

# My island home

*The romanticism and freedom of island living has lured three WA families to Dirk Hartog Island, Tonga and Rottnes Island. They share their experiences with Connie Clarke.*

It's the first day of school, but 13-year-old Will Wardle arrives barefoot. He waits until the last minute, slowly slipping on his pristine white socks and regulation black private-school shoes. Finally, taking a deep breath, he ambles through the gates of Christ Church Grammar School.

It's not that Will hates school. He's very bright, his father, Kieran, is quick to point out. It's just that until 12 months ago, Will woke up every day on a sprawling homestead surrounded by crystal blue waters. He swam with sea turtles and dugongs, went fishing and paddleboarding, and took photographs of his family's adventures on a stretch of untouched WA wilderness off Denham, 737km north of Perth.

"As soon as we pick him up, his shoes are off again," Wardle says. "He will not wear shoes on the island. We've told him that he needs to get an education before he comes back full-time, and he's so into his photography and the environment. He can't wait to get back. He wants to turn my favourite fishing spot into a marine sanctuary."

Until last year, there were no traffic jams, lunchtime queues or uniforms for Will, his brother Ollie, 10, and sister Sanechi, 7. From their home on Dirk Hartog Island, with their mother Tory Pyman by their side, they learnt the basics through the School of the Air, motivated by the promise of a kayak ride later in the day. "It was an awesome way of schooling. They know how lucky they were, spending half the day in a kayak," Pyman says. "I taught them early on, but always with the help of the school."

The Wardles are not alone in their pursuit of sun, sand and island life. Two other WA families have chosen to live this idyllic lifestyle while raising their children in differing degrees of isolation. The Sheens packed up their Dunsborough lives and sailed to Nomuka island, Tonga,

where they have raised their children while hosting whale-watching tours. And only 25 minutes from Perth, the Mants have spent a decade firmly embedded in the Rottnest community – the only home ever known by their young children.

On Nomuka island, Kai Sheen, 17, and his sister Dior, 15, climb coconut trees and prepare manioke from the cassava plant, a root vegetable used routinely in Tongan island meals. In between online classes, they help take tourists out onto the turquoise waters on the family catamaran, scouting for humpback whales.

Just babies when they started sailing across the world with their parents, Tris and Dave, their first classroom was the family's yacht as they sailed the Pacific. Tris was their first teacher. For the past few years they've been taught the WA curriculum through the School of Isolated Distance Education in Leederville. This year, however, Dior is starting Year 10 in Cape Naturaliste, the first time she has been in a mainland classroom for a decade.

"She wants to give it a go," Sheen says. "So we're supporting her. It's that time in her life when she wants to be with her friends."

Sparks flew for Dave and Tris 20 years ago when they spent time at a Dunsborough dive shop. Dave, a few years older than Tris, was a three-time national champion windsurfer and a big celebrity around town. It didn't take Tris long to agree to sail around the world.

"We got to know each other really well when we bought a small, slow yacht and sailed from Brisbane back to Dunsborough," Sheen says. "After getting married, we bought the Willie (an 84ft gaff-rigged schooner) and worked in Dunsborough in summer and Broome in winter, taking people out on the yacht for sunset cruises."

Kai and Dior were born in Bunbury, but were straight back



The Wardle homestead on Dirk Hartog Island, 737km north of Perth. Picture: Will Wardle.



on the yacht. "For seven years we did this migratory and water-based lifestyle and work," Sheen says. "We sold the Willie and bought our first sailing catamaran and took off for Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Kai was about 6 and Dior was 4."

Both the Wardle and Sheen families have lived this raw existence for two decades, working hard, but playing harder. Nothing has come easy, though. In Tonga, the Sheens built by hand the Lolofutu Beach Barn, their home for almost three years, with the help of islanders. It took five weeks to cut away sections of the jungle with machetes. They had pine shipped in from a nearby plantation, and it took a year for the barn and the camping sites to become a thriving hub for visitors who fly in from the Europe, the US, New Zealand and all over Australia.

For the Wardles, running water, electricity and a simple phone line were non-existent in the early days.

