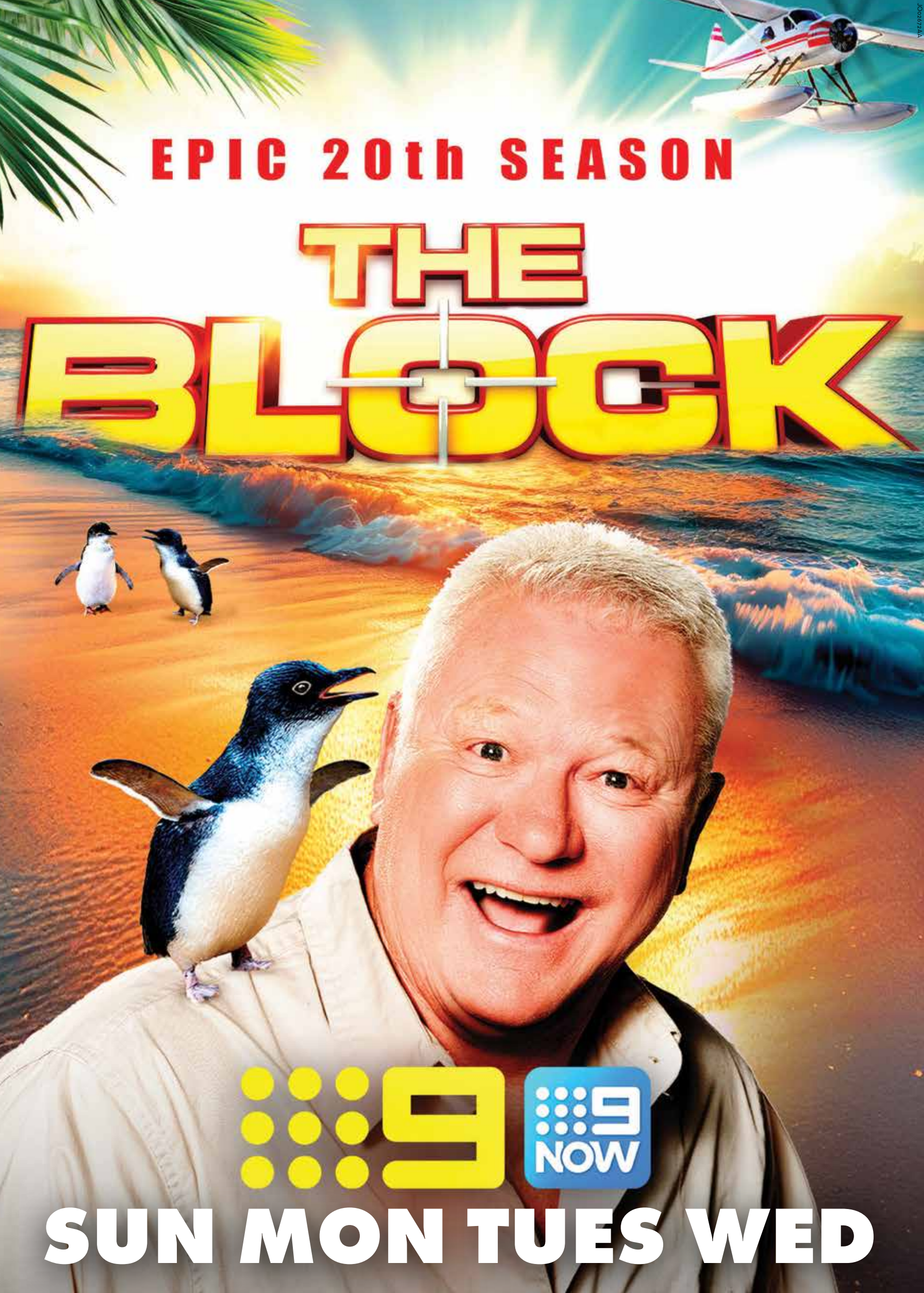
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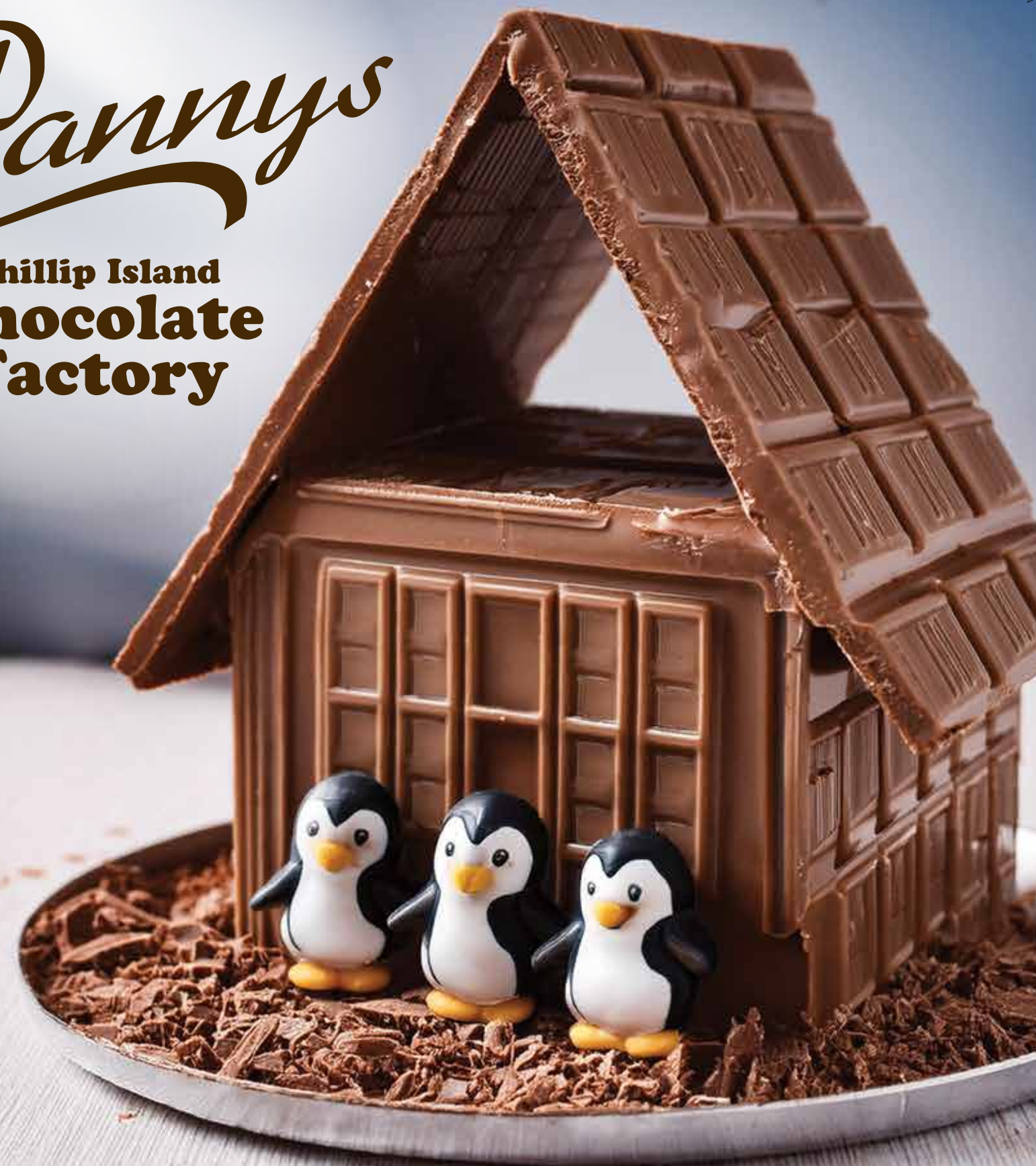
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# The Block on the Rock



BY SARAH HUDSON

After six months on Phillip Island, The Block Island went to air on August 12, after the Olympics broadcast.

At a media event to launch the show, hosts Shelley Craft and Scott Cam said the cast and crew had thoroughly enjoyed their time on the island.

"Everyone was so happy for us to be here," Scott said.

"For me it was a bit like the Truman Show, where I got out of my car at Woolies and someone told the whole island 'he's getting out of the car, action, go': 'hello Scotty', 'hi Scotty', 'have the chicken it's really nice'. People talked to me the whole way walking down the main street."

Shelley said she hoped they had "been honorary members of the community while we've been here".

"Regional living for me is the absolute winner. I love the sense of community you don't get in the cities."

House two contestants, a NSW married couple Courtney and Grant, said they loved shopping locally for "bespoke

styling" of their home, including at Tyde, Ivy Plant Studio and Linen House.

"We used the island as our inspo.

Before we started we thought everyone would do Hamptons or coastal, but we thought modern Mediterranean," Courtney said.

"We coined it 'moditerranean' to make it different, while still drawing on Phillip Island."

Courtney said she and fellow contestant Mimi often shopped together and they "loved the island vibe" and got to know many locals.

"When we got home I missed the island. Sydney is so go, go, go and the island is so relaxed, totally different to where we live, you appreciate nature more here."

House three contestants and the only duo from Victoria, plumber Ricky and IT worker Haydn, showcased their trademark colourful flare.

"We love Phillip Island but had no time off, so we didn't get to see much of it except in challenges," Ricky said, adding that he'd

been to the island many times for music festivals such as Pyramid Rock, as well as the MotoGP and friends' holiday houses.

Haydn said their colourful gos retro vibe was reflected in their house styling, which he described as a "fun factory".

Ricky said they wanted their house to have a holiday vibe, not just a "house you'd find in Melbourne then plonked on the island".

It's been a busy, sometimes frantic few months for the Block team, but that hasn't stopped them making friends across the island, including hosting a fun fair on the Cowes foreshore and inviting excited locals to a gala party earlier in the year.

The crew also visited many local beaches and organisations, as part of the show, including shooting promos at Berrys Beach and the National Vietnam Veterans Museum.

The Block Island property is located at 113-119 Justice Road, Cowes.

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Ricky, Courtney, Grant, Paige and Mimi*

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# Good Luck!

*From our team to yours*

The team at Ray White Phillip Island would like to wish all contestants of The Block 2024 the very best of luck!



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Lisa Hennessy, owner of Penny Lane Cafe, surrounded by Block contestants, Courtney from house 2 is on the left and Mimi and Kristian from house 5 on the right.

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Welcome to our eighth edition. When we started in December 2021, the world was emerging from the mist of the pandemic, and it felt like a good time to reassess what was important. Some of those promises we made to ourselves in the shadow of lockdown might have faded, but here at The Island, we've stayed true to our mission – to bring you amazing stories of people who call this island home.

This edition we meet Kara Williams, a fabulous foodie, who has turned her passion for food into an artform and used her love of fresh ingredients and Italian cooking to nurture her through some of the most difficult years of her life. Actor Simon Russell walks the tightrope between the life of an entertainer and a family man, all while running a local café with his mother. And Kate Crock and Lars Olsen give us two different perspectives on appreciating our wildlife and how important it is to the world's future health.

In our very first edition of The Island, we featured the underwater photos of Matt Bagley and are excited to see he's bringing his extraordinary exhibition "Unseen" to Berninnet next month, exploring forgotten and unwanted ocean debris reclaimed by Mother Nature.

