TOURISM SMALL BUSINESS

Case studies from Queensland, Australia

Edited by Dr Sarah Gardiner

Case studies prepared by students studying Tourism Small Business Management in the Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management at Griffith University

Griffith Institute for Tourism Research

March 2016

Griffith University, Queensland, Australia
Acknowledgment

We would like to sincerely thank the businesses that participated in this research.
# Contents

1. Introduction ................................................................................................................. 3

2. The Importance of Experiences and Innovation for the Tourism Industry .. 4

3. Researching and Preparing the Case Studies .............................................................. 7

   3.1 Sunreef Scuba Dive ................................................................................................. 9
   3.2 La Costa Motel ......................................................................................................... 11
   3.3 Dracula’s Cabaret Restaurant, Gold Coast ............................................................. 13
   3.4 O’Reilly’s Rainforest Retreat .................................................................................. 15
   3.5 Tall Ship Adventures ............................................................................................... 17
   3.6 San Mateo on Broadbeach ....................................................................................... 20
   3.7 Australian Kayaking Adventures ........................................................................... 22
   3.8 Stradbroke Island Adventures ............................................................................... 24
   3.9 Fire 4 Hire ............................................................................................................... 26
   3.10 Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary ............................................................................. 28
1. Introduction

This report highlights innovative case studies in tourism businesses in Queensland. These case studies were researched and prepared by students studying an undergraduate business degree at Griffith University. Students interviewed the owners and/or managers of leading Queensland tourism businesses to investigate product, process, managerial, marketing and institutional innovations in their business practices. They also sought insights into their motivation for running a tourism business and investigated key challenges faced in this sector.

Several new, novel and innovative experiences were identified, such as swimming with the whales, city tours in fire trucks and staying at a vintage 1950s beach motel. The importance of staff and their relationship with customers was also apparent in several case studies. Managers reported various approaches they use to recruit and retain appropriate staff for their business. Management practices that consider environmental sustainability of the business and the adaptation of the experience to account for cultural differences of guests are also identified as important to sustainable growth and development of the business. The individual’s passion for the business and the tourism industry, more generally, was also evident in several case studies, highlighting the importance of guest experience and the personal nature of delivering a tourism product.

This compilation of case studies seeks to provide some interesting insights into the nature and practices of tourism small-medium sized businesses in Queensland, highlighting challenges faced in this sector and how these key players overcome these challenges to maintain and grow their business whilst also creating unique, special and memorable experiences for their guests.
2. The Importance of Experiences and Innovation for the Tourism Industry

“The experience economy is here and travellers are seeking new, exciting and memorable experiences. To assist Queensland’s tourism businesses to develop new “WOW” tourism experiences for their guests, the Griffith Institute for Tourism worked with Tourism and Events Queensland to develop the “Creating WOW Experiences” video series and supporting resources (available from: www.teq.queensland.com/experiencedevelopment). These resources seek to assist tourism business bring their experience to life through story making and experiential marketing.

Creating new and innovative tourism experiences and more “WOW moments” is at the forefront of building strong and vibrant tourism destinations around the world. This often requires business owners and managers to think innovative about how they can create something new or adapt their existing offering to WOW their guests. Innovation is often associated with developing new technology and new processes that create big leaps in advancing tourism businesses. However, innovation can also be incremental, that is, a value-adding process where businesses develop better ways of doing what they already do (Tourism Victoria, 2014). Figure 1 highlights the two ways to be innovative, that is, radical innovation - taking a big leap - or incremental innovation – taking small steps towards creating new and innovative products and experiences.

Figure 1. Radical and Incremental Innovation.
Hjalager’s (2010) review of tourism research on innovation suggests there are five types of innovation in tourism: product or service innovations, process innovations, managerial innovations, management innovations and institutional innovations. Figure 2 presents definitions and examples of these five types of innovation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Innovation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Product or service innovations</strong></td>
<td>Changes directly observed by the customer and regarded as new; either in the sense of never seen before, or new to the particular enterprise or destination.</td>
<td>Accor's introduction of the “Formule 1” hotel concept revolutionised the budget hotel experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Process innovations</strong></td>
<td>Typically refer to backstage initiatives which aim at escalating efficiency, productivity and flow.</td>
<td>Self-service check-in at hotels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Managerial innovations</strong></td>
<td>New ways of organising internal collaboration, directing and empowering staff, building careers and compensating work with pay and benefits</td>
<td>Service employee breaks to check social media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Management innovations</strong></td>
<td>New marketing approaches and ways of building and maintaining relationships with the customer.</td>
<td>Customer loyalty programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional innovations</strong></td>
<td>An institutional innovation is a new, embracing collaborative/organisational structure or legal framework.</td>
<td>Central reservations system.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2. Categories of innovation (Hjalager, 2010).*
This report seeks to explore these five categories of innovation in Queensland small to medium-sized tourism businesses. Insights into innovative practices in business are highlighted, from big leap innovations through the introduction of new products, such as swimming with the whales and offering city tours in fire trucks, to small incremental process innovations, such as benchmarking water consumption and waste.

Gardiner and Scott (2014) study of a cluster of tourism businesses notes that the passion of the individual for the tourism industry is a driving force in facilitating change in destinations. Passion was also evident among the business owners and managers in these case studies. This highlights the intrinsic rewards of delivering exceptional customer experiences and developing a successful tourism business.

This report also seeks to stimulate conversation about innovation within the tourism industry, fuelling enthusiasm for being new, novel and unique among tourism businesses. The report begins with an overview of the approach to preparing these case studies. The case studies are then presented.
3. Researching and Preparing the Case Studies

The preparation of these case studies was part of the assessment for the Tourism Small Business Management course undertaken in the Bachelor of Business degree at Griffith University. Students were asked to select a tourism small business in Queensland that they considered innovative. They then nominated this case study for approval by the course convenor. Once approved, they began conducting background research on the business, using secondary data sources such as the business website, marketing collateral and publicly available reports and statistics relating to the business. Students also participated in workshops in class that assisted in analysing their chosen business and the guest experience at that business. The five workbooks used for this analysis are available to download from the Tourism and Events Queensland (TEQ) website (http://teq.queensland.com/en-AU/Industry-Resources/How-To-Guides/Experience-Development). Dr Sarah Gardiner, the editor of this publication, was commissioned by TEQ to prepare these workbooks and associated videos and, therefore, was able to assist students begin to unpack the experience offering of their case study. Students also discussed their selected case study with each other and offered advice to each other on key aspects of the experience that were unique, special and/or different.

Student reviewed the various categories of innovation - product, process, managerial, marketing and institutional innovation (as identified by Hjalager 2010) and collectively devised an interview protocol for this research. This process involved proposing questions via an online forum and then discussing those questions in class. In addition to investigating the various categories of innovation, the protocol also sought to garner insights into the experience offering, innovativeness and business practices of their selected case study. Accordingly, the interview questions focused on exploring:

- The owner/manger’s role in the business and passion for it;
- Business experience offering and the role of the employees in delivering that offering;
- The customer mix and key competitors for the business to gain insight into their competitive advantage;
- Anticipated changes to the business and the market in the next year and in the longer term;
- The most challenging part in operating the business; and
- How they plan to grow and change the experience to meet changing consumer needs and to improve the productivity of their business.

