

# MAN OF THE WORLD

Shaun Levings, the founder of surf travel company *World Surfaris*, is perceived by many to live a dream existence, and he most certainly does. His 'dream world' however, pardon the pun, has been the result of a lot of hard work. Indeed Shaun's entrepreneurial ingenuity has paved the way for the life he has lead.

We recently shared a ginger beer and lunch with Shaun retracing his start in the travel industry right through to what he is up to today. It's a truly inspiring story and we are very pleased to be able to share this with you. We hope you enjoy.

WORDS: DAVE SWAN PHOTOS: COURTESY OF SHAUN LEVINGS & WORLD SURFARIS

In 1984 whilst undertaking his studies in grade 10 at Erina High School on New South Wales' Central Coast, Shaun landed himself some work experience at *Jayes Travel Service*. He had travelled a bit with his family and was passionate about it but being an A-Grade student, his sights at that stage were set on university followed by a career in the legal field. The

gentleman who ran *Jayes* however had other plans. So impressed with Shaun he offered him a job. After consulting with his parents who were simply keen to support him no matter what career he chose (Shaun was also working as a kitchen hand at a restaurant in Terrigal and got offered a chef's apprenticeship too), Shaun decided to take up the offer and continued working at *Jayes* instead of completing his final two years of

senior at Erina High School.

Shaun worked with Jeff and the team at *Jayes* for another year before he decided other opportunities awaited. Gosford was only a little country town and Shaun couldn't see much room for advancement so he headed to the "big smoke" of Sydney. He foot slogged the streets and got himself an interview with *Thomas Cook Travel*, who back then were the largest travel



company in the world. Shaun landed a job at their biggest retail shop in Australia at 175 Pitt Street in Sydney's CBD. He was only 17 years of age. From there he proceeded to progress quickly through the ranks becoming their youngest ever Branch Manager of their Mona Vale store at age 22.

A few years on Shaun's Area Manager, whilst keen not to lose him but aware of his love for surfing,

advised him of a job advertised for a Manager of *The Surf Travel Company* at Cronulla. The owner, Paul King, was a pioneer of surf tourism and subsequently became Shaun's new boss in 1993. He would work there for the next 3 years.

In 1995 Shaun married and whilst on honeymoon with wife Jacqui in Noosa, they lucked upon a huge cyclone swell. The planets were in alignment. Noosa's beauty, laidback lifestyle and

THAT swell sealed the deal. The couple instantly fell in love with the place and upon their return to Sydney made plans to "get out of the rat race" and return for good.

Jacqui was working as a flight attendant with *Qantas* and put her name down for a transfer to Queensland. The transfer came through later that year and the couple moved to the Sunshine Coast in October 1996.



Sampling the delights of Lagundri Bay, Nias. Photo: Freddy

## THE MOVE NORTH AND THE BIRTH OF WORLD SURFARIS

To set up a travel agency in those days was a costly exercise and Shaun simply didn't have the financial backing to get his own travel agency license so he applied for a job as a travel consultant with Kevin Clarke at *Harvey World Travel* in Bulcock Street, Caloundra. Kevin at first could not believe Shaun had amassed such experience by the ripe old age of 27 but soon struck an agreement with him to develop a surf tourism side to the business. Shaun could place bookings through the agency and in exchange he would pay Kevin a percentage of his sales commission.

Shaun picks up the story.

"There was a guy by the name of Lewis Perry who had a small boat in the Maldives called the *Vindu*. I met Lewis back when I was working at *The Surf Travel Company* when he came down to start selling his boat trips through us.

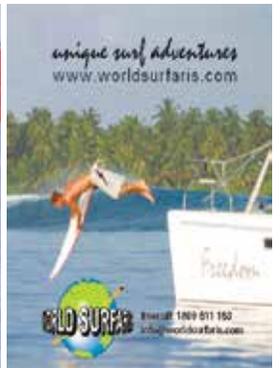
"Lewis was an industrious fella from Coolumb on the Sunshine Coast. He and a mate had pulled into the Maldives on the way back from Europe in the early 90's and discovered no one was doing boat trips. He basically hooked up with some locals and said, "let's get a boat happening and do some surf trips". They got this 50-footer with a big timber deck and canopy that made you feel like you were camping out on a boat. You would sleep up

top at night and basically chill there in between surf sessions during the day. It was incredible. There were no other boats at all in the Maldives at the time. Lewis incidentally had a few locals from the Sunshine Coast working as guides for him, guys like Stewy Johnson and Scardy (David Scard who is today *World Surfaris'* Business Development Manager and the nut job who pulled into a monster wave at Cloudbreak that saw him become the Runner Up in the 2011 Billabong XXL Big Wave Awards).