If you're looking for a brief respite from the stress and conflicts of the world, maybe now is a good time to put down your device, tune out the static and dive into some inspirational stories. We are surrounded by good people achieving great things and this edition contains just a small sample of them.

Hopefully their stories will energise you. Get out, go walking, plant a tree, join a group, learn to dance, cook for friends, paint, sing out loud. The world really can be beautiful. It's up to us all to make sure it is.

*Eleanor McKay*

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**THE ISLAND CREW:**

EDITOR: ELEANOR MCKAY

WRITERS: EDMUND COLEMAN, KATE CROCK, SARAH HUDSON AND ELEANOR MCKAY

ADVERTISING: JANE O'GAREY, JANE DALY AND ELLEN CHEESEMAN

DESIGN: STAFFAN HAKANSSON

COVER: PYRAMID ROCK BY S. HAKANSSON

**CONTACT US:**

theisland@pisra.com.au or call 5952 3201

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# Off to market

From fresh food to crafty treats, the island's markets will satisfy every craving.

**CHURCHILL ISLAND MARKETS**

- the first Saturday of every month, 8am - 1pm.  
Showcasing the some of the best local produce from Phillip Island and Gippsland, there's always a fantastic range of stalls. Stop by for a coffee while you browse and after, take a stroll through the historic grounds.

**CORINELLA COMMUNITY MARKET**

- second Saturday of the month, 9am - 1pm,  
Harold Hughes Reserve, cnr Smythe and Balcombe streets, Corinella.

Bring the family, bring the dog (on a lead) and enjoy time out with fantastic goods including fresh produce, arts and crafts, garden stuff, coffee and a sausage sizzle. Indoor and outdoor stalls.

**COWES ISLAND CRAFT MARKET**

- second Saturday of each month, 9am - 2pm,  
St Philip's Parish Hall, 102 Thompson Avenue, Cowes.

The market's theme is Make, Bake and Grow. You will find a large range of products from local producers and crafts people. Profits from the market are returned for local community needs.

**COWES MARKET ON CHURCH**

- fourth Saturday of each month, 9am - 2pm,  
St Philip's Parish Hall, 102 Thompson Avenue, Cowes.

Plants, produce, clothing, crafts and the famous "trash and treasure" shed, as



well as hot drinks and food.

**GRANTVILLE MARKET**

- fourth Sunday of the month, 8am - 1pm,  
Grantville Rec Reserve.

Fresh produce and over 100 stalls, including second hand collectables, antiques, food and clothing. Wet weather can make the reserve unusable, so if in doubt, check the market's Facebook page.

**NEWHAVEN MARKET**

- third Saturday of each month, 9am - 2pm,  
Newhaven Primary School, 22 School Avenue, Newhaven.

Hosted by the local primary school, the Newhaven market features a range of

fresh produce, food, crafts and goods, with everything from honey, vegetables and fruit to candles or baked treats, as well as live entertainment.

There are regular markets at Archies Creek Hall, Inverloch, Kongwak, Jumbunna, Loch, Leongatha, Wonthaggi and Koonwarra. Island Foreshore Markets usually on select dates from October. Check [www.visitbasscoast.com.au/events/markets](http://www.visitbasscoast.com.au/events/markets)

For the latest on local news and events, read the Phillip Island & San Remo Advertiser, out Wednesdays, or online at [pisra.com.au](http://pisra.com.au)

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# LOCAL LEGEND

Peter Paul is a man with many hats. He's been a school principal, mayor, and president of too many local organisations to list, including most recently Island Voice and the Phillip Island Medical and Health Action Group (PIMHAG).

Whether it's behind the barbeque at the annual community carols night, organising the breakfast program for school children or chairing a public meeting, Peter has been serving the people of Phillip Island for over four decades.

This year, he plans to step back from a public life that has included Principal of Cowes Primary School from 1984 until 1999, seven years as a Bass Coast Shire Councillor, serving as Mayor in 2010, a founding member of the Bendigo Community Bank – spending 18 years on the board, 15 years with the Phillip Island RSL Committee and 16 years with PIMHAG.

Passionate about Phillip Island, for the past four decades he has worked tirelessly to support the local community, lobbying for better educational opportunities, improved medical and mental health services, expanded sporting facilities, and protection of the environment.

It was Peter's vision as Cowes Primary Principal that saw the construction of the Cowes pool and a two-acre environmental

sanctuary established on the school grounds. He developed a masterplan for the future growth of the school and decades after he finished as Principal, local students are still benefiting from his tenure. His commitment to ensuring local children enjoyed the education and facilities they deserved continued during his time on council, where he advocated for the establishment of an Early Childhood Learning Centre in the grounds of the Cowes Primary School, which opened in early 2013.

His belief in young people never wavered. "It is our children we must teach to stand up and to be heard; to have a voice and to be listened to; on the matters that are important to them, and on the environment which is their home," he once said.

Through his work with Bendigo Community Bank, Peter has seen countless community projects supported, and was instrumental in the establishment of scholarships to help local students pursue their dreams of tertiary education.

As a councillor he convinced council colleagues to purchase land at the corner of Phillip Island and Ventnor roads in 2012, as a site for the future Phillip Island

Recreation Reserve.

In recent years, Peter's other passion has been ensuring the island community had access to better medical services, after Warley Hospital closed in 2008, leaving the island without 24/7 health care.

After a decade of tireless campaigning, PIMHAG secured the current Urgent Care Clinic, which opened in 2019, then in 2018 an election promise for a community hospital. The hospital, currently under construction, is due to open in early 2025. "It's a unifying force for Phillip Island since the closure of Warley Hospital," said Peter of the new centre and the community hospital.

"Peter has contributed tens of thousands of voluntary hours to groups on Phillip Island. His visionary leadership has had a substantial impact on current and future island residents," said his friend and RSL colleague Greg Mead.

*Do you know a local legend? Email your suggestions to: [theisland@pisra.com.au](mailto:theisland@pisra.com.au)*



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# Acting the part

NEWHAVEN COLLEGE ALUMNI SIMON RUSSELL RUNS THE SANNY SIDE CAFE IN SAN REMO, WHILE JUGGLING HIS ACTING CAREER, AS ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S ACTING SUCCESS STORIES.

Simon Russell is now well accustomed to being stopped by strangers who insist they know him. Even while working at his cafe – the Sanny Side in San Remo (and previously at the Seaside Provider in Newhaven) customers will scratch their brains to remember the link. “They stare at me and tell me “I know you, we’ve met before”. The staff now just laugh,” Simon says. “But when I tell them I’m an actor and they’ve probably seen me on TV they usually tell me they don’t watch TV.”

The 46-year-old face is a “familiar” one because he has been on TV, stage

and film since he left Newhaven College and immediately gained a career in acting. On TV, Simon has appeared as Danny McKillop alongside Guy Pearce in Jack Irish, on Working Dog’s Thank God You’re Here and other guest roles in Preacher, Stingers, Blue Heelers, The Secret Life of Us, Neighbours and Murray Wheelan – The Brush Off, alongside David Wenham and directed by Sam Neill.

On stage, in 2021 Simon performed the role of Mr Salt in the national tour of Charlie and The Chocolate Factory and in 2016 toured the country as Khashoggi in

Ben Elton and Queen’s musical, We Will Rock You. He has appeared in various short films including Real Meal Deal, Ringwood and in Tripod’s music video for Gonna Make You Happy Tonight and he has even recorded two studio albums.

“My face is familiar but I’m not famous enough to be instantly recognisable,” laughs the father of three. Although, he adds, there was a time numerous people would stop him in the street and instantly recognise him, confronting him with “oh you’re the nappy guy”, after he appeared in a Kia car ad driving while singing a Grandmaster Flash rap song, only to

arrive home and forget to buy nappies (hint: Google Kia nappy ad). “I’d be sitting at traffic lights and people would wind down their window and yell “the nappy guy”. “I’m always gracious about it.”

After three decades in the industry, Simon says the question he gets asked by the public, once they join the dots on his career, is what are the famous people like in real life? Are Guy Pearce and Hamish Blake really nice guys? “I’m never going to bag anyone out. They are all lovely. If you are working with someone it’s rare you come across a bad attitude, especially in Australia. You have to work hard here,

whether you’re famous or not, it’s an equaliser.

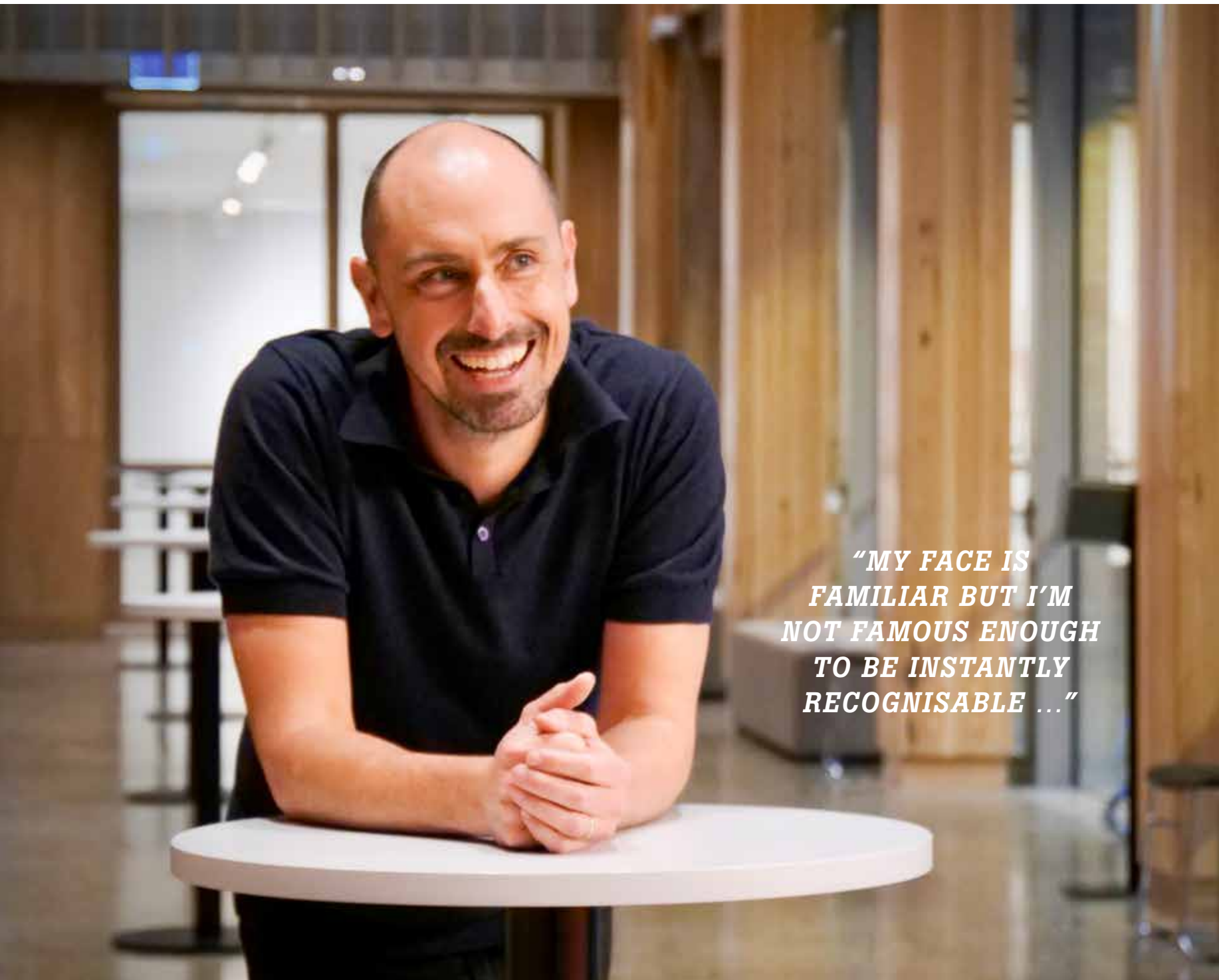
“You are all in it together. The closest thing to status is someone will have a bigger dressing room. I’m not saying there are no big egos, but everyone is working as hard as each other for a long time and in the end it’s like family. You don’t see each other for years and then see each other again and it’s instant bonding.”