In addition to developing the interview questions, students participated in another workshop on interviewing techniques to improve the quality of the research data collection process and ensure that the ethical conduct of research practices were understood. An example interview with a tourism small business owner using the interview protocol was also undertaken in class by the instructor to demonstrate best practice in interview technique. Students were also given an opportunity to practice asking questions during this session. The students, instructor and interviewee (small business owner) participated in a debrief session following the interview to gain insights into the various perspectives of those involved in the interview. Reflection on the challenges facing the interviewer and interviewee were explored and strategies to overcome those issues were discussed, for example, how to build rapport at the
beginning of the interview and how to ask probing questions. Awkward questions in the protocol were re-worded and the order of questioning was also revised as a result of this session.

Student were responsible to recruit their choose case study and organise an appropriate interview time and location. They were asked to interview the owner or a senior manager of the business. A suggested telephone script for recruiting interviewees was prepared by the course convenor. The students conducted the interviews in-person or via telephone in April and May 2015.

Prior to commencing the interview the students presented the interviewee with a project information sheet and gained their informed consent, consistent with the ethics approval granted for the class by Griffith University (approval number: HSL/13/15/HREC). Each interview was voice recorded and notes were also taken throughout the interview. Key quotes were transcribed for inclusion in the case study. Based upon the interview and secondary data, students prepared a case study on the business. Ten case studies were selected by the editor for publication in this report. Each case study was reviewed by the editor and then sent to the student and business interviewee for approval to ensure the accuracy of the content. The following case studies represent the outcome of that process.

3.1 Sunreef Scuba Dive

Case study author: Michelle Mitchell, studying Bachelor of Business majoring in Sustainable Tourism Management and Marketing at Griffith University.

Key insights:

• Competition is healthy - it drives awareness of the industry and the importance of maintaining the local reefs
• If people say no, find another way.
• Understanding and knowing, is truly knowing, and understanding how much you don't.
• The closer one comes to perfection, is when one realises how far from perfection they are.

Sunreef Scuba Dive is located in Mooloolaba on the Sunshine Coast. Philip Hart and his son, Daniel, went into business together in 2012 to follow their passion of scuba diving. In the years previous to purchasing Sunreef, Daniel had left his hometown of Melbourne to follow his love for scuba diving to work in businesses along the East Coast of Australia, where he lived in both Sydney and Cairns and later Thailand. Philip suggested that they come back and "we'll see if we can manage our own here" in Australia he thought. After thorough research of the dive shops on the market in Australia, they found Sunreef on the Sunshine Coast. A major drawcard in purchasing this business was the fact that there were only three commercial moorings at the HMAS Brisbane dive site, and Sunreef has two of these three leases. In addition, a competitive advantage Sunreef has over other lifestyle businesses is that the owner has a strong business background. The mix of Daniel's passion for diving and Philip's business background puts them in a position to run a successful business. In his experience, Philip has observed that:

"The problem with dive shop owners and a lot of lifestyle businesses, is people start a business because it's what they enjoy doing, they don't necessarily have any business sense and a lot struggle every week to make pay roll".

Sunreef started as a retail dive store that provided consumers with dive tours to local reefs and the shipwreck of HMAS Brisbane. However, Phillip recognised the need to broaden their business, particularly because diving and snorkelling are dependent on weather conditions. Hence, they needed to find other forms of non-weather dependant income. Accordingly, they became a Registered Training Organisation and now offer Certificate II, III and IV in outdoor education. They have also created a semi weather dependant income by becoming a 5-star PADI Dive Centre with the ability to issue the internationally recognised PADI Gold Card Open Water certification.

One of the keys to Sunreef's success is its use of social media to market the business, as Philip states, "[We] doubled the income in the first year, all whilst [the owners were] still trying to get their heads around the business". Every profit the business earned was poured back into the business, which allowed them to employ more people from the local community to help with the local economy. Philip mentioned that Sunreef prefers to recruit people from the local region as it is a "great way to feed the local economy...[and] harness local knowledge".
In 2014, Sunreef introduced a new innovative product to the Australian tourism industry, enabling visitors to swim with whales. On a trip to Tonga where Sunreef personnel went to swim with whales, Philip and his son wondered if it would be possible to do this in Australia. After looking into the issues they would cross if they were to embark on this in Australia, they couldn’t find any legislative reasons as to why not. As luck would have it, on the return flight to Australia, Daniel was sitting next to the person who issues the permits for waterways and marine parks in Queensland and discovered it might be possible to offer the swim with the whales experience in Queensland. After spending a year thoroughly investigating every channel they could and lots of people telling them they could not do it, they received government approval and began operations in July 2014. This new experience in Australia attracted international attention and their website was viewed by 26 million people in the first year. Phillip comments, “Tenacity was key when it came to making swimming with whales happen, as other businesses have been trying to do this for years but have been unsuccessful”.

Sunreef works closely with Tourism Sunshine Coast and Tourism and Events Queensland as whale watching is one of the region’s hero attractions. Maintaining strong relationships with staff is something that Sunreef strives to achieve. Sunreef uses managerial innovations, such as giving bonuses to staff based on the income they bring in, to motivate them. Philip said that the Sunreef workplace is full of “young passionate employees who are really motivated and interested in diving”. With only 10 employees, Philip expressed that there is a “sense of being in a family” and that all employees are encouraged to think of the business as their own. Another way in which Sunreef motivates its employees is by giving them the opportunity to travel with work, by taking a group of clients abroad to diving destinations such as, Mexico, Galapagos Islands, Maldives and the Solomon Islands. Regarding service delivery, it’s up to the employees to deliver a service which creates not just a swim with the whales experience or an underwater dive experience, but a once in a lifetime experience for the consumer. This is why Sunreef has chosen employees who are very passionate about diving and the environment they work in and also people who are willing to pass on any knowledge they have onto the customer.

Philip’s passion for his business and the environment can be seen throughout many aspects of Sunreef. The attitude he has applied has created an innovative business with a focus on sustainable use of the reef. His approach to thinking of challenges as opportunities and competitors as business generators will continue to bring new and exciting opportunities to Sunreef.
3.2 La Costa Motel

Case study author: Artur Kudrya, studying a Bachelor of Business majoring in Sustainable Tourism at Griffith University.

Key insights:

- Listen to your customers.
- Seek advice from tourism-related communities and cooperate with business associations.
- Keep your business fresh and regularly introduce new products or services.
- Value your employees.

La Costa Motel is a 1950's vintage motel located opposite the Gold Coast Airport. The current owners, John and Diane Cartmill, purchased La Costa Motel more than 10 years ago and have been slowly restoring the motel to its former glory as a classical 1950's motel with its signature neon light sign and classic beach architecture and design of that era. John and Diane want to transport their guests back to the 1950's, allowing their guests to escape to what is perceived as, a simpler time. For younger guests the motel provides an experience what life was like during the 1950’s and, in doing so, gain a different perspective and novel holiday experience. For older guests who grew up during that era, staying at the motel allows them to reminisce about how life was like back then and revive those pleasurable memories.

