ACROSS THE WATERS

Next Magazine - June 2004

Written by Sue Hoffart - Photos by Andrew Coffey

There's no power, water or sewerage services, yet these strong and resilient Great Barrier women tell Sue Hoffart why they wouldn't live anywhere else.

Kylie Robbins, police officer, ambulance driver, volunteer firefighter, rescue-boat skipper and air rescuer

When I arrive, unannounced, outside Great Barrier's small police station, constable Kylie Robbins emerges from the neighbouring house in a long multicoloured dress, two blonde children at her heels. Four year-old Ben is her son, the girl is the daughter of the island's only other cop. I scramble to explain myself, expecting reticence and official policy lines about not talking to journalists. "Come on in, mate" she says. Then, sitting at her kitchen table: "What do you want to know?"

Kylie, 36, grew up with her parents and two siblings in a one-room hut here on Great Barrier, just 88km northeast of New Zealand's largest city. Hers was the original hippie childhood, remote, barefoot, no running water. There was correspondence school into her teens and she learned about the bush, about fishing and growing produce. After leaving the island at 16 she eventually found her way to police college and spent a decade working as an officer on the mainland.

"I always wanted to come back here," she says. "This island has always had a big hold over me. People who come here either love it or hate it, it polarises people. But once this place touches your heart....."

A year ago she became the only other full-time police officer. The job comes with a police house fitted with true Barrier luxuries - Internet access, Sky television and an endless power supply (there are no reticulated power, water or sewerage services on the island). Her husband, Dennis, gave up his job to become a house dad while Kylie works a regular day shift and is on call around the clock every second week. Oh, and Barrier cops automatically become volunteer firefighters and ambulance drivers - the police truck doubles as the island's sole ambulance. They skipper the rescue boat and assist with air rescues.

"This place attracts very strong women. I think they have to be. The isolation is hard on relationships - nothing's easy over here. There's the odd dizzy tart but they don't seem to last

long. I love the lifestyle, I love the island and the community out here, even though they drive me nuts at times. I have to live in this community, too. So what I do to keep it safer is as much for me and my family as for them. Island people don't report a lot of offending to the police. They tend to sort stuff out themselves."

That said, there are locals she can call on for back up when necessary. "There is very little big crime. We get a lot of bullshit thefts of little things. Most homes over here are unlocked all the time, including outs. It is rewarding being a cop here. It's where I wanted Ben to grow up. It's still a very safe place for children, without peer pressure. Nobody over here has the latest, greatest Nikes and the other kids don't want them. There's no spacey parlour down the road."

Sarah Harrison, potter, with daughter Arwyn.

A few hundred metres from the jetty, 32 year-old potter Sarah Harrison looks content with baby Arwyn on her hip and a bag of just-delivered mussels at her feet. Inside her rambling old, art-filled house, she begins shifting uncomfortably when talk turns to her school days. She was among the island children who regularly caught the ferry to board at Epsom Girls Grammar almost 20 years ago. Sarah recalls how quickly her eagerness for the wider world was dashed by her inability to fit in with mainland schoolmates. The matron greeted her with the comment, "Oh no, not another Barrier girl".

It can be quite a harsh world at boarding school if you don't look right and wear the right clothes. It's a long way away from the unconditional love of family. But I'm really, really grateful I went away because I so needed it. This is not the place for a teenager to be - the lack of opportunities, of seeing people around you doing different things... there's a tendency to have a pretty limited world view. Being on the island shrinks your world."

Sarah's horizons were expanded by a polytechnic craft design course, travel and work. After almost a decade off the island, she returned to the Barrier to establish a pottery studio and showroom beside Tryphena Harbour. With help from her family and a small grant, she survived the first few, lean years and bought the property after her father died four years ago. Now, she is able to meet the mortgage by selling her hand-crafted bowls and mugs, mosaics, funky tiles and miniature tea sets to tourists. She raises her daughter with partner Nyal Smith and pots when she can.

"I earn my income between December and May and I just have to be good at budgeting to last the rest of the year. I do sometimes wish it was easier. In my weaker moments or depressed moments, when my batteries are dying... or the water pump's broken down and

the generator's blowing out smoke, I just wish I was on the national grid. But overall, I'm glad I'm not. I enjoy that independent lifestyle. It's bloody interesting."

"There is something that keeps bring you back here. There's so much diversity... and that sense that we're all in this together because we're all on this rock together."

Carol Rendle, former florist, now lodge owner.

Carol Rendle is waiting at the gate at the foot of a rugged gravel drive that fords two streams as it rises steeply through the bush. One kilometre uphill the driveway emerges into an olive grove and wraps around a striking adobe-like building made from straw bales. Earthsong Lodge is utterly unlike the board and batten buildings scattered around nearby Tryphena.

Someone has placed a single hibiscus bloom on the front doorstep and, beyond the threshold, ceilings are elevated, furnishings plush and something soothing wafts from a compact disc player. Carol's husband Trevor delivers home-made shortbread and tea before disappearing into the commercial kitchen to deal with the large salmon that will sate tonight's guests.

