



SEA CHANGE

For ex-lawyer Dani Rourke, leaving home to CHASE her DREAMS in the big smoke came full circle when she returned to helm the FAMILY BUSINESS.

WORDS CATHERINE BEST

Six years ago, Dani Rourke was a high-flying employment lawyer in Sydney whose days were consumed by piles of briefs, union diplomacy and courtroom contests.

Today, the only bar she answers to serves beer, wine and spirits, and the associated 'damages' are tangible things – think smashed glass, broken bottles and the like.

Dani is the accidental matriarch of Lord Howe Island's oldest and largest guesthouse, Pinetrees Lodge, having made the ultimate sea change in 2010 to take over the business that has been in her family for six generations.

"I used to deal with people in really stressful situations who were in and out of court spending lots of money," says Dani. "Now I look after people on holidays – they're having the best week they've had all year and they're having it with us – it's great."

Lord Howe Island, 600 kilometres north east of Sydney off the New South Wales coast, is a world heritage-listed wilderness of lush rainforest, dramatic volcanic peaks, white sandy beaches and coral reefs. It's a holidaymaker's paradise, but for Dani it's also home.

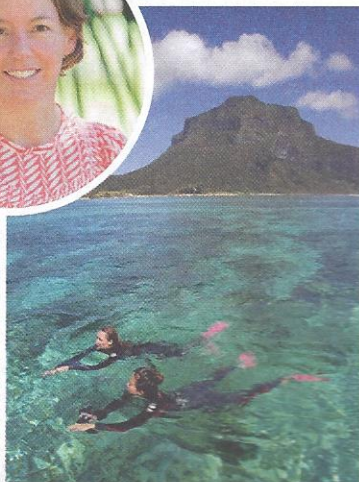
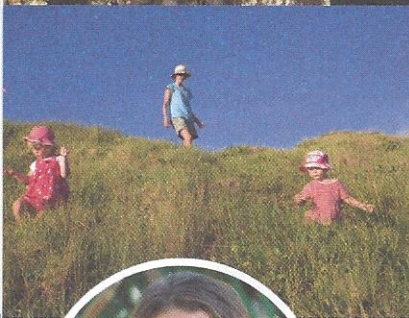
Growing up at Pinetrees, Dani had an idyllic childhood characterised by long days exploring her own real-life treasure island. There was no TV or phone, and barefoot was the accepted dress code at school.

"I had a very free, happy childhood," recalls Dani. "We were allowed out after school to visit whoever we wanted so long as we were home when it was dark. We were always out the back climbing trees, having adventures, going places."

When she was in Year 6, Dani headed to the mainland to board at an elite Sydney girls' school. She then went on to study law, a decision that was as much about forging her own career as it was a rebellion – she wanted to get out of the family business. In any case, Dani's brother Harry was the obvious successor. He had studied at hotel school in Switzerland and kept his hand firmly in the family business.

But when Harry was tragically killed in a motorcycle accident on Lord Howe in 2002, Pinetrees lost its "future leader", as described by former NSW premier Neville Wran at the memorial service. Eight years later, Dani's mother Pixie lost her battle with cancer and ruminations about selling the family business came to a head. Dani threw in her job as an in-house lawyer at IBM and returned to her roots, bringing her husband, former UN ecologist Luke Hanson, and their 18-month-old daughter, Elsie.

"It's a great place for kids to live and there's still so much freedom for them," says Dani. "There's no commuting and there are no supermarkets and no parking and none of those things that suck time away from everything else. That makes family life that much easier."



Within six months of returning to Lord Howe, Dani's family grew, with the birth of her second daughter, Pixie (named after her mother). It was the ending a turbulent period of upheaval Dani describes as "exhausting, horrendous, stressful and difficult". Eventually Dani and Luke bought out her aunt and uncle's share of the business, officially becoming sixth-generation custodians of the Pinetrees brand.

Dani's father Ed still has a 50 per cent stake in the lodge, and it has been a big adjustment working back in the shadow of her parents.

"What annoys me the most is how often he's right, it's just infuriating," says Dani. "He'll come down and he'll meet someone I've just hired and say, 'Oh yeah, that won't last', and, 'You might want to clear those drains because it's going to rain and it will flood'. He's always right, it drives me bananas."

Dani has a rich legacy to protect. Her great-great-great-grandparents arrived on Lord Howe Island in 1842, famously acquiring the land around Pinetrees for two tonnes of potatoes. Their daughter, Mary Nichols, would go on to open the island's first accommodation for guests, who began arriving by steamer around the turn of the century. Married to a whaling captain, Mary had 10 children, the eldest of whom secretly fled the island on a passing ship and sailed to England, only to perish on the Titanic. Mary ruled the family and the farm with an iron fist, and her son's desertion was perhaps a means of cutting the apron strings.

"Family history relates that she would watch the farm workers with a shotgun across her lap. If she thought they were slacking off, she'd fire a round over their heads," says Dani.

"I sometimes wonder what sort of hospitality Mary provided – and whether she fired the shotgun at her guests, too!"

Pinetrees went on to become a Lord Howe institution, passing through the generations and attracting a loyal following of repeat guests. When Pixie died, some of those guests expressed doubts they could ever return, such was the affection they had for the island stalwart, who became only the second woman to have a Qantas plane named in her honour. Dani and Luke had big shoes to fill. There was no 'handover' as such – no records of bed configurations, special dietary requirements or peculiar requests from regulars whose unique needs had been routinely catered to over the years.

"All of those people started arriving and all of them expected Pinetrees to know everything about them and the person who knew everything wasn't there anymore," says Dani, who quickly transitioned from corporate lawyer to business owner, running a staff of around 30 with a turnover of 2500 annual guests. Together, Dani and Luke became a formidable team. Dani is the staff manager and spends most of her time front of house, meeting and greeting guests at the airport, helping serve meals and dealing with

daily hiccups that arise among visitors and employees. Luke looks after the management of the business, handling bookings, marketing and sales.

But sometimes there's trouble in paradise. When you're living on a remote island and your very existence depends on the arrival of fortnightly shipments

of produce and daily passenger flights – always at the mercy of the weather – things often go awry. Flights can be grounded for days, the ship runs late or, worse, Pinetrees' cargo doesn't make it.

If fresh produce is in short supply, desserts become chocolate, honey, vanilla and poached-fruit affairs, and salads are whipped up with wild rice, chickpeas, quinoa and roast pumpkin.

But having done away with the peak-hour commute, Dani and her family are now firmly ensconced in the Lord Howe community, of which there are only about 350 permanent residents. Her daughters, now seven and five, are living their mother's islander childhood.

But whether the girls will keep Pinetrees in the family remains to be seen. There certainly won't be any pressure from Mum and Dad to continue the tradition for a seventh generation.

"The world's a big place; they have lots of options and could go anywhere," says Dani. "I guess we'll have to wait and see." ■

*There's no
COMMUTING
and there are NO
SUPERMARKETS
and no parking.*