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80th anniversary marked with memories and an exciting new milestone

Both the journey and the accommodation have changed over the 80 years since the famous O'Reilly family pioneered ecotourism in Australia, but the pristine destination and the warmth of the hospitality remain as the O'Reilly's prepare to celebrate the past and look to an exciting new era.

Originally guests faced a two-day 'expedition' to get to the O'Reilly's piece of paradise in the midst of World Heritage Listed Lamington National Park, and when they finally arrived by packhorse the accommodation, in slab huts, came complete with 'air-conditioning' - through the cracks in the walls!

The opening of their first guesthouse in 1926 marked a significant lift in accommodation standards, but it was 1935 before the first road was built to the edge of the national park, cutting back the horseback journey considerably, and 1947 before a road finally went right to the front door.

Not surprisingly, the accommodation has changed over the years and the newest addition to O'Reilly's modern facilities will take it to a new level, with the exclusive Mountain Bowers eco-villa development giving purchasers a once in a lifetime chance to buy a freehold stake in the O'Reilly's tradition.

The site for the new \$35 million 48 villa development, adjacent to the existing rainforest retreat, is to be formally blessed as part of a big weekend of celebrations (**April 21-23**) to mark the 80th anniversary, the start of construction and what is a new era for the eco-tourism pioneers.

Managing Director and third generation family member Shane O'Reilly said it was important to not only mark the 80th milestone by looking back on past achievements, but also looking forward to a bright future.

"I'm full of admiration for the first generation who really did it tough, especially given the isolation," Mr O'Reilly said.

"And setting up the guesthouse was such a gamble, especially considering nothing like it had been established in such a secluded location."

"The second generation, particularly my mother and father and aunt and uncle, steered the business through some lean times in the 50's and 60's and kept traditions going, while taking risks to upgrade facilities and introducing new innovations, like the now famous Bird Week in 1978 and the world-first Tree Top Walk in 1987."

“After establishing the O’Reilly’s Canungra Valley Vineyards in 1999 and overseeing some major expansions in accommodation and facilities in 2001, we were proud to take out the Australian award for 3rd Generation Family Business last year.”

Undoubtedly the Mountain Bowers is the third generation’s most exciting and ambitious project yet - offering that rare combination of natural escape and exciting investment, in an unsurpassed location and including a new lifestyle conference centre.

“The Mountain Bowers will be overseen by our experienced management, while allowing people this once-only opportunity to own their own piece of freehold property within Lamington National Park,” Mr O’Reilly said.

“Our occupancy rates in our 72 rooms and suites have been on the rise over the past few years, and the Bowers provide a great opportunity to keep up with this growing demand, especially from international markets, and to capitalise on the growing ‘green change’ phenomenon.”

With much to look forward to, there’s also plenty in the O’Reilly past to celebrate - commemorative walks to some of the most scenic spots in Lamington, a re-enactment of the packhorse ride up the mountain, walks down memory lane, a bush dance, commemorative mass, good food and good cheer are set to make for a big weekend.

As the Irish cheer flows, so too do the accolades from eco-tourism industry leaders.

Tourism Australia Chairman and former Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer has described a visit to O’Reilly’s as a ‘splendid experience’, whilst Ecotourism Australia Chief Executive Stephen Pahl has praised the historic eco-resort as an ‘Australian treasure’.

Tim Fischer, a regular guest to O’Reilly’s believes it offers a truly unique experience.

“It is the increasingly rare combination of a family clan successfully managing intergenerational transfer, matched with the rarefied atmosphere of the green mountains that creates the splendid experience of O’Reilly’s,” Mr Fischer said.

“It is a superb place to mend mind, body and soul, to have time out from the increasingly frenetic world but if you must there is even mobile telephone coverage to keep in touch! See you in the great Lamington National Park soon!!”

Steven Pahl has also heaped praise on the O’Reilly’s for their contribution to the Australian eco-tourism industry and the family’s vision for the future.

“O’Reilly’s pioneered ecotourism and sustainable tourism operations in Australia, through their continued dedication and commitment to the surrounding environment, building a globally recognised family guesthouse operation in harmony with, and complimentary to the surrounding National Park,” Mr Pahl said.

“Indeed O’Reilly’s and nature had become known as one – through the innovative interpretive opportunities offered at O’Reilly’s, and immersion of visiting guests into a complete ‘sense of place’ within the unique rainforest environment surrounding O’Reilly’s.”

It was Easter 1926 when the enterprising O’Reilly’s opened their first guesthouse – the adventurous visitors making a 25km horseback trek up the Stockyard Creek Track under the guidance of an O’Reilly family member.

Hardy souls had actually started visiting O’Reilly’s as early as 1914. They stayed in one of the family’s slab huts, where air-conditioning came through the cracks in the walls, and were escorted to scenic spots, generally on horseback, on trails especially cut for the purpose.

In 1915 World Heritage listed Lamington National Park was declared, effectively surrounding the O’Reilly’s piece of paradise.

Positive feedback from those early visitors sowed the seed for the eco-tourism success story that O’Reilly’s has become – after all the cousins had taken up their isolated selection for dairy farming, and what we now know as eco-tourism was virtually unheard of.

Dairying was a difficult living – milking cows by hand and carting cans of cream by packhorse to the dairy - with typical Irish luck, sometimes the cream had churned to butter by the time they got there!

In comparison tourism seemed a much easier option.

But setting up a guesthouse was no simple prospect – building materials had to be transported up a rough and rugged track, with horses used to drag an engine up the steep incline to drive a sawmill. Everything else – roofing iron, windows, furniture and more had to be carried in by packhorse.

Isolation was always both a blessing and a curse – no more so than when the Stinson aircraft crashed in rugged, inaccessible bushland – Bernard O'Reilly's daring rescue of the two remaining survivors is local and indeed national legend.

The first road ended six kilometres from O'Reilly's at a place that affectionately became known as 'The Dump'. The service car 'dumped' guests, luggage and supplies there, and the final scenic journey completed on horseback.

Well into the 1960's the O'Reilly's were still killing their own cattle to keep the guesthouse in meat and chopping enough firewood to fuel hungry stoves, hot water boilers and open fires.

O'Reilly's wasn't connected to mains power until 1967 and it was 1978 before a radio telephone link replaced the Duck Creek party line.

1978 also marked the first year for O'Reilly's famous Bird Week – celebrating the commitment of the family to conservation of the park's abundant bird and wildlife, through a program of special interest weeks and conservation activities, including annual frog and mammal weeks.

In 1987, the famous Tree Top Walk, the first eco-tourism attraction of its kind in Australia if not the world was opened, thanks largely to the vision of second generation O'Reilly, Peter, and the work of the Green Mountains Natural History Association.

80 years after opening their doors, O'Reilly's has grown into a \$10 million business, employing almost 100 people. Business turnover and staff numbers have expanded four-fold in the past decade.

O'Reilly's enjoys Advanced Eco-Accreditation and last year achieved benchmarking by the international Green Globe organization for its environmental management practices.

Today O'Reilly's is living up to its reputation 'where good things just come naturally', and serving up nature with its own brand of legendary hospitality, honed over 80 years in the business.

For special accommodation packages to mark the anniversary, contact O'Reilly's Reservations on 1800 688 722, e-mail reservations@oreillys.com.au or visit www.oreillys.com.au.

O'Reilly's is perched almost a kilometre above sea level in the lush rainforest of the McPherson Range, a scenic 2 hours drive from Brisbane, or 90 minutes from the Gold Coast.

Ends.

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