The motel offers services such as full continental breakfast, airport transfers, and free activities as well as specialist experiences such as themed 50's parties, painting and writing classes and organises a huge street market in front of the motel during signature events, such as Cooly Rocks On. La Costa Motel also offers guest the opportunity to hire vintage bikes. Diane suggests that these extra features and activities add to the character and quirkiness of the motel and sets it apart from other overnight accommodation in and around the airport area. “In the next few years, I would like to continue the path we are on currently and stay passionate about it. I would like to incorporate a small music or art festival with local musicians and artists for our motel in the near future”, says Diane.
The biggest challenge facing La Costa Motel is trying to keep the business fresh and maintain experience consistency. As described by Diane, they want to provide more variety in order to attract returning guests. Guests don’t always want to do the same activities as before when they return - they want to try something new - so La Costa Motel is always faced with the issue of coming up with new ideas. In order to grow the business and meet diverse and changing customer needs, La Costa strongly believes in listening to guests’ opinions and suggestions. One of the aspects of La Costa that gets the biggest positive feedback is the amount of activities they have for their guests. As such, La Costa Motel is constantly focusing on bringing in new ideas and activities for guests to enjoy, such as thematic parties, music sessions and vintage art mini-exhibitions right on the property. With an increasing international clientele, La Costa Motel has been surveying international guests at the motel in what they would like to see and experience in the future. Diane believes that receiving as much knowledge and experience from a wide array of guests is essential in developing La Costa Motel to continue to exceed guest expectations.
3.3 Dracula’s Cabaret Restaurant, Gold Coast

Case study author: Nevenka Simic, studying Bachelor of Business majoring in Sustainable Tourism at Griffith University.

Key insights:

- Design your experience to align with target market needs.
- Regularly update your experience - shows, costumes and food and beverage menus – to show modernism and attract repeat guests.
- The show venue, Dracula's castle, is continuously expanding and upgrading features in order to enhance the customer experience, meet their expectations and create satisfied customers.

Dracula’s Cabaret Restaurant, Gold Coast ("Dracula's") takes pride in being an industry leader for over 30 years. Dracula’s is the longest operating and most successful dinner theatre in Australia, offering a variety of entertainment such as burlesque, contemporary music, comedy and quality dining. “The biggest thing we offer to our customers is the unexpected”, states Dracula’s Cabaret Restaurant Acting Show Director, Richard Macionis. The Dracula’s experience begins from the moment of arrival, where vampires and blood stained Draculettes linger at the front entrance of the grounds. Impressions are shaped immediately as staff are not only dressed in full costume but also act in character from the moment guest arrive. VIP entrance into the Dracula’s castle entails the provision of a gift bag featuring a souvenir program, a pen in the shape of a blood needle and a necklace labelled with the Dracula’s logo for guests to wear throughout the evening and take home with them. Guests are escorted to the gloomy VIP bar by loud and frightening Draculettes who are constantly playing tricks on guests while they enjoy drinks and canapés. Undoubtedly, this sets the perfect, spooky tone for what’s to come – the famous Ghost Train Ride. Renowned for being the world’s most unique theatre entrance, guests ride the ghost train in suspense as objects drop from the ceiling and photos are taken which can be purchased as memorabilia. Prior to being seated in the theatre, guests are humorously probed to provide personal details such as where they are from and if they are celebrating a special occasion. This guest background information is used later on stage in order to welcome guests and to create a personalised experience for the consumer to remember. Pre-show entertainment includes live jazz music while the three course menu is served by waiters who are in full theatrical mode. Undoubtedly, Dracula’s incorporates the set gothic theme in every possible aspect including dining, whereby the dessert is a chocolate treat in the shape of a coffin.

A new Dracula’s show is offered every 12 months in order to change and improve the experience and encourage repeat visitation. As new shows are created and rehearsed, there is a strong intent across the board to evolve the business as a whole. Recent examples of this include an architectural innovation to the castle, where the roof was extended so it was possible for new props to be built, the building of a second kitchen to assist with timely food and beverage service as a process innovation, followed by the upgrade of the ghost train ride as a product innovation. Throughout each show, the acts are intentionally kept tight and
relatively short breaks are given in order to sustain interest of the audience. On average the evening consists of four hour entertainment. The duration of the show was recently shortened based upon consumer feedback.

Richard has a vision for the role entertainment and shows can play in the Gold Coast visitor experience, stating, “The Gold Coast should be Vegas, where customers should have at least ten shows to choose from”. Ultimately, Dracula’s seeks strong, healthy competition as the tourism small business does not have any direct theatre restaurant competitors on the Gold Coast. Potential competitors, such as Outback Spectacular and the occasional Jupiters Hotel and Casino show offers, are different style and theme. Dracula’s continues to remain consistent with at least five shows per week throughout the year - even in low peak season - whereas some competitors have been known to reduce their performances to two to three times per week during this period. One potential challenge for the business is staff turnover due to the transient population on the Gold Coast. They found that some staff members only live on the Gold Coast for a short duration. The average staff turnover is two years. On the upside, new staff are recruited, creating fresh faces and personalities to be brought to the stage and into the business.

Dracula’s also tries to embrace local culture and holiday atmosphere of the Gold Coast. For example, the Gold Coast Dracula’s show finale is an INXS rock band tribute as it was found that the target market preferred to end the night on a ‘high’. The target market for Dracula’s is predominantly tourists over the age of 18, particularly the Asian and New Zealand markets. Dracula’s in Melbourne however find it is more suitable to deliver a tamer finale and overall show due to the natural vibe of the destination.

Towards the end of the finale once guests have paid the bill, a comical wristband is gifted as an indication of both payment and memorabilia. Similarly, the audience is given ample opportunities throughout the evening to make purchases. This is achieved through a personal and direct customer approach by a Draculette, offering the opportunity for guests to purchase photos from the Ghost Train ride and several glow in the dark products for guests to wear as part of the experience. Systematically, the “Meet and Greet” after the show is held in the gift shop, which therefore keeps guests close to purchasable products throughout the entire evening. The gift shop has a wide variety of products such as clothing and accessories.

The Complaints Department link on the Dracula’s business website is also quite unusual and comical and reflects the Dracula's experience. It states, “We are intentionally loud, sexy, unrestrained, slight insane and totally over the top”. It is evident that the business seeks to provide a humorous twist in every component possible in order to maintain amusement and overall consumer interest. For instance, the complaints page has comments such as “Get over it, we won’t call you back”. However, it also reassures the viewer that any serious complaints will be followed up in due time. Ultimately, the intentionally loud and offensive personalities behind Dracula’s are all a part of the show and the fun of this experience.
3.4 O’Reilly’s Rainforest Retreat

Case study author: Rebekah Hancock, studying a Bachelor of Business with a double major in Sustainable Tourism Management and Human Resource Management) at Griffith University.