There is an air of fragility about the woman across the table from me, with her soft voice and creamy skin and her way of pausing to think before she speaks. Clearly, first impressions are way off. Fragile women do not chop firewood or negotiate such a hairy driveway without flinching.

To be fair, even close friends expressed doubt that Carol - who owned a florist shop in Auckland's Newmarket for 18 years - and her airline steward husband could handle the rigours of Barrier life. "They thought we would be lonely and not measure up to the challenges," she says. "We wondered ourselves, sometimes. We were not very skilled in handyman sort of things."

Before the Barrier, they didn't have to be. In Carol's old world, electricity came from power lines and fruit came from the supermarket. If something broke, she bought a new one. "We've astonished ourselves. We're gradually learning things our grandparents and parents probably knew. You have to plan a lot more what your needs are. We helped with putting up some of the straw walls for the lodge, which was fun and messy. I learnt to use a chainsaw."

Building their dream lodge was a difficult, protracted process, the remote location compounded by tricky access and the fact that guests paying more than $800 a night for a double would expect all the creature comforts. Towards the end, Carol rented a nearby cottage and oversaw the building work every day, while Trevor continued working for Air New

Zealand or cooked for friends who came to help with the painting. The hard graft continued after the lodge opened almost five years ago as they worked to raise their profile while fine-tuning their role as hosts. Now, business is gratifyingly good.

"We can't imagine doing anything else. There is a strong sense of fulfilment, pleasure, out of doing it well. I feel part of the community, more so than I did in (Auckland suburbs) Mount Eden or Birkenhead. You walk into the little store and people are really friendly, you hear what's happening and you talk about it. A five-minute purchase could take 25 or 30 minutes, which is really nice."

They have learned where to buy tiny, sweet, locally grown finger bananas, free-range eggs, avocados, mussels, apples and garlic. Lemongrass, basil and other seasonal goodies prosper on site and Carol proudly points out jars of spicy beetroot relish, preserved lemons and their own olives. Time off is spent working in the olive grove, in the garden or collecting cockles and pipi from the estuary. When the busy summer tourist season ends, they head for hiking trails or their mainland friends come to stay.

"I sometimes feel I'm in a time warp. It's slightly other-worldly. You get this mist between us and what people think is the real world," she says, pointing out to sea and the vague outline of Coromandel Peninsula. The mist and the size of the community can close in on a person, though. Carol, like most of the women I speak with likes to leave the island for periodic city hits of movies, galleries, shopping or just the pleasure of browsing. Then, they can return home with overflowing grocery bags and a sense of relief.

Helen Mabey, Whangapoua-beach farm owner.

Helen Mabey is a widow of 14 years who flits comfortably between the city and island life, while all three of her adult sons have returned to either live or work on Great Barrier.

Helen's new partner, an Auckland-based doctor, affords her extra excuses for trips to 'town' while her vegetable garden and 607 hectare sheep and cattle station draw her happily home again. For the first time, she even has a dishwasher, though of course she only operates it when the sun is shining (it's solar-powered). This astoundingly youthful 60-year-old stays in shape with regular morning jogs along the deserted golden Whangapoua beach that bounds her property, at the north end of the island.

Helen came to the Barrier to work as a dental nurse 35 years ago, fell for local farm boy Murray Mabey and stayed. Their sons were at boarding school when Murray died

suddenly. Though neighbours helped and she hired a farm manager, Helen had to learn to keep accounts herself and recognise when the diesel generator needed an oil change. Or deal with delays when foul weather prevented a barge load of her sheep from reaching the mainland sale yard. She has since leased an adjoining property, handed over management to middle son Allan, and, last year, downed her dental tools.

Aside from family, fun comes via the rural women's group, an art group and a myriad of gatherings like the "retail therapy" sessions where each woman brings a plate and a few still-stylish clothes to trade or sell. In winter, she sometimes stays overnight in her beachside shearer's cottage, to watch the storms.

"It's the sea in-between that makes us different," she says. "I find I'm very stimulated by what I do. When I look at some of my friends in town, I'd get bored stiff." Occasionally, she craves a hamburger or Chinese takeaways but frequent mainland visitors feel the same way about her fresh crayfish, fish and roast lamb. And her regular overseas pleasure trips always make her appreciate the absence of crowds and queues at home. Her nearest neighbour may be 10km away but the airfield is just a 10 minute drive. "In 35 minutes, you're in Auckland. If you lived in Gisborne, you'd be far more isolated than you are here."

Jude Gilbert, conservationist and city escapee.

Judy Gilbert's mainland ties are closer than most. Husband Scott Macindoe owns a home in Epsom, where he lives with their son Guy during the Auckland Grammar School term. "We have a really interesting marriage in that we live in our own houses," Judy says. "We're monogamous and we live our own lives, we love each other and we get all our holidays together. It's perfect."

It was Judy who told me, weeks ago, that everyone on Great Barrier is "an artist, an anarchist or an alcoholic". She lays claim to the first two, though admits she's better at buying than producing art.

