

Tony Sheer's Cape Schanck

... as told to Tim Bracher



Tony Sheer was not so much born 'into' tourism, but rather born 'over' it.

His first years of life were spent living over the family motel in Kew. He had a stint in the business before turning his hospitality experience and accounting training to good effect with the Flag Motel chain, where he spent 3 years helping to develop the much acclaimed Super Sally computer booking system.

He performed a major transformation of the Mitcham Hotel, then moved to the Wilton Hotel Group, before buying the Lamplighter Motel in Oakleigh 13 years ago. When his son was old enough to run the motel, he and his wife grabbed the opportunity five years ago to move to the Peninsula 5 years and start a B&B.

His experience in the accommodation industry won the State Government tender for the Cape Schanck Light station in 1998. Tony, his wife and four staff operate the museum and run tours of the historic tower and outbuildings every half hour. They have 4 cottages available for short term use, including the original 1859 cottage which has recently undergone a \$70,000 renovation.

Tony took over as Chairman of Mornington Peninsula Tourism during August 2002, to help oversee the area's continuing renaissance as a quality holiday destination.

Does your business card now say Tony Sheer, 'Lighthouse Keeper'?

I'm a tourism operator, but the reality is that I'm also the modern version of a lighthouse keeper.

What type of day to day work does a new-style lighthouse keeper do?

It's not quite as glamorous as people might think - everything from accounting to selling ice creams. We're told by Streets that the light station is the biggest seller of ice creams on the Peninsula. We clean the brass and keep a watch on the diesel generators, but the light is operated by AMSA (Aust Maritime Safety Authority).

You would be amazed at how much goes on at Cape Schanck. We're a key link in the Global Positioning System (GPS), and responding to calls from head office in Brisbane can consume more of our time that looking after the light. The Cape is considered to have the cleanest air in the world. We capture and bottle air for CSIRO, which is then exported as a 'zero pollution' index for benchmarking air cleanliness in other countries.

Do you get visited by former light keepers and their families?

A lot of the families do come back to visit because, being a three person light house with three families here at any given time, hundreds of people have lived and worked here over the years. However, there have only been 18 head lighthouse keepers since 1859 and one or two of them have revisited

Do you have a sense of doing something special?

You know it's a vital service when the light goes out, which it did about 18 months ago

and we received about 100 calls in an hour from people living everywhere from Phillip Island to Lorne and even some travelling on the Tasmanian ferry.

Being at the place and showing people around is amazing because a light house generates its own aura. There are two types of people who visit: those interested in history and those who are into the operation of it. We've got plenty to satisfy both groups. For the history buffs, just walking into the grounds conveys a real sense of going back 150 years and my wife is a mine of information about its past. The tours I lead concentrate more on the technical side of things. Everything works perfectly, as it did in 1859. The light still has the clockwork mechanism in place and it could still be used as a back-up system.

People just love the romance of a lighthouse, so it's not surprising that a lot of people get married here. In fact, we've turned the Old Inspector's room into a romantic, en suited room. When the inspectors visited in the 19th century to see how the light and the light staff were working, they obviously had to visit at night, so they needed a room to sleep in, with its own entrance.

Are there any ghosts or unexplained phenomena around the light station?

It's the most asked question on the tours. We'd like to think there is, and you could make up a lot of things. Because the whole tower echoes as people are walking up at night, there is a sense that there's something out there, but no, there's nothing like that.

What's the best and worst aspects of being on the Cape?

The whole coastline is quite magic. The best part is taking people up there at night and seeing them totally in awe of the place. You have the stars and a view over the 1859 buildings. You hear the waves pounding and on some nights you can see the lights over 180 degrees from the light tower.

Ironically, probably the worst part is having to share it with other people. Last year when the aurora lights were streaking across the sky, my wife and I would often sit outside at 2am, with no one else around. It was magical.

How did Bushrangers Bay get its name?

Two convicts on a boat from Tasmania forced the captain to steer it into Bushrangers Bay. They killed the crew and camped there for a while before heading to Ballarat where they were captured.

The walk from the light station to Bushrangers Bay is one of the best in Victoria - you get a mixture of cliff and gully walks, with a beautiful, rugged beach.

In the other direction, you can even walk from the lighthouse to Portsea along a beach, bush and cliff top track. We often send our honeymooning guests along to Fingal Beach - just up from the light house. There's a 750 step descent to a fantastic and very secluded beach.

It sounds like a great place for a picnic?

We often prepare gourmet food hampers for visitors, packed with home made and local produce, including my wife's wonderful Austrian almond torte. They can sit in the grounds to enjoy it or take it down to Bushrangers Bay or Fingal Beach. We can also do barbecues at the light station for groups.

If they don't want a picnic or barbecue, where do you recommend they eat around the district?

Salties in Flinders, Montalto in Red Hill and would I consider Fed Up in Rosebud to be one of the best eating places on the Peninsula.

It's something of a golfing mecca on the Cape, but does a modern style light house keeper get a chance to swing a club?

I'm very much a social golfer, but there are some fantastic courses within a few kilometres. Moonah Links will host the Australian Open this year and we're hoping to organise a 10 day festival of golf to coincide with it. It's the sand base and the undulating links style country that makes them so good.

How would you advise a visitor to spend a great time on this area?

I would advise a weekend guest staying with us to head down to Bushrangers Bay or Fingal Beach on the first day, probably with one of our picnic hampers so they can take as long as they like. I'd send them to Montalto in Red Hill for dinner and after breakfast the next day advise them to explore the scenery and fortifications at Point Nepean. Then, lunch or afternoon tea at Coppins on Sorrento back beach, before heading up to Arthurs Seat to explore Seawinds Gardens.