Key insights:

- Find your point of differentiation and build it into all elements of your experience, including why your staff want to work in your business.
- Having a passion for business and delivering exceptional guest experiences is important.
- The family history associated with the business can play a role in the experience.
- Consider how your business can be more environmentally sustainable and get environmental accreditations to show your commitment to the environment.

O’Reilly’s Rainforest Retreat (“O’Reilly’s”) is located in the Lamington National Park in Southern Queensland. In addition to providing accommodation for its guests, O’Reilly’s Rainforest Retreat also offers Segway tours, flying fox, bird show and bird feeding, guided walks and self-guided rainforest walks including the famous treetop walk. The retreat also has special events, eco ranger activities for children during school holidays and a Lost World Spa. The retreat also hosts corporate functions and weddings. There are also vineyard tours, wine tasting and dining and picnic options at O’Reilly’s Vineyard which is located at a separate property on the road to the retreat. Shane O’Reilly is the current Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Managing Director of O’Reilly’s Retreat and has been involved in the family business since 1989. He comments on what he thinks makes the O’Reilly’s experience different to other accommodation options and visitor experiences, particularly in the competitive Gold Coast tourism marketplace:

“...We are very much involved in an appreciation of the natural surrounds and there is certain places that do that probably closer to the coast but there is obviously a lot of places closer to the coast that just offers a bed. But our business is very much involved in people getting out and seeing some of the bird life and seeing the forest and doing that side of the place and that’s the key things that we sell that is different...”

On weekends, the retreat mainly attracts couples, who mostly want to visit the spa and the retreat. The retreat is also popular for families during school holiday periods. Most guests are domestic visitors (70%) with a smaller but growing international visitor clientele (30%). These international guests tend to made up North Americans, visitors from the United Kingdom along with a lot of other European countries. Having such a diverse mix of target markets helps to reduce trough periods and, accordingly, O’Reilly’s is typically busy all year round.

This business has been operated by the O’Reilly family since 1914, making it one of the first ecotourism businesses in Queensland. Family plays a substantial role in the running of this business and the business is overseen by the Family Council. The fourth generation of children also work during the school holidays to help the retreat run smoothly during the peak periods. Shane comments:
“The family plays a number of roles, from the kitchen to finance and operations. And during the holidays, ones from the fourth generation and who are still at school, will come and work during the holidays”.

He also believes that having a passion for the business is essential, saying:

“If you don’t have a passion you won last long because tourism is a lot of hard work and there’s not a lot of rich rewards compared to a lot of other industry’s but it is very much a people business. If you like it and get along and enjoy people and new experiences than you probably would like tourism and will be quite passionate about it. That’s why people are in tourism and that’s why people go on holidays to go have a new experience and enjoy new people”.

Being located in the Lamington National Park, the preservation of the environment is very important when it comes to ensuring the long-term sustainability of this environment that is central to the O’Reilly’s experience. From the beginning, in 1914, the O’Reilly family has been educating people about the land and environment that surrounds them. While the term ecotourism would be a foreign term during those times, they had no idea how this would shape the modern day tourism industry. Back then, it just seemed liked the right thing to do. Shane describes the main outcome he would like for his guest to take away from their experience at O’Reilly’s:

“A key thing is the environment. People really love seeing the natural environment. And hopefully they have learnt something even if they didn’t come to learn something and they pick up some knowledge whether it’s about the rainforest history or the bird life or some of flora throughout the park. If they’re learning something and picking up information it gives them some personal appreciation for what’s available at a national park and it’s going to be better for the park in the longer term”.

O’Reilly’s has received a number of accreditations over the years recognising them as having ecotourism at the forefront of their mind. Such accreditations include: Advance Accreditation under the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP) and Earth Check Benchmark Certificate. The retreat is also a member of the Green Power Program. To gain such recognitions, O’Reilly’s implemented such strategies by creating benchmarks for water consumption, waste consumption and disposal. They have also developed integrated environmental and social policies, including ensuring all visitors are educated in their environmental responsibilities whilst at O’Reilly’s and reducing non-renewable resource usage (which has also resulted in cost savings). The environmental ethos is embodied through the O’Reilly’s staff, as Shane explains:

“It comes back to making sure that they have the right value sets. And by value sets we mean someone who likes people but they are also quite appreciative of their environment and natural surroundings”.

Accordingly, O’Reilly’s aim to differentiate its experience through its longstanding, renowned name, being known from building the first treetop walk and having a historical story behind the retreat. However, it all comes back to the family name and being family operated. This means that guest can come back in one or two years’ time and chances are you’ll recognise the face of staff members throughout the retreat.
3.5 Tall Ship Adventures

Case study author: Prepared by Kate Clements, studying a Bachelor of Business with majors in Sustainable Tourism Management and Marketing at Griffith University.

Key insights:

- Personalising the tour and guest interaction can set a business apart from its competitors.
- Focus on the quality of the experience over large tour capacity and a full schedule of tour activities.
- Passion and enthusiasm for the business must start from the top of an organisation and infiltrate all levels of the organisation and its staff.
- Success is hidden in the ability to adapt to changes in the market and environment especially in the marine tourism industry.

Tall Ship Adventures is a family-owned business operating in the Whitsundays for over 25 years. Guest sail on a traditional Tasmanian built tall ship, Derwent Hunter, and have the opportunity to learn about the environment, hoist the sails and snorkel the around the reef of uninhabited islands of Langford Island and Bali Hai. The full day experience enables guests to spot the reef’s famous turtles and native humpback and pilot whales (that visit from June through to September) and enjoy a smorgasbord of quality food and a presentation about the local area and environment. These presentations are often accompanied by live acoustic guitar music from crew members.

Business owner and joint director, Jo Ladd, is part of the husband and wife team behind the sailing success of Tall Ship Adventures. Together they have built the business that adapts to changing visitor markets to remain competitive, yet, a true and authentic old style sailing experience. Whilst Jo manages the operations side of the business, she notes her husband, Warren, is the creative and hands-on side in the business. Warren boasts a wealth of knowledge with his sailing background handed down from generations. Warren is a direct descendant of Captain Henry James Ford who sailed to Australia in the 1800’s carrying the first Governor General of Victoria.

Jo and Warren both have similar reasons and inspirations for becoming involved with marine ecotourism most notably their people-centric approach to creating the experience. Jo comments, “It’s so nice to be able to educate people in a fun and informative way and feel
like you have contributed to someone’s idea on life”. Warren hopes that through the experience guests “may tread a little lighter on their own part of the planet and develop a deeper respect for our unique maritime history”.

Tall Ship sailing for many people is a once in a lifetime experience - a WOW moment which the pair aim to capture through its unique product offering. Jo explains how her business offers visitors the “opportunity to sail on an Australian icon and to explore nature in an old world way”. Jo notes how the experience is more of a ‘vibe’ and an intangible memory, “It’s a piece of mind, a kind of experience where [guests] have stepped out of everyday life and seeing something magical”. The unique vibe provides as an innovative anchor coupled with the conscious lack of technology, Tall Ship Adventures use to remain competitive. Jo comments, “It doesn’t matter, if it’s the sailing, being underwater or the reef, just something that makes them forget their normal day to day life”. The innovation extends to the monopolisation of tall ship day tours in the Whitsundays. Jo talks about how her business is less commercialised and she provides a few top reasons why success feels like a breeze, “Our tour is less about speed and cramming everything into one day, it’s more about the quality of the experience”.