Her property is part of a collectively owned 243-hectare block, bought when she was a 19-year-old teacher's training college student. Her home perches at the end of another Barrier goat track, beyond the 'No exit, legal road stops' sign. All gleaming glass, local art and wide decking, it faces the sea and juts, eyrie-like over rugged, kanuka-smothered hills. Here, this 1.47m ball of energy clears her own traps - rats are shudderingly abundant - hauls gas bottles and firewood, digs drains and battles rabbits and stubborn clay soil to garden on the steepest slopes. When she is not spearheading conservation and employment programmes, she keeps an eye on her eight solar panels, wetback wood stove and composting toilet. "And yes," she says, "I clean out the shit and I do dig it into my garden."

Unsurprisingly, the diminutive 50-year-old has a chiropractic appointment in the city to deal with her prolapsed disc, or 'Barrier back'. As an antidote to the slog, Judy makes a point of

bird watching from the seats dotted around her garden, bottling peaches with a girlfriend or soaking in her outdoor bathtub in the bush.

"I have time for girlfriends when they say, "I'm having a 'shit day'. There's an elderly woman I play Scrabble with of an afternoon. You've got every type of person imaginable living on Barrier. There's an opportunity to be in relationships with real characters. My son comes from an affluent family but he was able to mix and be friends with people who lived in a double garage. I think that's very important.

She has also learned to enjoy her own company. "I was a very gregarious, social person in town," she says, describing her former frenzied beachfront lifestyle and varied career in Auckland's Devonport. "Now, my life is more balanced. I love my solitude. It's a very ordinary life in a very extraordinary place."

Anne Kernohan, vet and former Aucklander.

It was winter when Barrier vet Anne Kernohan moved to the island. Leaving Auckland City, she found herself in a shack with two preschoolers, a wringer washing machine, wood stove and a long-drop toilet. Off the flood-prone, rutted gravel road, incessant rain turned the bush clearing to mud. The phone service was poor and there was no power. A week after she and her husband Chris arrived, three-year-old son Luke developed convulsions and had to be flown to hospital in Auckland. (Chris and Anne are now separated.)

Yet somehow, between battles with a temperamental generator and the chopping of firewood, the wet clothes and sick children, she fell for this hard, beautiful island. Previous struggles with her city veterinary career began to seem insignificant in the face of her daily toil to meet basic needs. And the comforts of her renovated Ponsonby villa seemed less consequential than having the company of wood pigeons and moreporks, in a place where hush had replaced the hum of city traffic.

Seventeen years later, living conditions are much improved and all is calm on the Kernohans' Tryphena Harbour property. Dusk is gathering, a teenage daughter is going camping with friends and there is a hint of wood smoke in the air as we sit at her outdoor table and watch fat kaka pecking over spoils from her apple tree.

"When I came her, I remember someone saying to me, 'This is a man's paradise and a woman's hell'," Anne says. "But I honestly think it has changed. I think women have found more support systems. I know I do things with a lot of groups of women."

On Sunday nights , islanders stand on the jetty and comfort each other as their teenaged children travel to city boarding schools. All four of Anne's children have left the island for

post-primary schooling and Luke, now 20 is studying science at Auckland University. Even as she appreciates the need for teenagers to leave their parents and the island, Anne hates saying goodbye to her youngest son, Nichol, who started at Auckland Grammar School this year. "It's really, really hard. Often tears are shed and people, without saying anything, are there for you. You look at each other and you all know what you're going through."

This is my fourth interview of the day and, by now, I'm getting the picture. As a Barrier-ite to describe her peers and the same words surface: strong, resourceful, resilient, self-sufficient, necessarily in tune with nature. Living without reticulated power, when the wind blows they hang out their laundry; when the sun shines solar power allows them to crank up the stereo and vacuum the floor. (When the jug switch fails in my gorgeous beachfront room, my delightful and rather elegant hostess Sandy Lintott of Foromor Lodge pulls out a Phillips screwdriver and undertakes repairs.) Every woman seems to be able to paint, weave or preserve fruit - the incredibly selfless nurse Leonie Howie sews beautiful quilts and vet Anne is working on a series of huge, stunning mosaic pictures. They get by without public transport, a bank, secondary school or hospital and the supermarket is a half-hour flight or four-hour ferry ride away. If the generator breaks, they fix it or do without power until the right part arrives from the mainland. If the road floods, they wait till the water recedes.

All right, unemployment is high, drugs and alcohol do create problems and domestic abuse seems to breed in the dreary isolation of a Barrier winter. But it is also true that islanders leave their cars and homes unlocked and that the local cop believes her son is far safer here than on the mainland. And it is a fact that, after their Saturday-morning yoga session, women head to the beach to help each other fill sacks of seaweed to fertilize their gardens. When the gardens flourish, they share their excess produce and no one cares what kind of dust-covered car you drive.

And if a journalist paints an unflattering picture of their home, they are truly wounded. Over two days, every woman I interview indignantly raises the matter of a recent story in *The New Zealand Herald*. It is unfortunate timing on my part that this trip comes on the heels of an article depicting a man's world inhabited by "bastards and bludgers, ferals and hippies". While most locals, when pushed, will admit there is truth in the words, they maintain it is only part of the story. As Anne says, "What I feel so many of the reporters miss is the richness of living in this community."