"Anyhow, Lewis was looking for a booking agent in Queensland, so it was co-incidental that he was one of the only people I knew on the Sunshine Coast. When he heard I was now



Maldives



living there, he approached me to help him get some business. So the *Vindu* became the first ever product *World Surfaris* represented. That was March 1997.”

Shaun then hooked up with a guy by the name of Shane Peel – ‘Peely’ – who at the time was publishing a surf magazine on the Sunshine Coast with Lyndsay Barry called *WaveRider*. Peely offered to do some promotions for Shaun and as such he had to quickly come up with a name for the business.

“I remembered seeing a film called *World Safari* with Alby Mangel and I went, ‘Why not *World Surfaris*.’ As far as the logo goes, I knew what I wanted, something that resembled the Daily

Planet logo from the Superman comics. A German designer called Bonnie, who was one of Lewis’s mates, helped bring it to life.”

For the first *World Surfaris* promo trip to the Maldives, “Peely organised a couple of Sunny Coast locals; a young grom by the name of Joel Parkinson (2012 WSL World Champion), Tom Whitaker (former WSL competitor and currently on the QS), Nick Wallace, who had just won the world grommet championships and another kid Sam Porter, who was a wave rat from Straddie (North Stradbroke Island).”

“Peely got these lads and filmmaker Brook Sylvester and photographer Rob Walshe for the promo trip. He said he would print a brochure to

insert into *WaveRider* and run off a further 10,000 copies. I thought that was a pretty good plan. That was the start of it all.

“It was an awesome trip. Joel was 16 at the time I think and I remember how he made it look all too easy. He would do something crazy on a wave without any effort whatsoever. It’s no wonder he went on to become world champion.”



South Maldives



## BUILDING THE PROFILE

"The promo trip definitely raised our profile. Parko already had a bit of a name despite being so young and thankfully I too was building a reputation in the industry. Surf tourism at the time was also really new so people were frothing over it. We started running these small eighth page ads in *Tracks* where you had to cut out the coupon and send it in and in return we would send you a brochure. You would be amazed how many of those coupons we would get."

Later in an edition of *Tracks* Shaun saw an ad for a surf camp in Papua New Guinea called *Nusa Island Retreat*. It was mid 1997 and his radar was on for new products so he got straight onto them.

"I told them, 'You need help. You need me.' I flew up there as they were still building it. I stayed in town above the general store in a small guesthouse. I was surfing *Piccaninny Point* (revered local surf break) on my own. A few of the kids would paddle out on their little timber boards. It was amazing.

"I could see their vision. Shaun and Nick Keane who founded *Nusa Island Retreat* grew up in

North Queensland but were born and bred in PNG. They had an affinity with the place. Together with Andy Abel from the *Surfing Association of Papua New Guinea* they created something unrivalled anywhere in the world. They have developed a means to support local communities and ensure the money generated by surf tourism flows back to them whilst also protecting local breaks from overcrowding. It was unprecedented at the time and I became their exclusive agent."

If that wasn't amazing enough, a good mate of Shaun's that he grew up with on the Central Coast came calling. Years earlier, Shaun had helped his mate Matt Cruden get a job with the *Katika* in the Mentawai Islands. Matt was now keen to build his own boat and wanted Shaun to be his partner. Shaun declined the offer instead introducing Matt to another friend, Greg Spindler, who partnered him in the new venture. Shaun became the agent for the new launch called the *Mangalui Ndulu*.

"It's a very famous vessel. The *Mangalui* is an 82 foot sloop that been used for countless pro trips. Matt incidentally now owns Resort Latitude Zero in the Mentawaiis.

Steve Burling from the Ha'atafu Beach Resort in Tonga then came across to *World Surfaris* having always enjoyed working with Shaun.