Simon admits the only times he’s been starstruck is meeting rock artists, such as Jimmy Barnes. Simon was aged 15 when he met his first big star and was given advice to set him on his career path. “I

knew a girl at Newhaven College whose boyfriend at the time grew up with Molly Meldrum. She knew I was big into singing and so she got me backstage at Hey Hey It’s Saturday where I got to sit down for 15 minutes with Johnny Farnham in Daryl Somers’ dressing room. I was speechless, but Johnny was amazing. He was trying to learn a new song before he went out and sang it but instead he sat me down and told me to believe in myself. I have never forgotten that. I still try to be as generous as I can with everyone.”

Meet Simon and he radiates the actor vibe: a photo-worthy set of teeth





*"MY FACE IS  
FAMILIAR BUT I'M  
NOT FAMOUS ENOUGH  
TO BE INSTANTLY  
RECOGNISABLE ..."*

framed by an easy-going smile, animated gesticulations, and booming voice. "I'm always told I'm too loud. My daughter now has the same thing which made me realise I need to monitor it."

He was born to a family that would spontaneously break into song, for the joy of it. Even his grandmother recorded a jazz and country album. His brother Ben now runs two live music venues in Melbourne: the John Curtin Hotel in Carlton and the Gem in Collingwood. His parents – Deb and Pat – encouraged him in his chosen field, although hinted at a possible other career option. "That support is vital."

He credits his seven years at Newhaven College – under the tuition

of drama teachers Anne Holt and then Karen Milkens – for his career success. "I studied drama in VCE and got top in the state, also winning awards including the Premier's award for theatre." The plaudits meant he left school and landed a role immediately with the Melbourne Theatre Company. "I think I was one of the last generations to have an acting career without training, but training is something I always recommend."

Such is his belief in training Simon this year has been sharing his skill with The Theatre Project, a youth theatre project at St Philip's parish hall in Cowes, with classes for junior, middle and senior kids. "It's about building confidence and imagination, teaching them how to tell

stories. I've not seen one kid who started out nervous not wanting to do anything and by the end of term they are up and running."

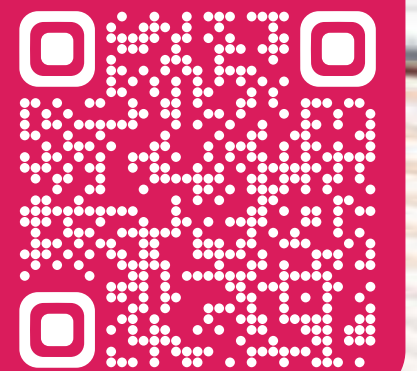
Simon started the project in 2017, but stopped with Covid, and restarted again last year, explaining the classes are not about being famous. "That's something we don't focus on at all. This is not about auditioning for Home and Away or getting on Neighbours."

Simon is married to Alana, who works at Bass Coast Shire and together they moved back to the island 16 years ago with their three children, who are now all at Newhaven College: Finn is in year 12, and twins Matilda and Molly in year 11.

Matilda is now following in her father's

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*"IT'S A CAREER I'D  
RECOMMEND AS LONG  
AS YOU'RE PREPARED  
TO HUSTLE."*

shoes, studying singing and planning to be an actor. "I think to myself 'please have a back-up plan'. But the kids have grown up seeing my career, seeing how hard you have to work."

Whether it's TV, stage or film, Simon has always managed to juggle his island life, with his city career. "Sometimes I'll have an Uber waiting for me at the stage door and I'll get in, still with makeup on, and head straight home. The worst was during Covid when I was doing Charlie and the Chocolate Factory in Brisbane and because of lockdown I was away for eight months. That was hard on my poor wife and the kids. Living here means I miss some networking opportunities but for now that's ok."

Simon says he prefers acting, especially in comedies, although admits musicals are "fun" and while he can sing "I can't dance, I just fake it". He also admits he still gets nervous when performing, although describes it more as adrenaline.

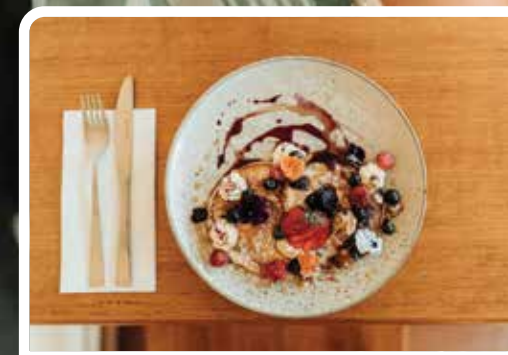
And there have even been times when he's forgotten his lines on stage in front of an audience of 2000. "It's terrifying. It keeps you on your toes, energises rather than cripples. You rebound. You've got to, otherwise you'd crawl in the corner. At times it's a struggle, but you've got to love it. It's a career I'd recommend as long as you're prepared to hustle. Then and now I love the story telling, taking on different characters. You've got to be dedicated and willing to be criticised and rejected. If you

don't love it, why would you put yourself through that?"

Simon doesn't see a time he won't be acting, although in future he'd like to move more into writing and directing, even with a vision to one day pen a musical or play to perform at Berninnet. And he always envisages living in the Phillip Island area, keeping his hand in the café, which he runs with his mum Deb Montague. "I need to be near salt water. I even find that touring. Brisbane has a river, but it's not salt."

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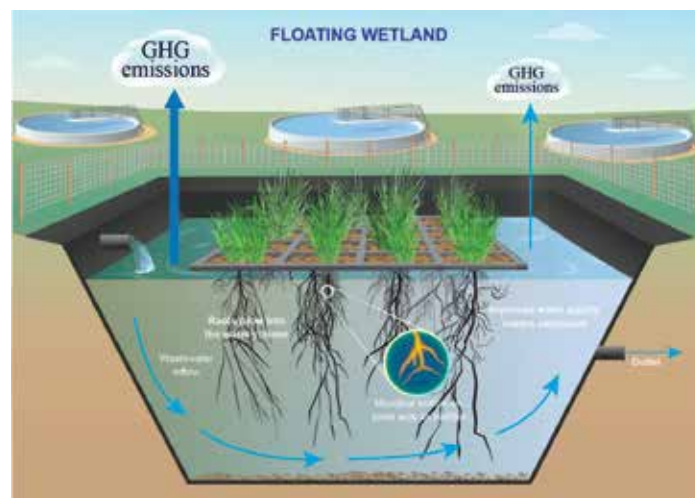
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Left: Mark Dishon, Westernport Water next to a tray of Common Reed which accumulated the highest amount of emerging contaminants. Top Right: A cross section diagram of a constructed floating wetland system. Bottom Right: Pictured from left Divina Navarro, CSIRO; Dr Christopher Walker, Covey Associates Pty. Ltd.; Dr John Awad CSIRO; Meg Humphrys, Water Services Association of Australia; Zoe Geyer, Westernport Water; Peter Macreadie, Deakin University Blue Carbon Lab and Dr Lukas Schuster, Deakin University's Blue Carbon Lab.



The floating wetlands system installed on a wastewater lagoon at Cowes Wastewater Treatment Plant.

# Floating wetlands for wastewater treatment

We're over halfway through a two-year pilot project that explores the effectiveness of constructed floating wetlands in removing nutrients and reducing greenhouse gas emissions from treated wastewater.

This innovative project is a collaborative effort led by Westernport Water, alongside Deakin University's Blue Carbon Lab, Clarity Aquatic, Covey Associates Pty. Ltd., and CSIRO. Last year, a floating wetland system was installed on a wastewater lagoon at our treatment plant on Millowl (Phillip Island) as part of a Floating Wetland Pilot Project.

Floating wetlands are a recent innovation for wastewater treatment. They mimic the

appearance of a natural floating island. Like a hydroponic system, the roots of native plants grow into the water under modules that float on the surface of the water.

As the plants grow, their roots provide habitat for microorganisms that assist with the removal of wastewater pollutants and capture floating particles in the water.

Since March last year, dedicated Westernport Water staff have meticulously maintained the floating wetlands, while research scientists have conducted rigorous monitoring to evaluate their impact on nutrient removal and greenhouse gas reduction. The removal of emerging contaminants to the plant tissue is also being investigated.

Conclusive results will be released when the project finishes in mid-2025. However, we're excited to share the preliminary findings and key insights from the establishment phase of the project.

**PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

Within the first year, we have noted the following results:

- The installation of the floating wetland contributed to reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, namely a 27% reduction in carbon dioxide, 19% reduction in nitrous oxide, and 58% reduction in methane.
- There is evidence that the floating wetland is removing synthetic materials from wastewater.

- The plant tissue is showing evidence of uptake of emerging contaminants, firstly via roots and transferred into shoots, where it can be removed through harvesting of the plants.
- The plant species, Common Reed, has grown better than Jointed Twig Rush and will be able to achieve a higher rate of nutrient removal due to superior growth. An additional species, March Club-rush, was planted earlier this year and has adapted well with substantial growth.

## THE NEXT 12 MONTHS

Plant growth and biomass accumulation will continue to be measured, with a specific focus on how the plants take up nutrient once temperatures warm and the plant growth cycle recommences.

The uptake of emerging contaminants by the additional species (March Club-rush) will be measured every three months.

Additionally, uptake of these contaminants by Common Reed will continue to be measured (every three months) during the growth of new shoots after harvest.

Methane and nitrous oxide emissions will continue to be monitored monthly.

**KEY INSIGHTS**

Considerable time is needed for nature-based solutions to adapt to the conditions at hand. The amount of time required can be difficult to predict at the planning stage, as plants react differently to climate and other conditions.

Whilst an additional benefit of a floating wetland is increased habitat for wildlife, a balancing act is required to prevent swamp hens and ducks from accessing the floating wetlands until immature plants have had a chance to grow and reach maturity.

Another challenge has been making sure that the connected stairwell is stationary (so that staff and research scientists can safely access the floating wetlands) whilst making sure the floating wetlands can always move to accommodate changing water levels and high winds.

