

**FEATURE STORY**

## "Bowenwood" after Baz

A sleepy beachside town at the tip of Queensland's Whitsundays; Bowen will never be the same since Hollywood A-listers Baz Luhrmann, Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman came to town, writes Jessica Reid.

For nearly two months in 2007, Bowen was gripped by the 'Baz Buzz' when it hosted a cast and crew of hundreds for the filming of the \$130 million 20th Century Fox production, *'Australia'*.

Situated a short 40-minute drive north of Airlie Beach, this picturesque seaside town known mainly for its Big Mango, remains one of north Queensland's undiscovered gems. Undiscovered that is, until Baz Luhrmann stumbled across it.

It all began one fateful February day when Merle Jochheim spotted a man and his wife taking photos outside her famous bakery, Jochheim's Pies.

Thinking the couple were tourists, Merle gave them a history lesson about Bowen and told them all of the things to see and do in town.

"I told him about our beaches and where to go fishing and I told him to go up to Flagstaff Hill to see the most beautiful views of Bowen and the Whitsundays," Merle said.

"He came inside and was looking at all of the old black-and-white photographs on the wall," she said.

A great-great-granddaughter of the explorer who founded Bowen in the 1850s, 72-year-old Merle takes great pride in the town and was able to tell the friendly couple everything they wanted to know about Bowen.

"I didn't have a clue who they were until a couple of days later I read in the paper that Baz Luhrmann had been in town and I'd sold him Bowen!"

Luhrmann and his team had been scouting the country for potential locations for his Outback epic movie *'Australia'* and decided on Bowen as the location to recreate wartime Darwin.

*'Australia'* revolves around the relationship between a rough-and-ready cattle drover (Jackman) and respectable English aristocrat (Kidman) who inherits a Northern Territory cattle station. The drama ensues when the couple are caught in the bombing of Darwin during World War II.

Retaining much of its old world charm from the 1940s era, Bowen provided the perfect backdrop for *'Australia'*.

In fact, Baz Luhrmann's wife Catherine Martin (Academy Award Winner for Best Art Direction and Best Costume Design for *Moulin Rouge*) said the costumes for *'Australia'* were inspired by the historic town photos hanging in Jochheim's Pies.

Visitors driving into town are greeted with a huge 'Bowenwood' sign, the famous Big Mango, and billboards with the slogans 'Baz, Nicole and Hugh loved Bowen... and so will you'.



And what's not to love about a place which offers beachcombers a veritable paradise with eight award-winning, palm-fringed beaches to explore. Keen anglers in Bowen have the choice of reef, beach and estuary fishing, while snorkellers and scuba divers will revel in the variety of soft and hard corals - and brightly coloured tropical fish - that can be seen straight off the beach.

Hugh Jackman and his family were frequently spotted at Horseshoe Bay when in Bowen, while Nicole Kidman and her entourage preferred walks along King's Beach.

The stars caused quite a stir while they were in town and every local seems to have a story to tell about their personal brush with fame.

Merle will happily recall stories of her daily encounters with Hugh Jackman and his family and her menu now boasts a *Hunky Hugh Jackman pie*, a *Baz Luhrmann baguette*, and a *Nicole Kidman Mango Cheesecake*.

Bowen's Grandview Hotel will also always remember the 'Bowenwood' era fondly, hosting hundreds of cast and crew for their daily meals. The hotel's new beer garden provided the perfect modern setting for Keith Urban to play a concert, despite its exterior still being disguised as a typical 1940s building for its starring role in the movie.

Approximately 600 locals were lucky enough to be cast as extras in 'Australia', and another 100 people worked as volunteer guides for tourists visiting the town during filming.

Clare Stocker was one of the volunteers and said there were still parts of the movie set left for visitors to see today.

"The parts that are left are the police station, the Grandview hotel and Customs House on the corner, which was Bryan Brown's house in the movie," Ms Stocker said.

But Bowen Mayor Michael Bruncker said the council was keen to see the 'Baz Buzz' live on long after the remaining set pieces deteriorate.

"We're building a huge outdoor entertainment area on the foreshore at Front Beach and in that will be a place dedicated to the movie where we can see the before and after shots, and what it actually did for the town and some of the special scenes," Mr Bruncker said.

He said the scene where Nicole Kidman led more than 700 cattle down the main street of Bowen would definitely be featured in the interactive centre.

Gordon Jensen was also a movie volunteer and said 'Australia' actor Bryan Brown could be found most afternoons at the Bowen Yacht Club.

"He'd sit on the stool and look out through the window and say 'has anybody bothered to tell the world how beautiful this harbour is?'" Mr Jensen said.

Anchors @ the Club owner and Head Chef Colin Oatley said Bryan Brown wasn't the only celebrity to pop into the venue, which serves up Bowen's renowned fresh seafood.

"Baz Luhrmann came in for dinner quite a few times and his wife CM (Catherine Martin) and Nicole Kidman - not to drop names!", Mr Oatley said.



"The stars all frequented the place plenty of times and we were lucky enough to get them to sign some of our plates, which hang on the walls," he said.

"Hugh Jackman signed 'we'll be back every Sunday' and he was back every Sunday!"

Summergarden Theatre owner Ben De Luca vividly recalls the first time he met Hugh Jackman.

"I was busy talking to customers the way I usually do and I looked up and this hand came through and handed me these tickets and I couldn't believe my eyes, it was Hugh Jackman!" Ben said.

"And I said 'Oh, it's you!' and he said, 'No, it's *Hugh!*'" he laughed.

The Summergarden Theatre played a major role in the production of 'Australia', being used as the cutting room floor for Baz Luhrmann and his team.

"We would screen the film rushes for Baz and his crew and they would see what they had shot the previous day," said Ben.

"They also used our old projectors and all the spools and spool trunks and even the rolls of tickets on set for the Pearl Theatre, which everyone will see when the movie comes out."

But perhaps Merle best summed up what the movie has done for the town when she said: "We used to say Bowen is between Townsville and Mackay but we don't have to say that any more because tourists just seem to know now where it is.

"It's a beautiful place and everyone's popping in here to see us," Merle said.

So while Bowen's beautiful beaches and laid back charm remain unchanged, 'Bowenwood' will also live on for years to come, remembering the fateful day that Baz came to town.

## **ENDS**

### **Getting there:**

Bowen, on the Whitsunday coast is 1165km north of Brisbane and 212km south of Townsville.

To fly-drive to Bowen, Virgin Blue and Jetstar fly direct from Brisbane to the Whitsunday Coast Proserpine Airport, which is a 45 minute drive from Bowen. Jetstar also flies direct to Proserpine from Sydney. There are also air, train and bus services connecting Bowen to major cities.

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