The majority of competitors operate small boats, chartered ferries and speedboat tours, however, Tall Ship Adventures steers clear of the commercialised sailing options to present a fresh yet historic way to explore the reef. The Derwent Hunter is a tall ship, which enables the boat to access places many larger boats cannot and here is how they present secret spots and a backstage pass to those on-board such as Langford Island and Bali Hai Island. That is, the experience offers guests something out of the ordinary and off the beaten track. It is the opportunity to experience something the majority of tourist’s do not know about and a glimpse of local life and activity. The business consciously does not visit the main tourist destinations that most cruises visit, such as Whitehaven beach, as a result, this differentiates the experience.

Tall Ship Adventures targets adventure tourists who are seeking a more personal and challenging experience and social interaction. The main customer mix is derived from equal parts domestic and international tourists and extends from families through to Grey Nomads. Despite the influx of Asian tourists to Australia and the Whitsundays region, Jo explains that she hasn’t seen a change in her customer mix as a result of this growth, however she has translated the safety documentation into Chinese for practicality. Jo recognises the change in customer profiles yet the margin of Asian tourists purchasing the tour is not significant enough to warrant changing the experience at this point in time.

The employees are ultimately the most vital tools in the experience as the product is largely based on guest interaction. Jo has handpicked each crewmember ranging from experienced locals to charismatic internationals. Jo understands the importance of passion and enthusiasm the employees need, she comments, "they are an extension of what myself and Warren foresee the whole experience being about, they just need to love their job and the rest comes naturally". Jo encourages her employees to feel pride in what they do through education on the reef, marine life and the history of the Derwent Hunter. The employees reap the intrinsic rewards by sharing the information and enthusiasm with guests, which adds value to the experience and is often reflected in guest feedback. Jo regularly involves her employees in decision-making, allowing them to voice any changes they see fit, as well as assistance with photography and filming related to the business.

Jo comments, “Passion is definitely important and has to start at the top of the organisation”. She describes how tourism operators can be passionate, “you have to believe and know you are delivering a good service, people are getting more than what they expect and it’s value for money”. Jo shares a small glimpse of her excitement and passion for the business:
“[Warren and I] still get excited and we still go down to meet people, we like to see happy people getting off the boat and we love reading the comments from the ships log”.

Jo and her team have cleverly created a ‘Captains Log’, that allows guests to detail their experience in a logbook whilst sailing on the ship which is stored and displayed for future guests to read. Jo uses the Captain’s Log book as a measuring tool to understand how the experience is received and if any patterns and changes occur. Jo comments, “We get [the guests] to lead, write in our ships log and have a good relationship with people on board, I hope we would be alert if anything changed and people stopped being satisfied with our product”.

In 2012 Tall Ship Adventures recognised the need for change from an overnight sailing tour to a one-day tour. This was largely prompted due to the limited niche market of overnight sailing. The consumers purchasing the overnight tour consisted of mostly young international adventure travellers aged between 18 and 35 years. The conversion of the product has enabled the business to market to a broader demographic extending its appeal to families and grey nomads and has ultimately increased profitability.

In the past 12 months, Tall Ship Adventures have focused heavily on promoting the product through digital and social media encouraging online word of mouth to increase sales and boost awareness. Jo says “It’s easy for people who have been on-board to refer to others, but it’s getting the experience to someone who has never heard of us to get a real feel for what we do”. The business have been working hard to boost their Facebook and Instagram views through photography of the reef, marine life and guest interaction such as hoisting the sails. The business now has a large following on Instagram and many 5-star reviews on Trip Advisor.

Jo is also very proud of the awards and milestones Tall Ship Adventures have accomplished such as Whitsundays Hall of Fame for Ecotourism and Adventure. Tall Ship Adventures has reached the highest level of accreditation with Ecotourism Australia as it is recognised worldwide as an Advanced Eco Accredited tour. To achieve the accreditation badge Tall Ship Adventures is compliant with the following regulations: water conservation, treatment of waste water, energy efficiency, noise limitations, minimal disturbance to wildlife and contribution to the conservation through recycling, ecological research and active involvement in projects with Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.
3.6 San Mateo on Broadbeach

Prepared by Meagan Bennett, studying a Bachelor of Business, majoring in Sustainable Tourism Management, at Griffith University.

Highlights:

- Technology has changed the business environment and how businesses operate and, accordingly, operators should increasingly utilise user-generated content to promote their product/experience.
- Implement outsourcing if you identify a weakness in your operations.
- Identify your unique selling point and differentiate yourself from your competitors by your level of service.
- Attend conferences and seminars and implement incremental changes to attract new markets to your business.

San Mateo on Broadbeach is an accommodation provider and offers self-contained apartments in one of Australia’s principal leisure destinations, the Gold Coast. The apartment provides ease of access to the attractions within the region’s tourist hubs of Broadbeach and Surfers Paradise. “When it comes to the Gold Coast, you aren’t [only] investing in a business, [you are] investing in a lifestyle”, describes Jan Gillmartin, Owner and Operator at San Mateo on Broadbeach. Jan’s role ranges from front desk management to the co-ordination of daily operations and most importantly, the letting of their self-contained holiday and permanent apartments. Jan purchased San Mateo on Broadbeach in 2009 at the peak of the Global Financial Crisis when domestic visitation dropped dramatically on the Gold Coast. However, she has noticed local businesses have started to recover from the economic downturn. To promote business growth, San Mateo on Broadbeach consistently looks for new ways to market and adapt to the needs of their guests to combat external changes in the environment.

Prior to purchasing the business, both Jan and her business partner had previously worked in the property management and accommodation sectors and she believes that this experience has proven considerably beneficial to their success. Accordingly, when starting out, Jan recommends gaining prior experience within the industry before purchasing and/or operating a tourism centred business, commenting, “Not enough people do their homework. [For example,] farmers who come to buy accommodation rights think they can have a lifestyle and sit back and do nothing, six months later they regret it”.
They currently employ one part-time staff member. Jan expresses her desire for innovative and new ideas to better her business through the employee’s involvement in the business planning process. “Hopefully she develops the knowledge and confidence to help with ideas and changes to the business. She has worked in the industry so she could bring new ideas to the table whether it is in marketing or systems”, comments Jan.

“It’s a great industry”, she reflects but it is evident that passion is imperative to maintain motivation during low season. “I love San Mateo [on Broadbeach], I love the industry and I love the Gold Coast and I think that passion comes across to guests. Repeat visitation has a lot to do with management”, says Jan. When asked what she believes her unique selling point is to her guests, she replied “Jim and I, the service we provide” that most competitors don’t offer and this service enhances the overall guest experience.

