

Our Island is Burning



Just a month after she left our screens as the face of TVNZ's *Breakfast*, Petra Bagust is at the forefront of the news again. But this time, she's not reading it from behind a desk – she's watching it unfold in front of her eyes. "Our beloved Great Barrier Island is burning. A potential disaster is unfolding in the bay next door, and it's relentless," says Petra (40).

She is spending summer on the island with husband Hamish (43), their three children Venetia (9), Jude (7) and six-year-old Theo, as well as Petra's parents Judi and Daniel. As the *Weekly* went to press, 70 firefighters – 40 Great Barrier volunteers, supported by crews from around the country – were working to contain the fire, which began last Sunday before dying out and reigniting with renewed force, devastating a huge swathe of land and trees.

"The night the fire started, I joined a group of locals and holidaymakers at the top of the hill at Sugarloaf to look at the fire," explains Petra. "There's a feeling of unreality about seeing something like this happen in front of you, when behind you everything is completely normal."

Deputy principal rural fire officer Lance Dixon has been on the front line



“The fire itself is huge, but you don’t really get a sense of scale until you see the helicopters in the sky above it – they look like ants. It’s very emotional – one lady was watching the fire’s onslaught and was just sobbing.”

While her kids are being kept away from danger, Petra is keeping her eyes and ears open to ways she can help. So far that’s included making meals for the firefighters and working with the community, who are fighting for their island.

A makeshift “mess” has been set up at the Claris Sports Club by local charity the Aotea Family Support Group, to help feed the volunteers.

“There are two important groups here: the people who are fighting the fire and the people who are resourcing the firefighters,” explains Petra.

While some supplies are on their way from the mainland, it’s the locals who are digging deep to look after the firefighters. “Local businesses and the food store have donated food, staff and supplies for people evacuated from their homes, and the sports club have dinner for 70 firefighters organised.”



Firefighter Martijn Brunner surveys the damage with Petra

The fire is intense and constantly changing. “Some of the firefighters are working for 12 hours at a time, returning so exhausted they can hardly bend over to take off their shoes, let alone go home and cook.”

At first, locals ran from house to house, asking for people to donate whatever food they had to the firefighters, but since the initial emergency, they have a co-ordinated phone tree going – someone will bring sausages, while someone else makes the salad or brings potatoes.

"It's an amazing situation – the community is king. On Great Barrier, the community feel is always present, but when something like this happens, it's just astonishing."



Petra helps island resident Jade organise food for the community.

In a concerted effort to get the blaze under control, the locals are doing whatever's needed for each other. "People leave their car keys in doors, so if they need to, they take someone else's car home and return it later. It's share and share alike," says Petra, whose friend, photographer Jackie Meiring, had to borrow a car the day before, when she got stuck on the wrong side of the fire.

At the end of the day, it's this attitude which will keep the island on its feet. "Even now, no-one's lost their sense of humour – the fire narrowly missed the police station and the volunteers were still joking that they could have let it go!" says Petra.

"Everyone's banded together and we'll keep working. Because this isn't over – this community's in it for the long haul."

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