Kieran was just 18 when, in 1994, the family decided to send him up to Dirk Hartog Island. The family owns two stretches of land on the 90km-long and 15km-wide island, discovered in 1616 by Dutch explorer Dirk Hartog. Kieran's grandfather, former Perth lord mayor and grocery entrepreneur, Sir Thomas Wardle, bought it from the Charles Court government in 1968 as a family retreat. He later retired there.

After the longstanding sheep-station manager had a heart attack, Kieran became the caretaker, and was the only soul on the homestead for weeks.

When he heard that Tory, the pretty teenager he met a few years earlier at a friend's party, was back in Perth, he tracked her down and invited her up for a week. She never left. "I felt really comfortable coming up here to spend time with him. I fell in love with Kieran and the island, too," Pymans says. But the early years were challenging. "We had a telephone that ran by radio and we had no connection to the outside world at all."

Two years earlier, newly arrived on the island, Kieran had no idea how to fix anything. "I learned really quickly," he says. "When you turn on the tap and nothing comes out, the first thing you do is ring Dad to see what went wrong, and he says, 'Have you been up to the top of the hill to check the tank?' Things that



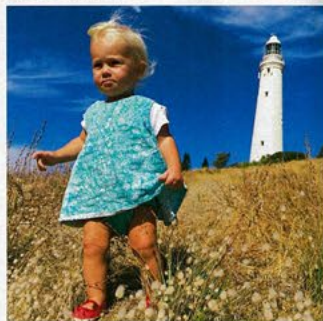
Above: Sarah, Darby, Jason and Indiana Mant. Picture: Richard Hatherly. Right: Indiana at the Rottnest Island lighthouse. Picture: Jason Mant.

people take for granted every day, that make life so easy, we have to think about all the time. We crush our glass, remove our aluminium cans from the island and have solar power and a wind turbine."

Crises are a normal part of life – everything from power and gas shortages, to boats running up onto the beach. But almost 13 years ago, a chain of unpredictable events seriously tested the couple's mettle. It was a time when isolation became their worst enemy. With a storm gathering off the coast, 12-week-old Will's chickenpox was getting worse. "We had 10 people fishing here," Wardle says. "They had their own plane and could have flown us to Carnarvon, but there was a massive storm coming in and we had to get Will to a doctor or he could lose his sight. We ended up driving to Geraldton. And then I had to drive straight back to look after the fishing expedition. It was a horror 24 hours, but we managed to survive that one."

The island's just got so much to offer. Fishing is one of the them – but it's more about seeing the turtles nesting or following the dugongs and whales and dolphins. So many people want to see the animals in their natural habitats. It's a lot different than when we started, when we had about 200 (visitors) a year in total, and you would go weeks and weeks without seeing another soul."

Just over 12 months ago, Kieran and Tory made a tough decision – to rent a house in the suburbs and send their children to school in Perth. They now travel tens of thousands of kilometres every year, back and forth between their idyllic home and the city. "Every long weekend and every school holidays we pick them up and head straight back the island," Wardle says. "I'm trying to convince Tory that she should get her pilot's licence and then she can fly us back every weekend. I certainly don't enjoy living back in Perth. It's not something that I would choose. You become so used to island life. When you get back to Perth, there's



"We grow stronger with all the challenges."

Now, 23 years later, the Wardles host about 1000 families every year at the homestead. There's an appetite for holidays that really take people off the beaten track, Wardle says, and visitors don't shy away from getting back to basics. "Another 1200-1500 camp every year in the national park. In the last six years we've really pushed ecotourism. When Tory (who cooks meals for 20 guests every day) joined me in 1996, the standard of everything went up. All of a sudden we went from just a fishing camp to a tourist place, with an emphasis on the environment."

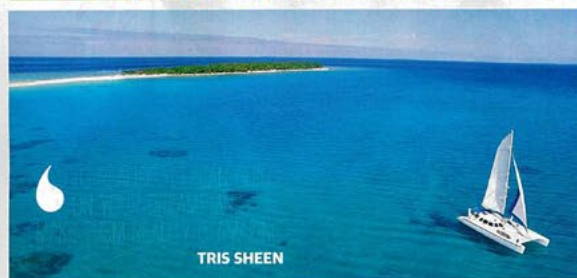
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Will, Kieran, Tory, Ollie and Sanchi Wardle.