San Mateo on Broadbeach caters to many different target markets but the main market is the domestic family market due to its close proximity to the beach and family activities. The business market due to its close proximity to the Gold Coast Convention Centre and the New Zealand and intrastate retiree markets, specifically Tasmania, during the winter months due to the Gold Coasts warmer climate. During the summer months, the predominant market is the intrastate domestic market. Jan comments, “Location has been a huge draw card, this includes the beach which is just across the road, the bowling club and the family attractions”.

Jan frequently attends seminars and conferences that specifically discuss how small tourism businesses can cater to and meet the needs of the emerging Chinese market. She advocates for small incremental changes to the business to accommodate Chinese cultural preferences is needed, for example, “having green tea in the room instead of normal tea, noodles instead of coffee and milk and [having] slippers available in the rooms too. Making these little changes makes them feel more welcome”. She discusses that these changes may be incorporated into her business in the future to meet the changing needs of the market and remain competitive within the industry. A very recent change that has been made to San Mateo on Broadbeach has been the translation of information signs such as the ‘after-hours bell’ sign into Chinese.

San Mateo on Broadbeach is also members of a number of trade associations and tourism boards including Tourism and Events Queensland, Surfers Paradise Alliance and Broadbeach Alliance. Jan attests that this aids in establishing credibility, increasing brand awareness and is a reliable source of industry information.

Jan admits that changes in technology have been a major challenge for her business, specifically new technology in marketing area. Jan recognises this as a weakness and is looking to outsource the digital marketing side of their business in order to combat this challenge. This challenge also extends to the products they offer in the rooms, such as the need for smart televisions. Jan comments, “I don’t know what they are, but we need smart TV’s and it is becoming the norm on the Gold Coast to include free WIFI in the rooms. Keeping up to date isn’t a choice, [it is] necessary in running a successful business”.

Technology has also influenced the consumer decision making process. Jan claims that user-generated content and online review sites, such as TripAdvisor, have had a significant impact on visitation. She also makes improvements to her business as a result of the feedback provided in the reviews. “If you have a look on TripAdvisor we have some very positive reviews, service is mentioned quite frequently. Word of mouth is the most effective marketing tool out there”, she comments. Online reviews provide an organic image of the business and encourage customers to feel ‘safe’ in their purchasing decisions. A sales representative in market with good contacts can be highly influential in promoting your product. Accordingly, San Mateo on Broadbeach hires sales representatives to distribute their product around Australia.
3.7 Australian Kayaking Adventures

Case study author: Eliza Tompkins, studying a Bachelor of Business, majoring in Sustainable Tourism Management at Griffith University.

Highlights:

- Passion for the industry is vital to any tourism small business and is the foundation to the business's success.
- Innovation is the key to adapting the business to the constantly changing industry and maintaining a competitive advantage.
- The industry is demonstrating significant growth in the international Asian market and subsequently businesses need to adapt their products and services.
- Operating a tourism small business presents challenges and requires dedication but it is not without its rewards.

Australian Kayaking Adventures is located on the Gold Coast and is one of the longest running kayaking adventure tours on offer in the region. The business is owned and operated by Steve Vah. Steve originally worked in the cruise tourism industry and purchased the business in early 2000 upon settling back on the Gold Coast after working abroad for a number of years. He says, "I found a business for sale and I bought it". Undoubtedly, Steve has had a profound impact on product development and the business offers two main tour experiences including a half day dolphin and snorkel tour and a sunset/twilight kayak tour. Recently, he has created additional services through the provision kayak and stand up paddle board sales and hire. The business also caters to schools, hen’s and buck’s nights and corporate team building activities which sets them apart from other tour providers. Steve noted that demand for these types of tours and activities, especially team building activities, are increasing throughout the winter months which help manage the seasonality of the business.

Steve advocates that having a passion for tourism is a core part of any tourism small business and is a critical factor in the success of Australian Kayaking Adventures. He explains, “You can talk about a lot of different things and answer a lot of different questions that they have and I think people can see enthusiasm and passion as well and they kind of thrive off that too”. Passion for the job and the associated customer interactions was identified by Steve as one of the dominant influencing factors in the business’s recruitment process. He encourages idea and opinion sharing among staff to assist in decision making, signifying the importance placed on the staff/customer interaction and demonstrating the business’s attitude on the importance of providing personal experiences. Sub-contracting staff with an interest in the industry is recognised by Steve as a key factor in maintaining the motivation.

Australian Kayaking Adventures incorporates a combination of logical and creative reasoning when developing and refining the products on offer to ensure continual growth and success. Steve also systematically provides customers with feedback forms to acquire direct information on customer perceptions, providing the business with information on ways to maintain its innovative edge. This process often involves thinking about consumer and
travel trends and how that impacts on their customer mix. To keep informed on these changes, Steve is a member of the local tourism association, the Gold Coast Adventure Travel Group, who work with Gold Coast Tourism and City of Gold Coast to develop and increase the backpacker and youth market visitation to the region. Steve often informally discusses changing markets and industry trends with other tourism businesses and he believes this networking and information exchange provides a good indication of industry movements and enables him to better respond and adapt to change in market trends and visitor markets.

Competitive advantage is essential to the survival of small businesses on the Gold Coast. When discussing competition for Australian Kayaking Adventures, Steve identifies the theme parks which form part of the Gold Coast hero experiences as a key competitor, as well as the over saturation of the tourism market in the region. Trying to stand out from other companies as well as compete with the larger, dominant companies in the industry is a significant challenge to the business. When asked how he differentiates his business from the multitude of other tours available, Steve credits their extensive experience and expertise, their well established reputation to provide quality experiences and the fact that they are the longest running tour business of this type on the Gold Coast. The quality and reputation of his business is how Steve achieves competitive advantage in the overcrowded, fiercely competitive market.

In Steve’s opinion, the most challenging part of operating Australian Kayaking Adventures is keeping the business busy and operating at a profitable level. He also identified the risk of people attempting to replicate his business model. He comments, “I’ve had a few sub-contractors now that copy my business, my model, and try to replicate that somewhere else”, which he admits is hard to control and provides a source of direct competition. When starting out, Steve confesses that it is hard for the first five years or so, and says that maintaining motivation is a significant obstacle that is only overcome through unwavering commitment. There is however the positives that result from this hard work and dedication. Over the twelve years that Steve has owned and operated the business, also his partner came along to support areas where the business needed it to be improved, as his partner has a business degree, her knowledge teamed very good with his experience. Also it was the relocation to Budds Beach in Surfers Paradise that he considers one of the business’s biggest risks, yet also greatest achievements. The new location provided the business with new product opportunities such as the implementation of stand-up paddle board hire which has proved to be just one of the many successful developments and growth decisions of the business.
3.8 Stradbroke Island Adventures

Case study author: Jordan Mills, studying Bachelor of Business, majoring in Event Management, at Griffith University

Highlights:

- Offer service that is tailored to the customer’s characteristics – be ‘people driven’ and have a skill for understanding what people want.
- Share your passion for the place with your guests.
- If you love what you do then you will never work a day in your life.