## MESSAGE FROM THE CLIMATE CHANGE ADVISOR

*The Floating Wetland Pilot is an exciting and innovative project, contributing to the state of knowledge for the water sector in utilising nature-based solutions to support wastewater management and emissions reduction. It also provides valuable insights for managing emerging contaminants.*

*Early trends of reduced greenhouse gas emissions as a result of the floating wetland function are positive findings and warrant further investigation as we progress into the second year of the project.*

*Westernport Water remains focused on identifying and embracing opportunities through collaboration, and a flexible, action-oriented mindset as we strive to protect and reduce our environmental impact.*

*While maintaining service levels and the long-term financial sustainability of the organisation, learnings will be used by Westernport Water to support decision-making for integrated water management in the context of climate change adaptation and meeting our target of net zero emissions by 2035.*

*Zoe Geyer, Climate Change Senior Advisor – Westernport Water*

The project is a joint initiative between Westernport Water, Deakin University's Blue Carbon Lab, Clarity Aquatic, Covey Associates Pty. Ltd., and CSIRO with funding from the Victorian Government, Intelligent Water Networks and Yarra Valley Water.



**WESTERNPORT WATER**





# Monaco, Monza ... Phillip Island

A new book by legendary motorsports commentator John Smailes charts the evolution of the Phillip Island circuit, from its beginnings holding the first Australian Grand Prix in 1928, through to 2024.

"Phillip Island is famous through the world for its motor racing circuit. You guys would be surprised how well you are regarded," John says.

"If you stand at La Mans, Monza or Monaco and you say Phillip Island everyone knows what you are talking about. I'm not overstating it at all. It's one of the best racing tracks in the world."

*Phillip Island*, is Smailes' ninth motor-sport book, coming on the back of his previous works that includes *Mt Panorama* about Bathurst, *The First to 1000* detailing championship races between 1981 and 2022, and *Formula One* about the race in Australia and New Zealand.

John says it was time to write a racing book about Phillip Island because the

island will soon celebrate the centenary of being the first place to host the Australian Grand Prix.

He explains what makes our circuit so internationally renowned is its style.

"Some people would call it old-school, I call it classic. These days tracks are internal where drivers duck and weave inside and they fit a corner in a small space, whereas Phillip Island was designed in the 1950s and the perimeter allows high speeds and occasional turns inwards.

"Also, the images from Phillip Island are just amazing. Where else in the world can you get a view like that, of Valentino Rossi or Casey Stoner doing 350km/hr with Bass Strait right in front of them."

John says while *Phillip Island* took about six months to write, the book is effectively the result of 50 years of knowledge.

"It would have been difficult to write the book if I had not had a personal

involvement with the circuit for many years," he says.

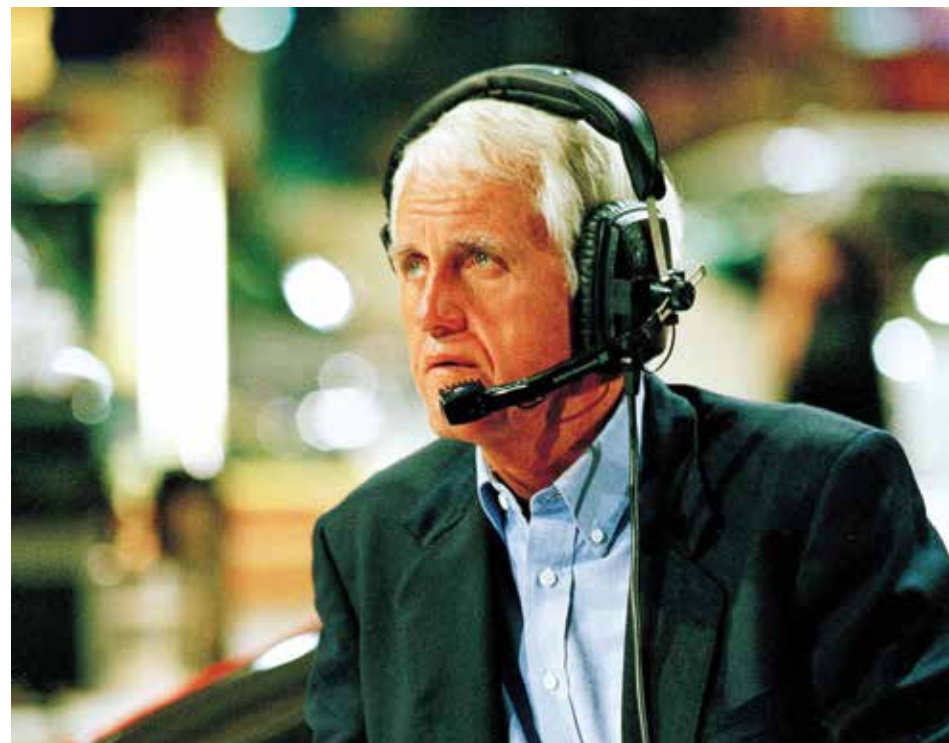
The book involved 75 interviews with "people who were intrinsic in the formation of the circuit, competitors and administrators".

It covers a "rich history", including the story of Gallipoli hero Arthur Waite, who won the first Australian GP in 1928.

One of the critical chapters in the circuit's history is the fact three Australian MotoGP champions won Grand Prix events here: Wayne Gardner in 1989, Mick Doohan in 1998 and Casey Stoner won six Australian GPs on Phillip Island "equalled only by Valentino Rossi".

*Phillip Island. The inside story of Australia's fastest racetrack, our home of motorsport* is published by Allen & Unwin and available in all good bookstores.

[johnsmailes.com.au/](http://johnsmailes.com.au/)



BY SARAH HUDSON

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BY ELEANOR MCKAY  
PHOTOS: STEPH THORNBORROW AND SUPPLIED

# The food philosopher

KARA WILLIAMS HAS CARVED HERSELF AN ENVIABLE CAREER AS A PRIVATE CHEF, COOK AND FOOD INFLUENCER, BUT THE ROAD HAS HAD SOME CONFRONTING TWISTS AND CHALLENGES. NOT EASILY DETERRED, KARA HAS TURNED LIFE'S LEMONS INTO LEMONADE, AND IS INSPIRING A WHOLE NEW GENERATION OF PEOPLE TO THINK FRESH AND FABULOUS WHEN IT COMES TO FOOD.

Talking to Kara, you could start to believe her success is due to a series of happy (and not so happy) accidents. A chance encounter while travelling, surgery problems, broken relationships or even Covid are part of the narrative, all stories delivered with rapid-fire enthusiasm over a coffee at a local restaurant. But that would ignore the incredible drive and passion of the woman herself, who successfully transitioned from a career in fashion into an in-demand chef, negotiating a path that would leave a lesser person huddled sobbing under a blanket.

When Kara talks about food, her eyes light up and it's that genuine passion for real food, for real people, that's fuelled her. Even when her career was in fashion – as a buyer for department stores David Jones and Myer – working 60 to 80-hour weeks, travelling the world, staying in five-star hotels and eating in Michelin Star restaurants, food was always what grounded her. “Fashion ... I lived and breathed it, but I would always read

cooking magazines and cookbooks and recipes. That would be my relax time.”

Marrying young into a big Italian family cemented her love affair with food, and big Sicilian family Sunday lunches, helping Nonna in the kitchen, were a regular part of her life. So, it doesn't seem a big step to end up cooking in a villa on the Italian coast in her thirties. But the road to Viareggio was a rough one. When Kara and her husband decided to relocate from Melbourne to Italy, she lined up a fashion job in Florence, packed up the house, put the car into storage, and jetted off to start a new life.

That's when the bombshell dropped. “Literally the day I arrived overseas he broke up with me, completely.” In the era before constant social media and instant connection, Kara found herself on the other side of the world, thousands of miles from her friends and family, and suddenly single. “Because we'd been together for such a long time, I'm thinking,

we'll just get back together, so I'm just going to wait around and we can talk through it all.” She didn't tell anyone back in Australia and ended up staying in Florence for about eight weeks, “not really knowing what to do”.

In the end, rather than flying home, Kara booked a one-way ticket to Germany, packed a cabin bag and went travelling through Europe. Befriending fellow travellers, Kara laughingly said she did what most Australians normally do in their twenties. “With my career, I'd always flown business class, stayed in five-star hotels. I'd never stayed in a hostel or anything like that.” Travelling through France, she became firm friends with a girl from Newcastle. “She'd just been studying fashion, had about two months left on her visa, and was running out of money,” Kara explained.

So they could afford to keep travelling, Kara replied to an ad on Craigslist for an in-house chef in Italy.





*"IT'S A GENUINE  
LOVE THAT I HAVE  
FOR COOKING."*



Within days the pair were on their way to Viareggio, arriving at an old, dilapidated villa. "It's literally like what ghost stories are made out of," Kara recalled. "There are chandeliers everywhere with cobwebs, and marble staircases with wrought iron. It's just gorgeous." But the owner had had a change of heart; she no longer needs a chef but offered the girls a cheap room.

"We're hanging out in this big old wacky villa and there's people from all around the world. Everyone gathers together every day around lunch and dinner," said Kara. After a month or so, she asks the owner if she can cook an Easter dinner for all the guests. Kara buys all the ingredients, and the other guests pitch in to help clean up the old dining room, to try and bring it back to its glory days. "Everyone comes down and we have this big, beautiful feast. And then the owner goes, oh, you can cook ... okay now you can work for me. So right from that moment, the narrative changed."

Those big Sunday Sicilian family dinners back in Australia, plus her own family's love of entertaining, provided a good launching pad for what became a new career for Kara. "My mum's been used to entertaining large groups of people. I've always been in the kitchen and that migrated just in terms of the cuisine, across to an Italian kitchen. To

me, cooking for ten people or cooking for twenty people, there's not really that much difference. I just love being at a big table."

In between cooking lunch and dinner for 30 people every day, Kara utilised her design skills and started photographing the meals, prepared in the old Italian kitchen, journaling her days and writing down her recipes. "This is a huge life change for me. It's a career change, it's a different country, I'm now single, everything's completely different. It was quite cathartic, and I was just enjoying the whole process," she explained. Some of the other guests convince her to start a blog and one night she pushed publish and sent her food stories out into the world.

Shortly after, she gets a call from the general manager of Benetti, Italy's leading yacht manufacturer. He tells her his receptionist discovered the blog when she was searching online for a tiramisu recipe. "He says, I've got a charter leaving tomorrow, are you free?" In under 24 hours, she packs up her apartment, puts

her things into storage and jumps onboard as a chef on a luxury yacht. "I basically ended up being on the boat for six months and went around between France and Italy for the whole season."

Returning to dry land, Kara was quickly approached by wealthy clients to be a private chef at their holiday homes. "I started working for a Russian family that rented a house in Forte dei Marmi. I worked for them for about six months." Another job came from an agency, to cater for a mystery client. "I rock up on day one and it's the villa of Giorgio Armani and Andre Bocelli's coming for lunch." It

turns out, the client is Bocelli's wife, and while Kara never gets to meet Armani, she continues to work for the villa for several seasons. Other jobs included catering at the Australian Embassy and during her downtime, she travelled to Sicily, "upskilling myself". By now, her Instagram account, Kara Private Chef had over 15,000 followers and her food career was blooming.

Then life threw her another curve

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WITH SOME HERBS  
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ball. Increasingly complicated medical issues saw her flying back to Australia for treatment, returning several times to resolve issues related to surgery. What was expected to be a quick trip home in 2018 turned into something more permanent, caught between medical treatments, and then Covid. Locked down in Melbourne, Kara brought her social media followers with her and started holding online cooking courses. “I’ve got an audience that is tuning in every single day, and I’d host a one-hour cooking class. It was a series called pantry essentials. I think we got to about 28 days of not having to go to a supermarket.”