"Then some fellas from the Central Coast were looking to build a surf camp somewhere in the Pacific and I said I would help them. I went to the Solomon Islands and had a look around there but at that stage the infrastructure wasn't really there. Getting boards on internal flights was difficult, there were issues with Malaria and there was a bit of unrest as well. There were too many things against it to make it successful.

"I had been to Samoa in 1993/ 94 and loved it. I met a guy there who was an Aussie expat and had kept in contact with him so I introduced George and Paul, the guys from Avoca to Michael, my contact in Samoa. They went over and spent some time with him and discovered a spot near Salamumu where they built the *Sa' Moana Resort*. I was heavily involved with that project on a consultancy basis and became their exclusive agent."



## THE ROAD TO DISCOVERY

Publishing a surf magazine we are often asked this next question by readers but this time the shoe was on the other foot. I was keen to hear from Shaun what surf spots he had encountered that were pure gold in his eyes.

"When we first started running a charter in the Southern Maldives it felt like every corner we discovered was a new break. I thought, 'wow, how good is this?' We had this guide book that just had all the reef passes – basically a topographic map of the Maldives atoll by atoll showing all the reef passes.

Jody Perry, an old mate of mine was one of the skippers back in the early days. Jody was a weather guru. This was also all before *Google Earth* mind you. We didn't have all the cheating tools back then (laughing).

So there was this program called *CMaps* and Jody had it programmed and would be zooming

in on these reef passes and working out the predominant winds and swell direction to predict where the waves would be hitting. He nailed it every time.

"I would like to say at this time too that I was very mindful of not overcrowding places back then. I could have had three boats in a short space of time, the demand for the *Vindu* was that great. It was booked solid. I just went, "Nuh, not taking on another boat as I don't want to be the guy who made the place crowded. Then people came in and imitated what I was doing and started running boat trips and it was like, 'Well, I do probably need to put on another boat as I have a good reputation and if I don't, customers will book with someone else.'

"I was just always mindful as a surfer that the true essence of why you spend money on a surf holiday is rocking up to a reef pass with just you and your mates. This is of course becoming increasingly difficult to do in the world nowadays. A lot has changed in the last 20 years but don't get me wrong, with a good skipper and guide who know the little tricks of the trade and the strategic

manoeuvres in the dark, you will wake up at first light and you will surf."

Another surf spot Shaun spoke highly of was a region more famous for other reasons.

"We discovered this place off Papua New Guinea near Manus Island. I took a catamaran out there with Tim Roland, photographer Peter Joli Wilson and ex pro-surfer Troy Brooks and Adam Neilson from the Gold Coast. This was probably 10 years ago. We discovered this little right-hander we nicknamed *Twiggy's Right* but the most amazing experience was when we entered villages that had never seen white people before. Tim took us down these estuaries in his tinny and they were like, 'Holy shit – what the! They were as gobsmacked as we were.

"We started surfing at Twiggies and a few of the locals paddled out in their dug-out canoes and one fella stood up in one and surfed it like a SUP. He had clearly been doing it for years and that sort of sh#t is just priceless.



## JUGGLING FAMILY LIFE

Our conversation prompts me to ask Shaun how he has juggled family life with the challenges of a developing business and of course, those necessary work trips needed to familiarise oneself with the various destinations they are promoting.

“The trips were undeniably fun but there was a lot of hard work too. You’re dealing with the frustrations of sorting through logistics in remote locations, boats that can break down, encountering bribery, corruption, different cultural business mentalities and this is all while trying to stay on top of quality control and customer satisfaction. Then you have some people who simply can’t be pleased and being a perfectionist I took it to heart. People who say I have had it easy with the dream job have no idea. Don’t get me wrong, there was a lot of good but it didn’t come without baggage. I would score *Lohis Left* in the Maldives with me and a couple of other blokes out while the swell is pumping but that would be after sitting down for hours upon hours of meetings with ‘suits’ trying to screw me at every opportunity possible.

“Each year I would do a half a dozen short overseas trips of a week or two at a time to the Mentawai Islands, Maldives, Papua New Guinea and Samoa just to keep in touch.”

