

Mystery Mountain Farmstay

Mystery Mountain Farmstay enjoys an idyllic location, nestled beside a national conservation park at Beechmont in the Gold Coast Hinterland. Owners Jan and Garth Keppie's meticulous renovations have both restored the 100 year old farmhouse to its former glory and transformed its facilities to meet 21st century visitor expectations.

Their renovations go beyond a beautiful building and gardens. While upgrading the property's infrastructure, the Keppie's have diligently adopted sustainable systems and practices wherever possible.

However at times, achieving sustainability wasn't always the primary motive for some of the property's upgrade but rather an outcome of complying with council regulations, as is often the case. However the sustainable credibility they have now achieved puts Mystery Mountain in a strong position to benefit from travellers' increasing desire to minimise their environmental impact while on holiday.

GETTING STARTED

The difficulty for a business such as Mystery Mountain Farmstay in getting started on their path to sustainability is knowing what to do and when to do it. The Keppies are no different in this endeavour to a lot of other small businesses. As the owner/manager/worker, the Keppies approached making their business more sustainable in as thorough way as possible within their limited time and resources and in the absence of the knowledge of a more systematic approach.

MAJOR INITIATIVES

These are some of the environmental upgrades and initiatives undertaken by Mystery Mountain Farmstay.

Environmentally Sustainable Practices

- All grey and septic water is treated with an aerated water treatment system which treats the waste water to a high degree of purity and which is registered with Council and monitored monthly.
- All water used on the property is either rainwater or spring water. There is a total water storage capacity of approximately 94,500 litres attached to the main building, as well as a further 18,000 litres of water storage in tanks located on the property.
- All 14 shower heads and all taps in the main building are fitted with high quality brass water limiters.
- All 14 toilets in the main building are dual flush.
- The external toilet located on the property is a waterless toilet with non-chemical waste treatment.

- Gutter guards are fitted to all water catchment roof gutters.
- Timber from the original homestead has been re-cycled for use in other buildings on the property, such as the external toilet building.
- No chemicals are used on the property in the growing of fruit or vegetables.
- Waste fruit and vegetables are re-cycled as garden fertiliser or chook feed.
- Introduced weeds such as groundsel, crofton weed, privet, camphorlaurel and mistweed are gradually being removed from the property.
- All human-introduced rubbish such as old tyres, non-biodegradable household waste, barbed wire, and other old farm detritus etc have been removed from the property.
- The large capacity gas hot water system which pipes hot water around the house continuously ensures that all 14 showers can be used at the same time with equal access to adequate hot water. The hot water dispenses from the taps immediately, avoiding water wastage.
- The Keppie's buy their supplies and produce locally wherever possible.

Part of being a sustainable business involves risk management. The process the Keppies underwent was to identify what was a potential risk for the business and how the risk could be reduced or eliminated. Through this process Mystery Mountain Farmstay recognised the scenarios that could potentially jeopardise their business and implemented initiatives to address this.

FIRE SAFETY FIXTURES

The impact of the Childers Backpacker fire meant fire safety was a key consideration for Mystery Mountain Farmstay.

- The property includes a 45,000 litres water tank, in addition to the existing water storage, which is dedicated solely to the fire sprinkler system installed in the main house
- The fire sprinkler system has a backup power source, in the form of a 32 KVA diesel engine, which is hard-wired to the sprinkler pump, so that in the event of mains power failure the sprinkler system will operate.
- There's emergency lighting throughout the house including exit signs; hard-wired smoke detectors in all rooms; hand-held fire extinguishers throughout the house; a fire blanket in the kitchen area; 4 fire hose reels fitted at various places on the outside of the house and a fire hydrant for use by the fire brigade.
- The internal doors are made with toughened glass to accord with the fireplan.
- The fire sprinkler system is monitored monthly.
- There are several roof-mounted sprinklers, independent of the internal fire sprinkler system, intended for use in the event of bush fire.

BUILDING FEATURES

- Extensions have been built on 4 meter deep pylons to negate slippage.
- Verandahs are built to withstand the weight of up to 100 persons.

- The building is constructed to withstand cyclone force 80 winds.

KEY OUTCOMES

When asked, the Keppie's found it difficult to quantify the outcomes or benefits of their efforts. However, offering a sustainable product and experience and showing their guests the importance of looking after the environment is certainly a nice fit with their core market of Asian school groups.

It's common for the schools to send groups to stay at Mystery Mountain year after year. Part of the appeal of what the Keppie's offer, and likely explanation for their high repeat business, is the way the Keppie's incorporate their respect for the property and its surrounds into educational and fun activities for their guests. It's not uncommon to see the students participate in weed pulling sessions! They try to give the students an appreciation of nature, with many of them never having spent time out of a city before.

MAJOR CHALLENGES

Becoming a sustainable tourism business isn't always an easy journey. Some of the property's major re-development projects required significant financial outlays. The Keppies at times experienced a lack of clear, correct information and guidance when dealing with government and regulatory bodies.

ADVICE TO OPERATORS

The Keppie's key points of advice to other operators starting on the path to sustainability are:

- Make sure you are totally familiar with local by-laws and zoning requirements
- Speak with the locals first, and find out what will work and won't work in the local environment
- Get to know your local Member, who may be able to support you in applications before Council
- Don't compromise on quality
- Establish good relations with agents built on trust
- Stay true to your core business

NEXT STEPS

While the Keppies have done much in terms of introducing sustainable practices and systems to their business, they haven't yet finished the job – they are yet to promote their successes and monitor and evaluate their performance. Monitoring their progress will help them to assess what they have already achieved and guide their future planning.

As with most tourism operations, staff numbers vary according to seasonal demand. Mystery Mountain currently only takes group bookings and while they can employ up to 12 staff during their busy periods their manpower is limited. External factors such as the Swine flu panic also have an effect on their business which is mostly reliant on international bookings. However the Keppies also see they are now achieving the rewards of their efforts and are looking forward to continuing on their path to sustainability.

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