Alongside the classes, using her food contacts, Kara also started a real-world pantry from her tiny Elwood apartment, providing fresh food packages, delivered to people at home that were unwell.

She also housed a stockpile of essential items such as toilet paper and canned food, which was delivered to victims of Victoria’s 2019 fires, or the housing commission towers during lockdown.

If that wasn’t enough of a change, when her brother-in-law had to have open heart surgery, Kara moved in with her sister to help mind her four-month-old nephew. She planted a veggie garden in the backyard, and soon the garden and her nephew were also featuring on her Instagram page. Emerging from Covid and juggling her own medical issues, Kara decided to sell her apartment and head for the ocean, eventually buying in San Remo. “I knew if we were going to go into another lockdown, I just wanted a backyard, with some herbs and some sun.” The area was a familiar one, as Kara’s grandparents had owned a house in

Silverleaves and the family had frequently holidayed on Phillip Island. As she started posting about her life on the coast, requests to cater for events at holiday houses on the island started flowing in. “I basically spent the first three or four months, most weekends, being occupied with catering for private events. And by doing that, I very quickly needed to find out where the local quality ingredients were.” Alongside this, work for a prestige Italian importing company meant a new work life was opening up.

Then came that curve ball again. Her Instagram page was hacked, and Kara lost all her content. “That account was a lot of contracts and paid work. I lost all the content.” Thinking quickly, Kara started a new account Foodies on Phillip Island, as a way to keep in contact with a close-knit group of friends. “It was just a temporary

thing that I thought I’d just use for now to keep in contact, and then I’ll get my Private Chef account back ... but that never happened.” That temporary page has morphed into something precious. “With the Foodies page, even though in comparison it’s a small number, those 1400 people I’ve either met in person, or know. They are generally all locals or actual businesses.”

The page isn’t selling anything or promoting a particular business. “It’s purely a creative outlook for me. It’s a genuine love that I have for cooking. Because food to me isn’t about being styled or contrived. If I see bright red tomatoes and the way the sun’s (on them), it’s beautiful and I want to capture it.” With her background in graphic design, applied design and photography, not to mention years of experience in visual merchandising, it’s not surprising the page looks so impressive. “It’s having a visual eye and applying it to a daily need, which is eating.”

Soon another pressing need came into the frame. Kara’s mother was diagnosed with glioblastoma, an aggressive form of brain tumour and Kara turned her passion for food into creating the best possible diet to help her mother cope with the rigors of her treatment. “At least I knew she was getting some fuel from a living plant. I feel

like we are forever healing and I believe the way to do that is through nourishing food.” While hospital food might keep people full, “they’re not getting the actual nutrition”. “I’ve always led that sort of lifestyle for myself, that food is here to nourish and keep us; I just had to quickly change it for mum, because it was very specific.”

Her mother outlived her initial diagnosis. “I do believe it helped in mum’s general wellbeing and also in her longevity.”

Caring full time for her mother, Kara said the pair spent most weeks in San Remo and many of the posts on the Foodies page document the pair’s travels around the area. “We tried to catch sunsets and we drove around. We generally went for walks on the beach every day and we’d go out for lunch. Then on our travels, if I found produce at a side stall or wherever, I’d cook it for dinner.”

Kara said she’s seen a big change in the island’s food culture over the years. On holidays as a kid, she remembers Saturday night fish and chips. “And we’d go to The Swan (now Isola) for pizza on our birthday.” She recalls her grandparents visiting the Welsh shop at Surf Beach,

where they’d stop to buy rock candy and lava bread. “My grandparents would buy tins of this lava bread, which is basically seaweed, then heat it up in the electric fry pan and pour it over their fish and chips. It was disgusting. It would stink the whole house out. But that was our takeaway food down here. And not just because there was nothing available, but I think it was

just the generation that food wasn’t a priority.”

Nowadays, Kara said she can see a whole new food culture evolving, including local

produce and new cafes and restaurants. And she’s proud to be documenting part of it through her Foodies Instagram account. Who knows where life’s next curve ball will lead her, but dreams include helping develop a new approach to nutrition for patients, and perhaps a cookbook – or two. “I’d like to do what I do on a daily basis, which is Italian-style cooking and use the ingredients we actually have down here. I think that would be a very, very beautiful cookbook. I’d love to do that.”

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Photographer Sally Kirsch has captured thousands of images of Phillip Island over the years.

Last spring she took this photo at The Pinnacles on the Cape Woolamai walking track, capturing “the essence of the incredible natural beauty of Phillip Island”.

“It shows how private some of the moments are that you can enjoy here,” she says.

“I walked out to this spot on that afternoon, and saw a few people at the car park, but no one on the beach and no one along the Cape Woolamai walking track. I enjoyed it all on my own and sometimes that time is important and golden, to immerse yourself in nature and have

your own quiet time and stillness.”

Sally describes The Pinnacles as “uniquely rugged and very special”.

“I can feel nature’s energy when I am there, standing high above the pounding water on the rocks below – rocks that have been sculpted and worn smooth by mother nature over thousands of years.”

In this photo, the last remaining light after the sunset is reflected on the rocks and the vast expanse of Bass Strait. “The scene captures the timeless interaction between the elements, showcasing the serene yet powerful essence of this immensely special place.”

**SALLY KIRSCH**  
**DETAILS:**  
The Pinnacles, Cape Woolamai  
Fujifilm X-T2, with Fujinon XF10-24mm f4 lens at ISO200, f8, one second exposure time.  
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The Moto GP returns to the Phillip Island Circuit from October 18 to 20.

This year fans will be treated to a brand-new general admission upgrade, the Trackside Club. Fans will be able to enjoy the thrill of the track action from an unreserved Gardner Straight viewing area, equipped with a sheltered undercover marquee to keep everyone protected from the elements.

The world's best motorcycle riders will once again grace Phillip Island, with a stellar line-up including Aussie favourite

Jack Miller and rising Moto2 star Senna Agius. Fans will also see the return of Moto3 talent Joel Kelso, who achieved his first podium at the Australian Motorcycle Grand Prix in 2023, while newcomer Jacob Roulstone will make his first Australian appearance as part of the Red Bull KTM Tech3 team. The thrilling MotoGP Sprint Race will also return for 2024, giving fans an action-packed Saturday.

Organisers have also announced the off-track addition of an indoor Beer Hall, featuring a hand-picked selection

of premium brews on tap for the first time. The Beer Hall will showcase a stellar lineup of renowned brands, from refreshing lagers and ales to robust stouts, the zesty kick of ginger beer, and non-alcoholic friendly options.

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# Big fish in a big pond

FOR MUCH OF THE YEAR CAPE WOOLAMAI'S LARS OLSEN TRAVELS AROUND THE PACIFIC OCEAN, VISITING REMOTE TROPICAL ISLANDS. BUT IT'S NO HOLIDAY. IT'S FOR THE GOOD OF THE PLANET.

Lars Olsen's client list reads like a tropical paradise holiday brochure. Working from his Cape Woolamai home office, Lars runs Olsen Pacific Consulting, advising on a vast range of fisheries issues for 11 countries in the Pacific Ocean and South East Asia, from the Cook Islands to Nauru, Tonga to the Philippines, Samoa and Fiji.

"People think it's an exotic lifestyle. It is, because there are so many different cultures and languages. There's an incredible amount of diversity," Lars says. "Every country is beautiful, and I do surf a lot of interesting places, get to scuba dive, do fun fishing and get invited to community events. But out there it's not martinis on the beach. I'm working in

capital cities with governments. Travelling used to be sexy and glamorous, but it gets old really fast."

When Lars says he works from his Cape Woolamai home, that is a debatable point. He estimates he's away from home – and his wife Andrea, an ecologist – about half the month. But even that doesn't paint the full picture. "Sometimes I'm away a few days, sometimes up to three weeks. There have been times where I've flown in, seen Andrea, got fresh clothes, and flown out again. It's just hard to predict. For me, planes are buses with wings. Long travel and airports are the price I pay to work in this beautiful, remote area."

Lars explains while he does use Zoom and email, face-to-face contact is

critical when dealing with local Pacific communities. "It's not an email society. In the Pacific, you've got to earn trust. You can't just walk in there. You have to spend time. They call it talanoa, getting people together and talking. If you are going to work with them you have to pay your dues by sitting in a plane."

In reality, Lars has no need to prove his credentials. The 55-year-old's resume reads like that of a global expert. He grew up in California, with Danish parents and travelled to Denmark through his childhood. Having lived the west coast lifestyle of surfing, diving, fishing and camping, Lars wanted to study biology and oceanography but instead "second guessed himself" and completed a



Bachelor of Economics. “It turned out to be a good choice because economics affects everything in our entire lives. It’s very useful to understand how the world works.”

He had a variety of jobs – including as a water ski instructor at Club Med – before landing a job in a prawn aquaculture farm in California, which later led to understanding other aspects of aquaculture in Hawaii. “But then I hit the ceiling because I was unskilled.”

Lars then opted for one of the best degrees in the world, studying applied science in aquaculture in Tasmania for two years. Following that he had a rapid ascension: snapped up by Fisheries Victoria, eventually working in research and later compliance, intelligence and regulation. He arrived in Bass Coast in 2005 to work at the Kilcunda Abalone Farm, buying a home with Andrea in Cape Woolamai because it reminded him of his childhood home. “It’s not a perfect analogy but Phillip Island is like California was 40 years ago. California has gone because there are too many people. Here there are still fish in the water.”

His peripatetic lifestyle is not only tough on his marriage and friendships, but also his ability to commit to the community, whether joining a local sporting team or signing up for a class. He has, however, managed to be one of the founding members of the Phillip Island Community Orchard in 2013, and is



now vice president. He is a key member of the Sunderland Bay Surf Beach Coastcare group, completing numerous planting and landscape projects. And he has worked on Bass Coast Shire’s south coast community plan to upgrade parks and walks in the Surf Beach area. Lars and Andrea kept the home even when they left Phillip Island in 2015 so he could work for the New Zealand government’s Pacific Island Fisheries Management.

It was working on the New Zealand role that Lars’ diverse career skills shone. Combining science, management, compliance and policy, the New Zealand fisheries management job was a precursor to launching his consultancy business in 2017, which he ran overseas until returning to Cape Woolamai post-pandemic. “Even now the best part of the job is that I’m doing something good. If I won the lottery I would do this work for free. You are literally helping people in the Pacific to lift their game in how they manage fisheries. It’s all about sustainability. But when you talk about environmental sustainability you have to talk about economic sustainability. You have to balance those two otherwise it won’t work.”

Put simply, Lars now helps Pacific Island communities ease pressure off inshore reef fishing, to focus on deep sea tuna species: skipjack, yellowfin, albacore and big eye.



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“The Pacific has 60 per cent of the global supply of those species. Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam take 30 per cent of that supply.”

Lars advises governments and communities on complex issues from governance – to ensure they retain sovereignty over the resource – through to policy across international treaties. It means he has eaten pearl oysters and giant clams, as well as a unicorn fish that was “so fatty I almost puked”. He has sat in kava ritual drinking ceremonies and visited a tiny atoll north of the Cook Islands that has only one flight every two weeks and a population of 187.