When Shaun and Jacqui’s son Jai was born in December 1997 things had to change however. Jacqui was still working as a flight attendant for *Qantas* and driving down to Brisbane each day. When it came time for her to go back to work three months after Jai was born, it became a undeniable struggle.

“I wasn’t earning enough money to support the whole family so Jacqui unfortunately had to go back to work. She would be up during the night breastfeeding and then on the road at 3am to make the morning flights. Thankfully however the business was humming along enough that I could afford to get my travel agent’s license and go out on my own. The guys at *Harvey World* always knew that was my eventual plan so I said thanks for having me and set up *World Surfari*s in its own right.

“We moved to Brisbane in mid 1998 so Jacqui could be closer to her work and rented a little Queenslander in Lutwyche. Jacqui would head off and I was set up in the front bedroom with my toll free number and it was all go. I even had a mobile phone for when I had to head out of the house. During the day I was juggling the office and changing nappies. It’s amazing what we humans have in reserve when you have to call upon it. In

time we had a lady who would come and help with Jai between 9am and 5pm.”

The Levings later moved to Gordon Park buying a house just off Stafford Road. Shaun’s office was now ‘bigger’ – he set up in the home’s double garage and with that it was time for an employee. He employed a junior consultant by the name of Kevin Forrester. Kevin had been to TAFE and completed a travel course and was a keen young surfer.

“Our profile continued to grow from there. I didn’t have a lot to spend on advertising but the surf media were keen on contra deals. They would book a trip for a couple of pros with a photographer and journo onboard and out of it I would get a story and a few free ads equivalent to the cost of the trip. The business began really pumping and the phones went nuts. Jacqui then fell pregnant with Mia and we decided it was definitely time to head back to the Sunshine Coast. We set up the office on Brisbane Road, not where we are today, we were initially a little closer to the beach at the Mooloolaba end. At this time, I head hunted, Wendy Silk-Glover previously from HWT, Caloundra and she ended up managing *World Surfari*s like it was her own for the next 13 years. It was a sad day in 2014 when Wendy left for a new adventure. Wendy remains a great friend to Jacqui and I. Anyhow, we soon outgrew those premises and moved further along Brisbane Road into a larger office.”



## IN PURSUIT OF PERFECTION

"At the end of the day it is all about the consumer and guest satisfaction. Quality Control is everything. Further to your earlier question about family, thankfully I have a very understanding wife because it was the pursuit of this goal that saw me away a lot.

"This passion for customer care is why *World Surfaris* became the number 1 surf travel company. It has always been about the customer! If they love the trip you send them on you get repeat customers. Dealing with the stoke of people when they return and they ring you and thank you and the testimonials is a big buzz. Any business that has a model of churn and burn is not going to stand the test of time."

It was his perfectionist streak however that saw Shaun near burnout.

"By 2014 we had a crop of 50 different products ranging from boats to surf camps to resorts. We

always had good staff but being so hands on within the business I couldn't switch off. I mean if someone was sick I would answer the phones. I was always really involved in the marketing of the business. I customised the back office systems and prided myself on being able to do anyone else's job. My constant pursuit of improvement however resulted in insomnia. To that end I considered selling the business three years ago but a mate recommended I take on a business partner to share the load.

"John Finlay had done a couple trips with us and had retired to the Sunshine Coast from Brisbane. He expressed interest in buying into the business. John had a mature business head having come from the big end of town and was just what I was after. He now jokes of the former Remington shaver ad that goes, 'I liked it so much I bought the company.' Anyhow John joined us in February 2014 and has been great. Like my wife Jacqui he is a fantastic person to bounce things off."

John and Shaun then set about a plan to make

Shaun dispensable. As any good business owner knows to further grow one's business they must find a way to make themselves obsolete.

"I was micromanaging too much to my own detriment. Being an anally retentive stickler for detail and wanting everything to be perfect was having a negative impact on me personally. So we put on a young accountant JP along with a few others to cover my roles and they have all proven to be great. At the beginning of last year however I realised it was time for new challenges. I'd been putting the feelers out for a potential buyer for my share and I mentioned to John I was keen to sell. John had first right of refusal and simply told me to come up with a figure and we'll work it out; which we did in due course with the minimum of fuss. At end of May last year, I handed my baby over to John and his fantastic team. It was a surreal feeling and one that took a while to adjust too as you could imagine after nearly 20 years. I'm very proud of *World Surfaris*, it's a fantastic business that has stood the test of time and will continue to flourish in the future and get many more surfers stoked!