Above, left to right: Dave and Tris Sheen collect herbs near their barn at Nomuka, Tonga; Kai climbs a coconut tree and swims with Dior, a humpback whale and her calf. Left: The Sheen's catamaran exploring the area. Pictures: David Clumpner Photography and Tris Sheen.



too much traffic and too much going on."

Tory will often go four weeks without seeing her children. It's the biggest challenge she's faced since moving to Dirk Hartog Island 20 years ago.

"When we committed to doing this a year ago for the kids' benefit, we knew we just had to do the best that we could and we remind ourselves that it's not forever. The kids see home as a really special place."

Tris and Dave tried life back in Bunbury for a while, too. After cruising the Pacific for two years, they sailed into Cairns, sold the yacht and bought a van, driving back to WA. Just six months later, they had itchy feet again. "We flew to New Zealand, hoping to buy another yacht," Tris says. "We couldn't find one. So we flew to a friend's place in Puerto Rico and continued the search. We found one in New York."

Sailing from New York down the east coast of America was such fun, Tris says. "We sailed again across the Pacific and spent a fair bit of time in Tonga before heading to New Zealand."

The family has since sailed to 35 countries. They have lived on three islands in Tonga, settling on Vava'u for two years before moving to the Ha'apai group of islands, 100 nautical miles south. They bought Whale Discoveries in 2009 and set up their base camp in Nomuka in 2013. It's a great way to earn a living, Tris says, and an opportunity to put something back into the world. "It's important to give back, especially in a place like Tonga where people don't get the opportunities that we've had."

The Sheen kids are just as comfortable capturing wild pigs, spearfishing and swimming with humpback

whales as they are with technology. The family rescues animals, too. Mainly dogs, but also horses and ponies, pigs and even the odd goat. "I think I love animals more than people sometimes," Sheen laughs. "I grew up in Nigeria and I remember my parents were always bringing home animals. I can't go very far without bringing animals home myself."

They have rescued 30 dogs in 10 years – some in Tonga, some in the South-West. But it's the horses, regularly tethered and often eaten by the islanders, that Tris has a soft spot for. "Some of them get free and they run around, often getting tangled up," she says. "They have lots of hoof and eye problems, so we've organised vet supplies, along with getting advice from an online vet."

But it's the main attraction – swimming up close to the majestic humpback whales on the island of Nomuka – that people fly in from around the world to see. From July to October, it's still the highlight of the family's life in Tonga.

"We live 100 per cent off the grid," Sheen says. "There are real

hardships, but to realise you can build on your dreams and make them reality is amazing."

Rottnest Island ranger Jason Mant agrees. His decade living in a cottage under the main lighthouse has been simply "unreal", he says. "We have ocean views from the house and we hear all of those natural sounds of the surf and the birds. It's amazing having a giant lighthouse in your backyard." Built in 1897, the cottage was home to the island's lighthouse keepers until 1990, and has since housed Rottnest Island Authority workers and their families. "It's a typical old 19th century stone cottage," Mant says. "It was built from a quarry just down the hill. We rely on a rainwater tank and we don't need or want airconditioning."

Mant, 40, and his wife Sarah 35, jumped at the chance to live and work on Rottnest after commuting from Fremantle for a year. He was an environmental officer and she worked at the visitor centre before the ranger position became vacant. They have two children, Darby, 5, and Indiana, 3. "Rottnest is the only place they've ever known," Mant says. "We are away from town with no neighbours and so close to uncrowded beaches and surfing spots. There's always somewhere to swim that is protected from the wind. It feels like we're a thousand miles from anywhere, but you can be in Fremantle within half an hour."

The Mants spend up to eight weeks straight on Rottnest, only making the 25-minute ferry ride to Fremantle for specialist medical appointments and haircuts. This year, Darby starts Year 1 at Rottnest Primary School, where there are 12 students. Next year, Indie joins him. Transport to and from the cottage can be tricky, though. "We've just started using electric bikes, which makes things easier," Mant says. "It's a 10km round trip to the centre of town. We've become pretty fit, that's for sure. On very hot days, the wind and rain can be particularly challenging. We are constrained by the ferry services in the winter, but the summer is not so bad because there are so many more services to cater for big increases in visitors."

"We've enjoyed every day we've had on the island. We might have to think about leaving when the kids get to high school. There's no school for older kids on the island. It's hard to imagine leaving, but maybe we'll find a way to live here forever."

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