Lars says while his work and adventures have revealed stories of beauty, hope and goodness, he has also seen the flip side. He says plastics in the ocean are a “significant issue and a growing issue”. “They are finding plastic in the guts of animals – and humans because we eat those animals. Plastic doesn’t break down; it just breaks up. At the end I’m not hopeful because if you put sheep or rabbits in a paddock they will breed, eat more and

the resource will be gone. So ultimately it’s a population issue: a growing population with a finite resource. Climate change is depressing, as is geopolitics, but these tend to eclipse the good things that are happening. And there are good things happening.”

He says he works with groups trying to change international law to bring about more sustainable fisheries, with the work ensuring the western central Pacific Ocean tuna is “in a healthy state”. “You can’t let doom and gloom stop you from doing good or doing your best. You have to have a go; you’ve got to do something. We are not going down without a fight, but we’re possibly delaying the inevitable. Ultimately I need to do something I believe in. I’m lucky I’m able to do work I care about and I’m passionate about and that is good. I try and live in the good energy as much as possible without ignoring the bad stuff.”

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# Penguins bigger than Taylor



It's a battle between our little penguins and the world's biggest star.

And it turns out that while they might not have Taylor Swift's vocal talent, the little penguins are punching above their weight. Figures released in July show the penguin parade officially sold more tickets in Australia than Taylor Swift in the last financial year.

Figures released by Phillip Island Nature Parks (PINP) report there were 709,527 visitors to the island's little penguins in the 2023-24 financial year, a

30 per cent surge on the 2022-23 period.

Across seven shows earlier this year, it is estimated the international megastar sold just under 630,000 tickets to three and four shows in Melbourne and Sydney respectively.

The number of international tourists who attended the world-famous penguin parade in the last year jumped by over 100,000 people – one full MGC stadium – to 251,208.

According to PINP, the highest international visitation came from China,

Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, India and the UK.

One local Swiftie said she wasn't surprised at all the little penguins had pipped the global cultural icon.

"It should always be the people's priority to see the beauty and experience the nature of Phillip Island," she said.

"Taylor Swift is a massive worldwide celebrity, but clearly so are our little penguins who wander up the beach every day and then return home to 'shake it off.'"

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BY SARAH HUDSON  
PHOTOS: MOLLY CONROY

# Changing his tune

When Dave Barr finishes his day job as Phillip Island Winery general manager – and when all the customers and staff have left – that’s when he cranks up the volume.

The 27-year-old heads to the property’s renowned atrium, overlooking farmland towards Berrys Beach, and practices his other job: playing the bagpipes. “I practice there after hours a lot – the acoustics are so beautiful,” Dave says. “Because it’s such a loud, powerful instrument, I don’t want to impose myself on other people, so I can’t practice at home in Cowes. You have to be a big fan of yourself to play when there’s a lot of other people around.

“If I’m not practicing at the winery then I’ll find a nice quiet spot at Red Rocks beach in the evening when there’s no one around, although if it’s windless the sound can travel more than 1km.”

Dave started formally playing the bagpipes just two years ago, when he moved to Phillip Island with his partner Molly Conroy, and now runs The Island Piper, performing for weddings, birthdays, events, and funerals around the island and Bass Coast.

However, as Dave explains in his lilting Scottish accent, he has been immersed in the instrument of his home country his whole life.

Dave grew up in the eastern Scottish town of Kirriemuir, between Angus and Dundee: (“it’s actually the birth place of AC/DC’s Bon Scott and there’s a statue of him in the town playing the bagpipes”).

His parents were both vets, but his dad Colin was also an advanced piper, performing in some of the world’s top pipe bands. “I remember him playing for

fun for friends at Hogmanay (New Year’s Eve), and he’d also play the small pipes at the local pub with violinists.”

As a kid Dave played everything but the bagpipes – guitar, piano, violin, drums – and says it’s “one of my big regrets” not taking up the pipes at a young age. It was only when he left Scotland in 2020 that he appreciated the music of his ancestors.

Dave worked in New Zealand’s ski fields for three years where he met Australian Molly (who had grown up holidaying at Phillip Island) and the couple lived in Melbourne during Covid. “I was stuck in lockdown and I’d never missed home much but it was then when I couldn’t leave that I appreciated my heritage more.”

That’s when Colin began teaching his son bagpipe lessons via zoom from Scotland. Dave started on the chanter, which is like a recorder, and then moved to the full Great Highland Bagpipes two years ago (he explains there are more than 30 kinds of bagpipes, ranging from \$1500 to \$9000). “I still send him videos of myself playing and he critiques them.”

Dave was actually given his first set of bagpipes by his grandfather George on a trip to Scotland in 2022, but the pipes were lost by an airline and never retrieved, so Colin and Dave bought a set together.

Dave says he is now “somewhat competent” on the highly complex instrument. “It has been said it is one of the hardest instruments to learn.”

The bagpipe is made of the chanter, which produces the noise, and three drones (“the long sticks out the back”) that produce the hum, with all four of these

requiring tuning during the performance. At the same time a piper must constantly blow into the bag, that is tucked under the arm and squeezed.

“The breathing is hard, but it’s about timing more than good lung capacity. It’s not about amazing lungs as much as about knowing when to use it. You can’t breathe well when you overthink for some reason. So if I’m playing a tune that is challenging, suddenly breathing is hard because there’s too many things for the brain to think about. Results aren’t fast like guitar or piano and there’s a lot of muscle memory required.”

For this reason, a piper will generally only perform for about 10 minutes (although top pipers performing at the Queen’s funeral, for instance, can walk and play up to 30 minutes). So as The Island Piper, Dave will generally pipe a bride down the aisle or offer 10-minute ceremonial performances.

When performing, he wears full Argyll kilt (“because the Barr tartan is horrible”) and his repertoire includes favourites such as the Skye Boat Song, Scotland the Brave, and Amazing Grace. He says he loves performing on beaches around the island, even playing for a birthday party at Berrys Beach, which is reminiscent of Scotland.

“When I came from the UK everyone has the image of Australia as looking like Surfers Paradise, but I was surprised when I came to Phillip Island, the beaches are very rugged and dramatic, which reminds me of home.”

[theislandpiper.com.au](http://theislandpiper.com.au)





# Berninneit – what’s going on



The good times keep coming at Berninneit with a fantastic range of performances and films on offer.

Musical treats include Dan Sultan (sold out), a tribute to Johnny Cash and June Carter (October 15), Collide Ensemble (November 24) and the Ukulele Death Squad (November 30).

On stage, enjoy the acrobatic

performance of The Librarian (September 27), take the kids along to the Teeny Tiny Stevies (October 4) or enjoy Offshore Theatre’s presentation of My Sister Jill (November 7).

In a new innovation, Spit the Dummy sessions have been introduced, with “baby friendly” sessions on a Wednesday, designed for caregivers to enjoy time at the

cinema with low sound, open captions and an inclusive and friendly environment for people seeking to get out with less stress.

Information about upcoming performances and movies at Berninneit is available online.

[www.basscoastculturalvenues.com/live-at-berninneit-cowes](http://www.basscoastculturalvenues.com/live-at-berninneit-cowes)

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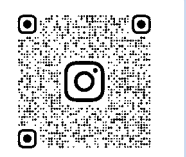
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# A TWITCH IN TIME

FOR PHOTOGRAPHER AND TRAVEL WRITER KATE CROCK, WATCHING BIRDS ON PHILLIP ISLAND IS A SOURCE OF JOY AND STRESS, ESPECIALLY ONCE SHE EMBARKED ON AN EPIC QUEST TO SPOT 150 DIFFERENT SPECIES IN A YEAR.

Kate can spend two hours nestled in the grassy marshes of Phillip Island's Swan Lake, immersed in peaceful communion with the delicate wetland ecosystem of the island's only freshwater body, before a low flying Swamp Harrier prowls overhead and the twitcher snaps into action, reaching for her Nikon Coolpix P950 in a frenzy to capture the bird of prey.

"It's the dichotomy of birdwatching," laughs the photographer and travel writer, "it can be very stressful. It's a bit like, 'Ooh! There's one!' and there's sort of this panic, then calm, and relax. If you want to take a photo, take the photo. If it works out, great. If it doesn't, it's not the end of the world because you've seen it, and the

thrill in seeing a bird for the first time is just amazing."

Kate explains she's not hung up on taking a photo of every bird she sees, and while the photographer is always trying to improve her skills, bird watching for Kate is as much about finding peace in nature and re-setting for the rest of her week.

Last year the birder decided to embark on a "local" Big Year on Phillip Island, where Kate and her family have holidayed for 30 years. A "local" Big Year is where birders, or twitchers, set out with the aim to spot as many species of birds in their local government area as possible. In Kate's case, she took particular focus on Phillip Island.

Kate set a goal of sighting 150 different

birds on the island and her current count is up to about 70, including several 'lifers' – birds seen by a twitcher for the first time.

While the travel writer explains she only began seriously birdwatching during the COVID-19 pandemic, Kate is no neophyte when it comes to the study of birds and animals. She studied a science degree in the 80s, majoring in zoology and genetics, but her fascination with birds harks further back still.

"I've always been an animal person," Kate says. "There's a photo of me in my teens in my room, and on the wall is a bird poster. Not, you know, some heartthrob popstar poster, but a poster of local birds. The Weekly Times magazine

used to have these posters of common mountain birds, common bushland birds, common ocean birds. I've managed to keep a couple of those from the 90s and they're down at Phillip Island."

Travel writing and photography, however, are a relatively new venture for the 59-year-old. After completing her science degree and diploma of education, Kate taught science in secondary schools before leaving the profession to start a family.

While raising four children, Kate started a bookkeeping business which she ran for 16 years, before following her passion for travel and taking on a path to travel agency work shortly before the pandemic. Due to the pandemic, Kate

explains "that all went to custard". "I had a few years where I was minding the shop as it were, at home with my husband and a new puppy and a couple of the boys.

"I was just treading water," Kate reflected, before explaining the impetus to shift careers again to travel writing and photography. "Sometimes you've just got to follow what you want to do, so that's what you do. We are human beings, not human doings."

Kate says when she's out in nature birding, certainly there is a sense that bird watching goes both ways. "Oh yeah, they're always watching. If you're watching them, you can tell when they're looking at you. And as a photographer, that's the best time to try and take a photo

when they're looking directly at your lens. When the birds do watch you, it's a bit like being an animal in the zoo."

Kate currently has two granddaughters, with two more grandchildren on the way. While her grandchildren are still young, she can't wait to pass on her passion for birding to the next generation.

Now she shares her birdwatching tips and reveals some of the best twitcher spots as she takes us behind the scenes of her "local" Big Year, observing and photographing the birds that call Phillip Island home.





*“CONSERVATION  
HILL RESERVE AND  
THE RHYLL INLET  
ARE HIDDEN GEMS  
ON THE ISLAND  
BIRDWATCHING MAP.”*

Ripples spread from around the dark grey body of the male musk duck. With his spiky tail fanned upright in display, and his strange leathery lobe obvious below his chin, he cruises the freshwater stretches of Swan Lake in pursuit of females. As I watch him glide across the surface, the female ducks have also spotted him and paddle effortlessly a little further away.