Tucked away just north of the coast of the Gold Coast and 15 minutes from the city is a hidden tourism gem known as Stradbroke Island or just ‘Straddie’ to the locals. It is the largest sand island in the world and home to 2,500 permanent residents, with numerous tourists coming over daily to embrace and appreciate the tranquillity and beauty of the island. The island’s main industries are sand mining and tourism with the island rich in indigenous history dating back 21,000 years. Stradbroke Island is split in two by a small channel of water with North Stradbroke being the larger island and South Stradbroke situated close to the mainland of the Gold Coast.

Helping tourists to engage and see the island through tours and activities is the newly formed family business Stradbroke Island Adventures. The visionary and owner/operator of the business is local Stradbroke Island resident Tony Ward. Although the tourism industry is new to Tony, he has had extensive business experience, in particularly in the Gold Coast region and describes himself as being in the ‘people business’. Having worked closely with people in customer and client situations for many years, he understands what they want and knows how to deliver this in way that exceeds their expectations. Tony says, “I’m in the
people business and tourism is the same thing, it’s all about managing and guiding people to ensure you deliver a high quality product or service”. However this isn’t his main drive for kick starting his tour business, Tony has a strong passion and love for Stradbroke Island. Born and bred on the Gold Coast, in 2003, he and his family relocated now living permanently on South Stradbroke Island. “I want to spend as much of my life on the island as I can…and share my knowledge and passion with others”, he says.

Stradbroke Island currently has a small but strong and growing tourism industry, with tourism currently being the main motivating factor for people visiting the island. North Stradbroke Island is a popular camping location, while the South Island is home to the Couran Cove Resort, private house rental accommodation and also home for permanent residents. As Tony puts it “Living on Straddie you get to see mainly tourists coming and enjoying the place for what it is, seeing this is what gave me that concept of Stradbroke Island Adventures”. A major positive for Tony is that he has the monopoly with vehicles as most of the South Island is restricted and only local vehicles and the correct permit holders are able to host tours. Therefore Stradbroke Island Adventures provides that access around the island.

Stradbroke Island Adventures is an ecological sustainable tourism business that has a business culture built upon a strong understanding about the history and the environment of Stradbroke Island and the other surrounding islands. This can be seen through their motto “Share the love and appreciation of this very special place with YOU”. However, their innovative and unique business factor is their willingness and ability to be a customised adventure and accommodation business. Using their four wheel drive vehicles, they offer their guests a range of activities such as tours of the island, bush walks, private barbeque lunches, stand-up paddle boarding, kayaking and surfing. However, they believe in catering their offering to what the guests want. Tony’s view on his product offering is that, “You have to cater your offering to what the guest wants and also be able to read what your group wants, while also providing a reasonable price”. They offer their guests packages that range from a quick 1-hour tour right up to half day and full day tours inclusive of lunch with food and wine. However, every group can vary substantially. One day they might have an adrenaline-seeking group of young adults who wants to experience the adventure side of the island so they will take them out surfing, tobogganing and bike riding. Whereas the next group might be from a different culture which do not normally engage in many adventure activities and the will want to do the complete opposite. For example Tony discussed how the Asian culture just wants to take picturesque photos, so he will cater their trip to include the best photographic spots on the island. They have even had a number of weddings parties utilising their knowledge of the island the find the hidden local spots to gain the perfect wedding photos. Tony said “you don’t want to overwhelm people, you just have to read the group your hosting and tailor the tour to their needs”. He plans next to expand his tours to include North Stradbroke Island and following this, he even sees the business incorporating Moreton Bay, which sits just north the Stradbroke Islands. Tony’s key to doing all this he believes is the accommodation industry. Getting people over to the island is the first step however, keeping them there for extend periods of time is highly beneficial. Therefore in the future he foresees ‘island hoping’ trips and the ability to provide a range of accommodations being fundamental. As Tony puts it “being able to show the guests more of the three islands and having them with us for five days as opposed to five hours is the goal”.

As Tony says “there might not be that much money in doing what we do however, we are doing what we love and if we are savvy in our business planning than the money should flow as it does with most things in life… and if you love what you do than you will never work a day in your life”.

25
3.9 Fire 4 Hire

Case study author: Hei Tung Cheng (Alison), studying a Bachelor of International Tourism and Hotel Management at Griffith University.

Highlights:

- In order to compete with competitors, you need to differentiate your product with them, make your product unique.
- Make the experience more personal, more interactive.
- Have a passion for your business.
- Happy employees = happy customers = successful business.

Fire 4 Hire is a new tourism small business located in Surfers Paradise on the Gold Coast and in Brisbane. The business mostly hosts parties and events and has a chartered transfer service to the airport and other transport connections, offering a unique, exciting and memorable transport service. Fire 4 Hire has two main experiences. The first is its locally more well-known name, Fire 4 Hire, which is used for private hires such as children’s birthday parties and hen’s parties. The second experience is named Fire Truck Tours, which is a city tour experience. The novel experience of travelling around in a fire truck, with a fire truck driver in costume, is a new tourism product for the Gold Coast and Brisbane and provides a new and different way to experience these cities. The elevated seating position in the truck gives the guest an excellent view of the city sights and surrounding scenery. Fire 4 Hire also partners with other companies like Dracula’s Cabaret, My Ultimate Hens, Time Zone and Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary to create a unique way to be transported to these attractions. Guests can experience being a firefighter, holding the fire hose nozzle and wearing authentic fire helmets and getting dress up to take photographs.

Richie Cunningham is the owner of Fire 4 Hire. He calls himself the Fire Chief. He began conceptualising the business idea in 2009, however the business concept took some years to develop and get it to the stage was ready to launch, so business opened in 2013. Richie said that the reason for starting this business is because he was always interested in fire trucks from a young age and his family members have a history of being part of the fire brigade. The idea of fire truck tours is a new concept to the tourism industry, as such he thought it was an opportunity to start the business and become a full time driver for Fire 4 Hire.

Fire 4 Hire specialise in special events and are popular for children’s birthday parties, hen’s and buck’s party celebrations, corporate groups and incentive travel groups. The fire trucks are fully equipped with refrigeration for guest refreshments and sound system for music so guests can bring their own music on USB or stream live via Bluetooth. Shirtless fire fighters are also available to host these events.
Richie acknowledges the strong competition between tourism experiences located in Surfers Paradise for customers. One of his main competitors is Aquaduck because they also offer city tour in a novel way and they have the same target market, that is, families with children. In order to differentiate their experience with Aquaduck, Fire 4 Hire focuses on creating a more interactive experience. Richie said Aquaduck have 30 passengers per 2 staff members on tour, however Fire 4 Hire offer a smaller group which have 10 passengers per firefighter. As a result of this higher staff-to-guest ratio, guests can have a better quality of contact with the host. They also have activities for about twenty minutes for children’s birthday parties to make the experience more personal.

“Operating a new small tourism business is very difficult”, says Richie. Although he is the owner of Fire 4 Hire, he still plays many different roles in the business, from replying to phone and email enquiries, driving the truck and maintenance. Yet, he has some causal employees to take the tours and to assist with sales activities.