## WHAT NEXT?

The obvious question I had to ask was what Shaun had been up to since he sold his remaining share in *World Surfaris*.

"Well I have surfed a lot more (laughing). You are juggling so many balls with the business and family life there isn't always time to grab as many surfs as you may like. I have surfed a lot more in the last 7 months then I have in the last 19 years that's for sure."

One of the first things Shaun did however when things wrapped up with *World Surfaris* was to grab some quality time with the kids.

"My daughter Mia was in France in an exchange program living there for six months. When she finished Jacqui and I picked her up and spent the next month travelling around Europe. It was whilst there I sensed Jai (Shaun's now 19 year old son) wouldn't continue on with his Uni degree. I asked him what he wanted to do and he was unsure so I spoke to a mate of mine in Europe who was in the maritime industry.

He inquired whether Jai had thought about the superyacht industry. I recalled a couple of surf guides who had worked for me who had gone on to this industry and were earning really good money. So I said to Jye, 'What do you think?' I found this superyacht training academy in the northern beaches of Sydney that do all the safety training and tickets you need in August. We went down together for three weeks camping in the van at Narrabeen. He went off each day and I went surfing.

"Jai got his tickets then jumped on a plane to Fort Lauderdale in September and pretty soon after landed a full time gig. He is now based out of West Palm Beach on a 171 foot superyacht privately owned by an Italian fella. Last week he was in the Bahamas and getting paid to do it! It is awesome for him and it's been a blessing that I haven't been working these last six months. I could do some family stuff, return to my youth a bit and recalibrate the brain."

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## THE VAN

Now that Shaun has mentioned the van, I have to say it is friggin' unbelievable. I certainly had a fair bit of van envy going on after he showed it to me prior to our meeting. So here's the rundown for those interested.

"The van is my happy place. It's a Mercedes Sprinter mid-wheel base high roof. There are 7.1 cubic metres of space in the back that will sleep 4 at a push. It has become my mobile office and home away from home. There are a couple of solar panels on the roof and I can store up to 120 litres of water and importantly, about 5 or 6 boards. It is brilliant. Even if I am not on the road travelling around Australia I can go for a surf at Moffs (Moffat Beach) and hang out in the carpark for a while, make a cup of coffee and chill out. It has a hot shower, cooking facilities, plenty of power points, USB chargers...."

Bastard.

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# “IT’S AMAZING WHAT WE HUMANS HAVE IN RESERVE WHEN YOU HAVE TO CALL UPON IT”

## THE WORK FRONT

Dare I say it, I was in need of some bad news (only joking) but I wanted to know whether Shaun had returned to the land of the working.

Shaun has set up a consultancy business called *Social Surf*, which is centred around the knowledge he has acquired over the last

20 years and the fact he grew a business like *World Surfaris* from day dot into one of the most successful multinational surf agencies in the world. He first client became a travel agency in Noosa and recently he has worked with a newly constructed world-class surf resort on Nias Island in North Sumatra at the famed break of Lagundri Bay.

“A mate of mine, Mark Flint, bought 2400 sq metres of beachfront looking directly into the eye of the break. It is called *KabuNohi* Resort. It is amazing. He has constructed this hand made resort using all local woodworkers and the attention to detail is phenomenal. It truly is beautiful.

“Mark has been in surf tourism for years and years so the punters that go there are going to



have an awesome experience but he needed help. He told me he wanted someone to work with the travel agents allowing him to focus on the guests. I became the go between. I just signed *World Surfari*s to be the exclusive agent and I will be working closely with the team there.”

So there you have it. Shaun Levings certainly appears to have The Midas Touch. I have always

enjoyed our chats through the years. We regularly worked together on marketing campaigns for *World Surfari*s in Smorgasboarder but this no doubt was our most lengthy and enjoyable talk. I left our interview feeling inspired by the achievements of a clearly switched-on yet down-to-earth guy who simply likes to travel and surf. Don't we all? Well done Shaun. **S**

# THE NEW WORLD