Most local and international visitors to Phillip Island come for the Penguin Parade, and rightly so. But many visitors may not be aware that beyond our iconic penguins, there is a superb variety of birdlife which also call our island paradise home.

As a resident of Phillip Island and avid birdwatcher, my eyes have always been drawn to our blue skies, ocean reefs and unique bushland, seeking out and photographing the avian fauna. Taking on the challenge of a “local” Big Year seemed a logical decision until I delved deeper into the statistics. In birdwatching lingo, a Big

Year is a personal challenge to identify as many species of birds as possible by sight or sound, within a single calendar year and a specific geographic area.

It’s estimated that approximately 250 species of birds live on, or fly over the waters surrounding Phillip Island. Birdwatchers can take advantage of exploring new or familiar hotspots and with multiple locations across the island, birders get good bang for their buck for a relatively small area.

My go to hotspot is Swan Lake. Positioned just before the entrance to the spectacular Penguin Parade visitor centre, this vast lake – the island’s only natural freshwater lake – was an important site for the traditional custodians of Millowl (Phillip Island), the Bunurong people. Easily accessible along a gravel lined bush track and timber boardwalks, there are two wooden hides on the edge of the lake which provide an ideal vantage point for

novice or experienced birdwatchers.

The immense joy and sense of calm I absorb in barely an hour in these hides refuels my tanks for the day ahead. On multiple visits here I have added black swans, white ibis, herons, cormorants, at least four species of ducks, Cape Barren geese, and more to my list. Additionally, busy woodland birds like rosellas, shrike thrush, superb fairy-wrens and honey eaters can be found along the bush tracks. Raptors like kites and harriers prowl the skies above the lake. I’ve seen several lifers (a species seen for the first time) here including Yellow-billed Spoonbill, Australasian Shoveler, Hardhead and Grey Teal.

The Western Port Ramsar site (a wetland of international importance) which borders the northern coastline of Phillip Island spills into the major wetland at Fishers Wetland (near Churchill Island). A solid bird hide ensures minimal disturbance to birds while the walking

tracks around the lake edge and through the bush are filled with elusive woodland birds foraging for food. The wetlands themselves provide an important home and resting place for pelicans, swans, ibis and many species of ducks. I’ve been fortunate to add the Great Egret and hoary-headed Grebe to my list of lifers in the lush surrounds of Fishers Wetland.

Conservation Hill Reserve and the Rhyll Inlet are hidden gems on the island birdwatching map. This easy walking trail starts its journey through tall banksia forests, before opening out to boardwalks which sit solidly above the mangrove mudflats. This vegetation allows ample opportunity to see and hear numerous woodland and wetland species – my favourite being the white-naped Honeyeater fossicking for nectar in the spiky banksia flowers. During the summer months, thousands of migratory shorebirds line the sandy coastline to feed in the nutrient rich waters at Rhyll Inlet, bringing with them binocular bearing birdwatchers from across the state and the nation to tick these unique lifers off their list. Next summer I will make a dedicated outing to notch up these incredibly well travelled wading birds.

At the farthest end of Phillip Island on Summerland Peninsula, sits the Nobbies, its peculiar name belying the spectacular clifftop views and rocky landscape. From our intrepid little penguins, quirky crested terns in summer, to ubiquitous silver gulls in late autumn, the south-west tip of our island is home to many nesting bird species throughout the year. A good pair of





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binoculars will enable keen birdwatchers to scan the oceans beyond the rugged coast and rollicking waves to search for soaring seabirds. Although best seen from a boat, it is possible to see albatross and gannets deep diving into the ocean for fish. Seeing the enormous flock of crested terns with their downy spotty chicks, sitting exposed on a clifftop hillside in January was a highlight of my local big year.

**“... THE INCREDIBLE  
ARRAY OF BIRDLIFE  
ON THE ISLAND  
IS WORTHY OF  
ENJOYMENT BY  
EVERYONE.”**

Another of my favourites is the south coast road from the Nobbies towards the Penguin Parade at Summerland Beach. Along this gravel road you can rely on spotting raptors like black shouldered kites hovering precisely in place despite the wind, swamp harriers soaring slowly over the grassy areas, as well as the majestic Cape Barren geese alternately preening in the sun or promenading slowly as they graze.

Scenic Estate Conservation Reserve was recently restored to preserve grasslands and native vegetation, after years of use as an off-road bike track. With the ecosystem given a chance to regenerate, woodland species have returned in droves, and the walk through to the northern edge of the reserve brings you to the rocky low-lying coastline. Expansive views across the water to Churchill Island and the verdant Bass Hills imbue a sense of space to the walk.

Oswin Roberts Reserve and the neighbouring Rhyll Swamp are two of the last patches of remnant woodland vegetation on the island. As well as hearing the song of plentiful species of woodland habitat birds, you may spot echidnas and even wild koalas. Marked tracks through the aromatic eucalypts provide a peaceful environment to notch up more species.

Ventnor Common bushland reserve is another piece of the twitching puzzle worth a visit and if you love a good hike to go with your birdwatching, then the



Cape Woolamai circuit walk covers both activities with spectacular views for kilometres in all directions.

So how is my big year going? So far I'm just under one third through the estimated list of 250, and without testing my sea legs on a boat, I'm unlikely to see the extraordinarily hardy ocean-going birds off the coast. Over many weekend visits to our island home this year, I have explored most of the locations I've listed here, often on multiple occasions. With a goal of seeing 150 species, I plan to hit the walking trails and boardwalks, armed with a keen eye, my binoculars, and camera. And although I have set myself an ambitious target, I am confident my list will grow over the months ahead. In the process, not only will I add more lifers to

the mix, but my love of the birdlife and natural environment on the island will be strengthened.

For visitors to Phillip Island with no birdwatching agendas, the opportunities for incidental birding are fortunately plentiful - the incredible array of birdlife on the island is worthy of enjoyment by everyone. Personal challenges aside, the pure sense of quiet joy, calm and peace that infuses my system from an hour or two spent in nature, just being present in the moment, is worth the small amount of pressure to reach my big birding goal.

*Follow Kate's "local" Big Year on Instagram: @packupandflyaway and Facebook: Pack Up And Fly Away.*



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# Melbourne Cup visit

Phillip Island got an early taste of Spring Racing fever, when the Melbourne Cup visited in June.

The 18-carat gold Melbourne Cup trophy started its day long tour with an assembly at Cowes Primary School.

In attendance were several direct descendants of Captain John Cleeland, who bred and raced thoroughbred horses on the island; most famously, “Wollomai”, who won the Melbourne Cup in 1875.

Wollomai, bred in Cape Woolamai, won the ‘race that stops the nation.’ To get there, he had to swim across the Eastern Passage to San Remo, and, in stages, walk all the way to Flemington.

Clarrie Cleeland, who is now a grandfather himself of sixth-generation islanders, is the great grandson of Captain John Cleeland.


Clarrie said to have this year’s Melbourne Cup on display on Phillip



Island and reunite with three generations of his family was “very, very special.”

The visit also included a fundraising evening to help local teenage equestrian

stars Gabe and Gisele Smith raise money for their trip to compete in the Mounted Games Championships in Europe.



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This year's event promises a fantastic mix of heritage, local seafood, entertainment, and fun for all! Expect

a wide variety of local seafood, market stalls, continuous entertainment, and much more during the weekend.

The festival will feature two different programs on each day. Events include Friday's Seafood Festival Cocktail Night, Deckie's races, Blessing of the fleet, Wildlife Coast Crusies, live music and kids activities.

Profits from the event will be donated to the local SES and CFA for improvements and new equipment.

Tickets will be available online as well as at the entrance. Adult is \$10 per day, \$15 for 2 days. Under 16 free. Bring the whole family.

[tidalseafoodfest.com.au](http://tidalseafoodfest.com.au)




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# CACCIUCCO

## - TUSCAN FISH STEW

**INGREDIENTS:**  
One kilo of locally sourced fish (I used a mix of John Dory, latchet and duck fish)  
400 grams of mussels  
300 grams of octopus or squid  
250 grams of prawns (at least two per person)  
400 grams Italian diced tomatoes  
One heaped tablespoon of tomato paste  
5-6 fresh sage leaves  
Handful of fresh Italian parsley  
One small onion  
One carrot  
One celery stalk  
One cup of red wine  
Two cloves of garlic  
Two cups of fish stock  
1/4 cup of extra virgin olive oil  
One fresh chilli  
Slices of crusty bread

**METHOD:**  
Chop celery, carrot and onion in small equal pieces and add to a saucepan with chilli halved, parsley, olive oil and a pinch salt. Sauté on a low heat for a few minutes until tender. Add halved garlic pieces and sage leaves and heat through.  
Add tomato paste and stir through, then add red wine and cook off for about a minute. Add fish stock to the pan and heat through. Remove garlic pieces.  
To the saucepan, add large evenly chopped fish pieces and octopus, cook for about 20 minutes. Add diced tomatoes to the pan and heat through.  
Add cleaned mussels and prawns and cook for about five minutes or until cooked through.  
Ladle stew over toasted crusty bread scrapped with garlic and olive oil.  
Finish with chopped parsley and serve immediately. Recipe serves 4-6 people depending on appetite.  
Note: ask your local fish supplier to fillet and skin fish for you, and reserve the carcass to make a fish broth to use in this recipe. Store bought stock will also suffice.

From one fishing town in Tuscany, Italy, to San Remo on the Bass Coast. It is impossible for me not to poetically draw synergies between the two coastal towns. Although vastly different, I have called both places home.

In Tuscany, this hearty fish stew was frequently enjoyed on Sundays, at the beach club restaurant located underneath my apartment in Viareggio. I can still feel the warm sea air, sand in my open toe shoes, my thighs sticking to the plastic beach chairs, hear the rhythmic chattering, the clanging of plates, wine bottles being corked and raucous laughter.

Although there is a 16,000 kilometre divide, I have also enjoyed cooking this dish in a saucepan on a barbecue. Using fresh seafood direct from the boat in San Remo, for family and friends, with the fragrance of tea trees in the air under the heat of the Bass Coast sun.

Cacciucco (Kar-Choo-Ko) alla

Viareggina hails from the port city of Viareggio, a lively fishing town located in northern Tuscany, on the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Viareggio began as a medieval fishing village, then later gained renown for shipbuilding. Like with many soups and stews of the region, bread plays an important role in this dish. Tuscans make their bread without salt which means it goes stale very quickly. To not waste the bread, it is toasted, rubbed with a little garlic and then topped with the stew to mop up the juices. It is said to have been created by fishermen as a way of using up the smaller fish which could not be sold, not wanting to discard a thing. A classic example of the “cucina povera” (poor kitchen), using seasonal and local ingredients, minimising food waste through creative reuse of leftovers.

While many fish stews typically contain white wine, this stew has a red wine base which is evident in the rich flavour and

colour. Surprisingly this still works as a quintessential spring or summer dish.

The selection of fish and seafood is interchangeable. There is no strict recipe so it is best to select what looks best seasonally at the local fish supplier. This recipe uses a beautiful selection of locally sourced fish from the Bass Strait.

Before cookbooks, travel and now social media, this dish could only be experienced and enjoyed in Viareggio. I almost get goosebumps that I am sharing it with you, using local produce from the Bass Coast. A place that I have loved since infancy.