“If you don’t have a passion about it, then you won’t do it”, says Richie. He acknowledges that his business is still in its infancy and found the first few years the most challenging. “You need to have some kind of passion and excitement for the product that your trying to push, otherwise you just get a job”, he explains. Passion is also one of the elements he uses to motivate his employees to deliver exceptional experience. If his employees are passionate about their job and will enjoy it then the customers enjoy it. In turn, if customers have a nice time and offer complements then that is a nice thank you to the employees and motivates them at the same time.
3.10 Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary

Case study author: Lucy Frank, studying a Bachelor of Business, with a double major in Marketing and Sustainable Tourism, at Griffith University.

Highlights:

- Consider the education market - design educational experiences related to your experience.
- Always look at making improvements - think about implementing technology and sustainability practices in your business.

Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary (the “Sanctuary”) was established in 1947 and is one of the Gold Coast’s longest standing tourist attractions. Set amongst 27 hectares of lush eucalyptus and rainforest, the Sanctuary offers the unique opportunity to immerse yourself with native Australian flora and fauna. The Sanctuary is home to one of the largest collections of Australian wildlife in the world, with over 1000 iconic Australian animals. While the rainbow lorikeets, koalas and kangaroos remain hallmark attractions, visitors can see many of Australia’s iconic species on display in their natural habitat. There are many interactive wildlife opportunities throughout the Sanctuary where you can cuddle a koala, feed a kangaroo or lorikeet and hold a baby crocodile, snake, owl, wedge tailed eagle, possum or echidna and have your photo taken. Sonya Mroz, Business Development Manager at Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary, states:

“Due to strict [government] regulations, Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary is one of a handful of places throughout the whole of Australia where you can hold a koala for a photo. This is a quintessential Australian experience and one that appeals to all age groups and nationalities.”

The opportunity to cuddle a koala and see them at such close proximity is often an unforgettable experience to many visitors. In addition, the Sanctuary has animal shows daily, a high ropes Adventure Parc and Segway safari tours. The most popular shows include Australiana, Blinky Bill and the Free Flight Bird show. Sonya explains that when people come to the Sanctuary:

“We want them to be able to see and interact with our native Australian wildlife, so they can become our wandering ambassadors. While visiting Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary, we hope that guests will learn to love our Australian wildlife, but also take away what they can do at home to help protect vulnerable species”.

Since it began, the Sanctuary has demonstrated a commitment to caring for injured wildlife, for involving the local community and for sustainability. “Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary is a not for profit organisation focused on reinvesting in conservation-based research, caring for sick and injured wildlife and public education”, says Sonya. Today, the values at the
Sanctuary are very much the same, with the main focus of the Sanctuary being caring for wildlife, followed by educating the public and implementing sustainability practices. “Management is constantly looking at new ways to operate all departments, incorporating technology and sustainability practices throughout the sanctuary”, explain Sonya. All profits are reinvested back into the park. “Just by visiting the park, guests are helping to fund our onsite Wildlife Hospital”, she says.

The first veterinarian (“vet”) started working at the onsite animal hospital in 1989, and since then over 45,000 native animals have been treated and released, making it one of the busiest wildlife hospitals in the world. The wildlife hospital admits over 8,500 native animal patients brought into the wildlife hospital by the local community each year. Sonya explains:

“Guests are offered the unique and special opportunity to go into the hospital and watch vets work, and for those eager to learn more, Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary conducts hospital tours, as well as offers and supports wildlife courses to help engage the public in their plight.”

Learning is encouraged at the Sanctuary amongst both visitors and staff. The Sanctuary hosts many local, domestic and international school groups throughout the year and provides tailored education programs including pat and chat animal encounters, sustainability tours, Indigenous experiences and behind the scenes tours. “In the past 10 years over 190,000 students have participated in our education programs here at Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary”, says Sonya. During the school holidays there are Eco Ranger Programs for kids, where they can come to experience and interact with the sanctuary’s wildlife. “Children really enjoy coming to Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary and learning about the native animals in a fun and interactive way”, she says. The Sanctuary also offers Creature Keepers Wildlife Course to teenagers, aimed at creating a better understanding of wildlife, and exposure to working in a zoo environment.

In addition to these specialised visitors experiences, the Sanctuary also takes a proactive role in sustainability. Sonya states:

“Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary holds Advanced Eco Certification with the globally recognised scheme run by Ecotourism Australia. The business has a particular focus on nature interpretation and knowledge sharing, facilitating community benefits and transitioning to renewable energy…We want to provide unique and memorable nature based experiences, conserve the area’s natural values and demonstrate environmental best practice, improve visitor awareness via quality interpretation and knowledge sharing, contribute to the local community and research programs and deliver quality customer service and value for money…Our ongoing success is driven by our commitment to provide the best service, professionalism, safety, value and genuine ecotourism experiences to our guests. Our goal is to exceed the guest’s expectations.”

To help achieve this goal, “we systematically analyse guest and staff feedback across critical customer service delivery points”, she says, to help continually improve guest experiences. Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary employs over 170 staff and has over 200 people donate their time in a number of departments including wildlife care, the vet hospital and general park volunteers. The sanctuary places high value on their staff and volunteers and appreciates
the impact they have on the success of the sanctuary. To ensure the Sanctuary is as successful as possible, Sonya comments that:

“The recruitment processes emphasise the Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary service values – a can do attitude, friendliness, helpfulness and genuine concern for our guests and the environment. We actively recruit people who are passionate about wildlife, the environment and ecotourism. Training is provided as part of the orientation process and on the job training reinforces these values and identifies key responsibilities and tasks. Regular staff feedback channels encourage staff morale and provide insight into customer service issues and further training requirements”.

Management holds a monthly breakfast for employees, offering everyone the opportunity to interact with other employees and management, which encourages information and idea sharing. Weekly meetings are also held within departments and with all managers to ensure clear communication and organisation throughout the sanctuary.

In addition to these weekly and monthly meetings, “each staff member’s performance is monitored throughout their employment, with individual goals and objectives being set bi-annually to help each employee deliver a high quality experience. Quarterly reviews are also conducted”, Sonya claims. She comments:

“All feedback, positive or negative, is relayed to staff and each month a staff member is recognised with an award for exceptional service. We do this for the professional development of our staff and to ensure that everyone remains up to date with industry developments”.

Another current focus at the Sanctuary is also focusing on the use of technology as part of the park experience and to improve operational efficiencies. Sonya states, “We are currently looking at implementing a new CRM [Customer Relationship Management] System to streamline the ticketing services at the front gate”. She adds that this innovation aims to, “drive online and pre-purchased ticket sales, reducing the number of payments at the gate and staff work load”. The implementation of this technology will allow easier ticket purchases and less time spent in cues, improving flow and efficiency throughout the park, leading to better guest experiences. Increased technology use will also mean improved efficiency and communication within various organisational departments of the Sanctuary, which, in turn, will increase productivity and profits.