

When last-mile logistics means a 160 km sail across the Gulf

By Walter Glass

Sunset at Pa Beach, Great Barrier Island, means it's time to wander down to the legendary Currach Irish Pub

A tiny pub on Great Barrier Island has been named 'the best craft beer experience in the rest of the world' – but how do they manage to keep the ale flowing when they're situated on a remote Hauraki Gulf island?

With an average annual temperature several degrees warmer than Auckland, Great Barrier Island is a subtropical paradise – a bit like Slice of Heaven with a twist of Hotel California – you can check out anytime you like, but you never really leave.

The island's incredibly dark nights are renowned. The lack of light pollution has resulted in the island being given the status of an International Dark Sky Sanctuary, and international tourists have shown an immediate interest. Sunrises over Medlands Beach are stunning, and as the intense heat of the day gives way to the evening warmth, you'll find people

watching the spectacular sunsets at Pa Beach in Tryphena Harbour, where the bay is bathed in soft yellow, orange and pastel pinks. As the sun departs, it signals that time when one might feel the urge to wander down the road to the local community gathering spot, the legendary Currach Irish Pub. Owned and operated for over 20 years by the effervescent and ever-smiling Máire Burns from Kerry, Ireland, and her cheerfully pensive Kiwi husband Phill Judd, the busy enterprise runs like a well-oiled machine and the service is exemplary. 'It won't be a problem' appears to be the unwritten motto.

Accents in the bar are from all over the world. Patrons can enjoy fine local Waiheke and NZ craft beers, Guinness, NZ branded tap beers and wines, and fantastic food, and engage in a bit of local banter, perhaps take part in an 'open mic' singalong, or quietly ponder the day. If you are exceptionally



The Currach Irish Pub owner/operators Phill Judd and Máire Burns celebrate winning the Best Craft Beer Experience in the Rest of the World award

lucky, you might even be around for a pirates and pizza party – very rare, extremely colourful, and definitely worth the wait.

Unique operation

None of the Currach's success is down to chance, although few if any patrons will give a second thought to contemplating how this great experience comes together, nor how the 'last mile' logistics systems work to support this internationally suc-

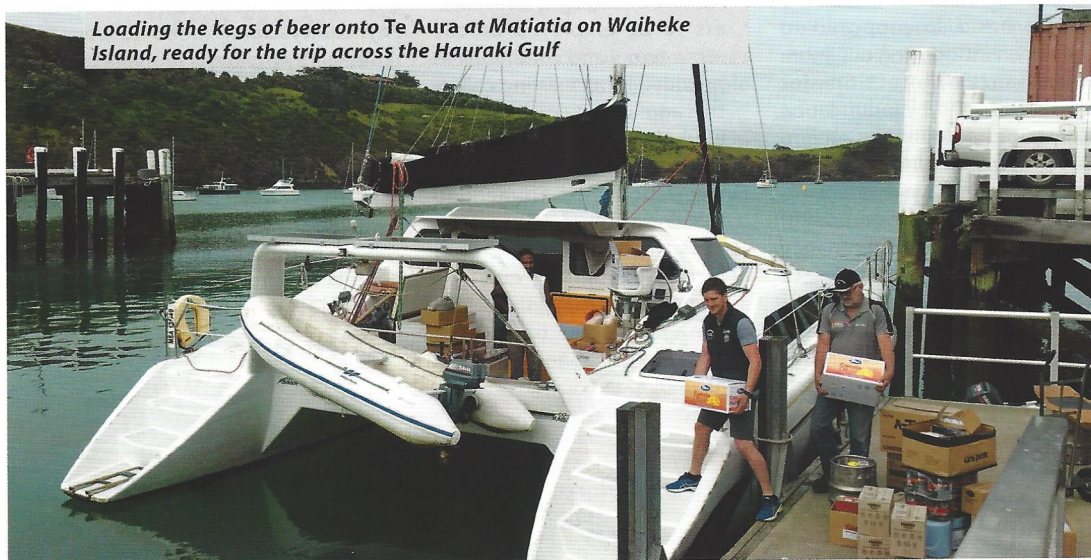
cessful business on a remote outer Hauraki Gulf island.

The supply chain sector generally accepts last-mile logistics as the last leg of getting goods from a high-volume distribution centre to their final destination, usually in a commercial or humanitarian context. The last mile is also often the most costly leg, especially in response to humanitarian needs, and each example has its own twists that add to the challenge. The Currach's story is one of a very unique New Zealand logistics operation, with both commercial and significant humanitarian aspects.

It is important to Máire, Phill and the Currach staff that whatever is served is quality, and the experience is one that any patron will remember positively. They are also very keen to supply locally-made products, including craft beers.