*Buon appetito,*  
*Kara Williams*



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# That's one lucky duck

A community fund raiser help saved the life of Mr Quackers, a duck owned by the late, iconic Phillip Island artist DAK.

Mr Quackers has been cared for by Jess O'Brien since the artist's death early last year.

When she announced the duck had developed "bumblefoot", a highly painful condition found in the feet of ducks, and needed expensive surgery, the community rallied to raise the money needed for the operation.

Jess said the fundraiser "came down to the wire", but DAK's treasured duck underwent successful surgery, just in the nick of time before his bacterial infection



spread to the bone.

"Now he's right as rain," Jess said, "It looks like Mr Quackers has got a pretty good future ahead of him. I really do thank everybody that pledged and donated. I was incredibly touched by how many people came out to save Mr Quackers."

Mr Quackers was one of several ducks owned by DAK, who was frequently spotted around town accompanied by his duck Skippy.

DAK's unique metal sculptures can be seen all across the island, including on many private gates.

The ACMI in the Regions series features a short film made in 2011 showcasing DAK's artwork.

[www.acmi.net.au/works/117264--acmi-in-the-regions-stories-from-bass-coast/](http://www.acmi.net.au/works/117264--acmi-in-the-regions-stories-from-bass-coast/)



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PHOTOS: MATT BAGLEY

San Remo based underwater photographer Matt Bagley is holding an exhibition at Berninnet in Cowes later this year.

The “Unseen” Exhibition series runs from October 26 to December 8.

Matt has won international awards for his underwater and environmental photography, and was featured in the first edition of The Island magazine back in December 2021.

His latest series, “Unseen,” takes viewers on a mesmerising exploration of forgotten and discarded ocean debris being reclaimed by Mother Nature. Using

ultraviolet photography, he captures the beauty and devastation of discarded manmade objects found during his nighttime free diving adventures on the San Remo coastline.

The “Unseen” Exhibition series invites visitors to interact with the photographs using their smartphones, unlocking a captivating augmented reality experience. This immersive journey provides in-depth information about the life cycle and detrimental effects of common pollutants on marine ecosystems, sparking meaningful conversations and raising awareness about ocean conservation.

Back in 2021, Matt spoke to The Island about his nighttime dives. Armed with only a torch and his camera, he free dives to a depth of 10 metres, holding his breath for about a minute, plummeting blindly, and for what?

For his art: to capture in photos “a moment, a wave, an interaction with an animal”

Matt’s photos – showcased on his Instagram (@petrichor.mb) – feature some extraordinary marine species. A curious sea lion (a line of air bubbles streaming from its nose), an octopus gliding in a ray of light, and more poignantly a tiny



seahorse no bigger than the end of a finger.

“Migration patterns, animal behaviour, marine ecosystems, this is what influences my shots,” Matt said.

On one of these night-time diving forays, off San Remo’s back beach, Matt captured a tiny bottletail squid, which he photographed in the palm of his hand, in the light of a dive torch, against a midnight black ocean.

He called the photo “Lullaby” and entered it into the annual Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation Environmental Photographer of the Year 2021 contest.

The shot earned Matt second place in the “Reasons for Hope” category and launched him to international prominence.

His work has been exhibited in prestigious galleries and museums around the world, including New York, London, Berlin, Paris, Moscow, Monaco, Budapest, and Barcelona.

Matt mainly photographs around San Remo and Phillip Island, including seals opposite Saltwater restaurant at Newhaven, and in Western Port between the island and Flinders.

“I’m fairly passionate about the environment. Having grown up here I can

see how things have changed, even just the erosion and sand movement on the back beach. As the population here grows, we need to start taking notice and looking after the environment.

“I think my images can make a difference. Many people who live in San Remo don’t realise what is in the ocean. It educates people about what is out there and helps raise awareness.”

Follow Matt on Instagram @petrichor.mb  
www.mattbagley.art

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# Oceans Sounds

A stellar line up is coming our way for Ocean Sounds 2025, at Churchill Island on January 11.

Birds of Tokyo, Boy & Bear and The Cat Empire are part of a stunning bill that also includes Sunshine and Disco Faith Choir, Jem Cassar-Daley, Cool Out Sun and Ozone Street, as well as a special performance from Millowl Dreaming.

Alongside some of Australia's best live acts, Ocean Sounds will also showcase local wines, cheeses and gourmet food vans.



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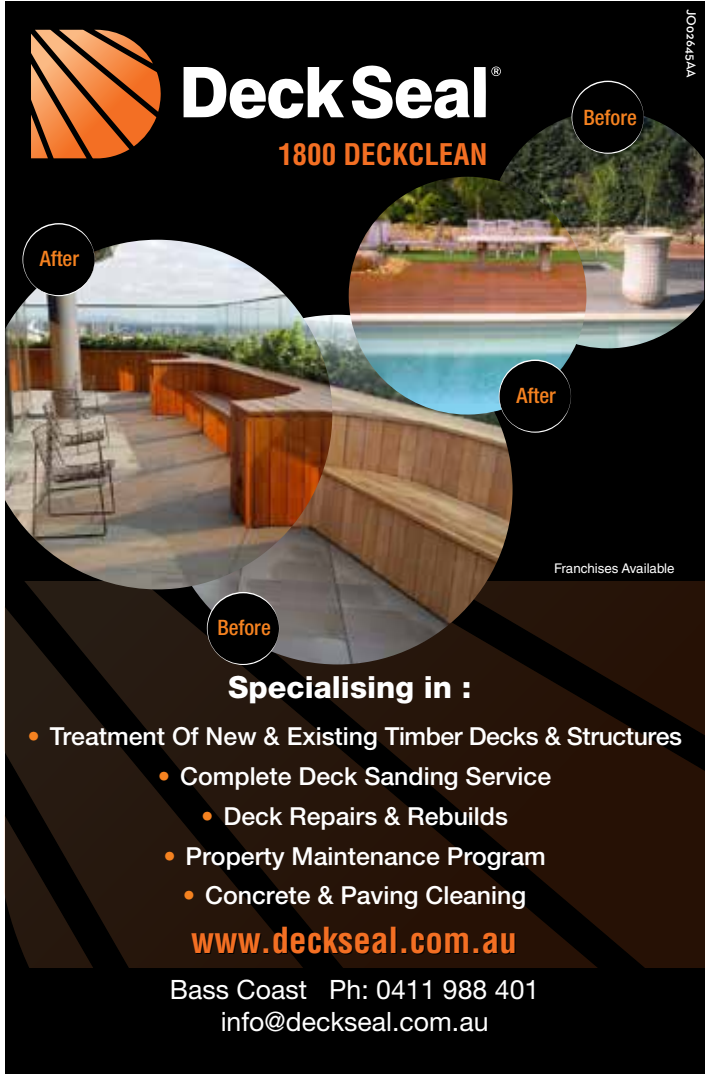
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BY EDMUND COLEMAN



# Smiths Beach rescue base on the edge

The Woolamai Beach Surf Life Saving Club (WBSLSC) is calling for donations to help renovate the Smiths Beach rescue base.

The rescue base was opened in June 2018, following a seven-year campaign by the local community. However now, due to natural deterioration caused by harsh coastal conditions, the rescue base urgently needs refurbishment and renovation.

Perched above one of Phillip Island's most popular beaches, the base is one of the surf club's most critical pieces of infrastructure,

"The elevated position allows lifesavers and lifeguards to see over waves in order to keep a safe eye on swimmers and complement their colleagues gaze from ground level," explains former Club Vice President Brendan Smart.

According to approximate numbers recorded by patrol members, over 11,000

people visited Smiths Beach during patrol hours over the 2023/24 summer.

The base is also equipped with a solar panel and battery, part-funded by Westernport Water, which ensure radios – crucial for communication and co-ordination of rescues and beach safety – can be charged.

Moreover, the base includes a first aid room and a fresh water tap, both essential assets for lifesavers and lifeguards when treating members of the public.

The Surf Life Saving Club is aiming to raise \$138,000 to fund works including treatment of wall panels, the removal or replacement of the metal staircase, and painting work.

"Without work on these assets we will have to close the staircase, followed by the tower in coming seasons," WBSLSC President Jason Close said.

The club is currently applying for

grants and asking both local and state authorities to contribute to the repair costs.

Anyone wishing to contribute to the restoration project can make a fully tax-deductible donation: [woolamaibeach.org.au/donate](http://woolamaibeach.org.au/donate) and selecting the 'Smiths Beach' option.




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**FEATURES**

- Home to Phillip Island Brewing Co.
- Boutique specialty and seasonal ales on tap, Contemporary European and Australian cuisine
- Rustic bush setting, 5 minutes from Cowes





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MY  
OBSESSION

# Crazy about the ukulele



BY ELEANOR MCKAY PHOTO: SUPPLIED

The Beatles' George Harrison reportedly carried a ukulele with him everywhere, and once famously declared "it is one instrument you can't play and not laugh ... everyone I know who is into the ukulele is crackers ..."

Diane McAskill, founder of the Phillip Island and Bass Coast Ukulele Festival, is the first to admit she's a "little bit crazy" about ukuleles.

Her obsession kicked off in 2013, when her husband Paul took her to see the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain perform at Hamer Hall. "It was the most incredible musical experience." But it was on a family trip to Hawaii in 2016 where it really took hold.

After a free ukulele workshop at their hotel, "I was hooked – line and sinker," Diane cheerfully admitted. Dialling up the "uke" factor, Paul (a luthier and musician) visited Kamaka Ukuleles, one of Hawaii's oldest and finest ukulele makers, celebrating its 100-year anniversary, and then the couple renewed their vows at Waikiki, serenaded by a group of ukulele players. Diane said the performance was so incredible, "all the hairs on my arms stood up".

Returning home, guided by Paul, she made herself a tenor ukulele, the first instrument she'd ever made. Diane then

set about practicing ... and practicing. "I basically just taught myself".

A chance encounter in a Rhyll park opened up a new door for the ukulele lover. "I heard a bunch of people playing ukulele and realised there was a group here on Phillip Island." During Covid, the group – know as the Ukulelians – started playing outside, rotating around the local park rotundas. Diane joined the ranks and since then, a second group, the Island Ukers put together to perform at local aged care facilities, has emerged, playing charity performances, and aged care homes. They have already secured their spot on the 2024 Carols by the Bay line-up.

After attending other ukulele festivals in Melbourne and Emerald, Diane was inspired. "I felt like it was something Phillip Island could embrace. In Bass Coast we have very large uke groups in Wonthaggi and Inverloch doing amazing things." The original idea was put on hold due to Covid, but post pandemic, Diane felt the need was even greater. "I wanted to create a free weekend event to bring the community back together." The first festival, held in November 2023 attracted ukulele lovers from across the state, and raised over \$2000 for the Bass Coast Health Music Therapy program.

The Phillip Island and Bass Coast Ukulele Festival returns this year on November 30 and December 1 at Berninnet. Diane says anyone interested in playing the ukulele should come along and they also have instruments people can borrow to try out. "We always say, if you don't have a uke, don't fret," she laughed.

"Anyone can play the ukulele. It's only got four strings; it doesn't judge you. You can pluck it, strum it, finger pick it and get the most incredible sounds. It's a very small instrument but has a lot of heart and soul."

Tickets at: [www.trybooking.com/events/landing/1225580](http://www.trybooking.com/events/landing/1225580)

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