In an effort to retain product quality, reduce supply costs and buy locally, the Currach controls its own logistics solution for its craft beers, as well as some other products, and is largely self-reliant in this area. This does come with a twist, however – a 160 km round trip under sail on the pub owners'

Loading the kegs of beer onto Te Aura at Matiatia on Waiheke Island, ready for the trip across the Hauraki Gulf





Dolphins are frequent companions en route to the island

catamaran *Te Aura*, across sometimes treacherous seas, to pick up the 'real beer' from Matiatia on Waiheke Island, which is supplied by local brewers Boogie Van Brewing and the Waiheke Brewery, where Kiwi brewing legend Alan Knight brews the Baroona label. The kegs and other goods are all hand-loaded onto the catamaran, and then sailed across the often hazardous Hauraki Gulf and Colville Channel to Great Barrier Island.

'The beer must get through'

The role of skipper is undertaken by legendary sea dog Captain Phill Judd – who also doubles as crewman, sometimes pub chef, music and events organiser, recent pizza oven operator, part-time pirate, member of the Sunken Rock Sailing Club and 'head beerista' at the Currach.

In true frontier style – and borrowing from the famous US Mail Pony Express motto – the philosophy has become 'the craft beer must get through'. And so far it has – mostly.

The Colville Channel between Coromandel and Great Barrier can be a particularly treacherous piece of water. Phill fell victim to it some years ago when his Salthouse 28 launch hit a submerged object and sank within minutes, leaving Phill in the chilly September water for over three hours before being picked up by the rescue helicopter.

His dog Ali, who was also onboard, was presumed lost, until she miraculously reappeared on Great Barrier after having dog-paddled or floated the 12 nautical miles from where the boat sank. "The current catamaran is a bigger boat, but I am always cautious of the trip – when things go bad, they can do so very quickly," notes Phill.

This unique 'last mile' operation works on what can only be described as a mix of passion,

persistence, obsession and common decency toward fellow man. Without this supply chain, the result could mean dehydration and even depression in an otherwise happy community – such is the humanitarian need for their favourite tipples on Great Barrier. This is exemplary customer service.

The Currach does not transport all its goods via the pub catamaran as it simply isn't practical. However, without the catamaran, the craft beer supply chain would involve double handling and additional transport costs – from Waiheke to Auckland by truck and ferry, then Auckland to Great Barrier by ferry. The cost of any transport to Great Barrier is prohibitive. In addition, craft beer does not like sitting in the sun, particularly in mid-summer in heat-conducting metal kegs. The same applies to other perishables which are better brought directly across, so careful control maintains product quality.

Ultimately though, a significant proportion of the pub's provisions come from the mainland, primarily Auckland, either by regular ferry or plane. Every business and resident on Great Barrier is acutely aware of the logistical constraints of living in paradise.

International recognition

The Currach's reputation has recently gone global and a new chapter is unfolding. In October this year, the pub was recognised at the Irish Pubs Global Awards – the 'Irish Pub Oscars' – in Dublin as the 'Best Craft Beer Experience' in the 'rest of the world' category. (Ireland, the UK, Europe and North America have their own categories.)

Máire and Phill initially got an email to say the pub was in the finals, but as they knew nothing about the anonymous nomination, they thought it was a wind-up. By the time they had adjusted to the news, and



The pub's pirates and pizza parties are very rare, but definitely worth the wait

politely declined the invitation to go to Dublin for one night for the awards dinner, they were told the Currach had won the category. They say they have been blown away by the award as it is such a huge accolade.

Winning this prestigious award was no mean feat, as it is given by Tourism Ireland and Bord Bia (the Irish Food Board). Moreover, the Currach was the only Kiwi pub among the 16,000 international contestants and beat other businesses from Dubai, Seoul, Abu Dhabi, Thailand, Queensland and West Australia. (Where is New Zealand Trade and Enterprise when you need them?)

The award is also great news for the island, although it is understood that on hearing the news, the Currach regulars nodded knowingly and waxed lyrical on their superior intelligence for frequenting such a famous hostelry, then increased their consumption of the local craft beer in lieu of possible future shortages as word of the win would inevitably get out.

Perplexing questions

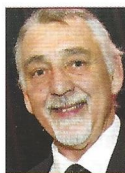
All this means one thing for the future – more people will be

coming to Great Barrier Island to enjoy the Currach and try the best craft beer experience in the rest of the world. So how will the Currach and Great Barrier cope with the logistical issues that such a potential influx of people will bring?

What happens when the ferry from Auckland can't berth for a few days? Or the island has a massive influx of Irishmen desperate to try the best craft beer experience outside of Ireland?

These may be perplexing questions, but for the Currach Irish Pub the answer is straightforward, if not always simple – it won't be a problem.

So if you find yourself sitting at one of the many establishments in Auckland's Viaduct or Wynyard Quarter, sipping your \$18 glass of beer and eating another \$6 oyster, and observe a large catamaran slipping by with a dignified, if not slightly smug, grey-haired man at the helm and a woman with a perpetual massive smile, you may be witnessing the last-mile logistics effort to the best Irish pub in the rest of the world. Cheers, and I'll see you there sometime after sunset.



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