

EDUCATION

Island home is a king hit

A regional college finds a remote home away from home for year 9 students. **Em Weekes** reports.

A HOUSEHOLD of teenage boys has invited me for dinner but somewhere between snorkelling, surfing and platypus-watching, I've lost track of time. Feeling sheepish, I tear across the school campus, towards a dusky sunset and home-cooked wallaby stir-fry.

There's laughter and scrambling of chairs when I reach the front door. It's clear the boys are ready to eat. Dinner is served within seconds — and conversation starts up the minute my plate is full.

Each term about 30 year 9 students from Ballarat and Clarendon College, a co-educational secondary school of about 1200 students that has its foundations in the gold rush, are sent to live and learn on King Island — located in Bass Strait, about halfway between the mainland and Tasmania. Many Victorian schools offer a change of scenery and curriculum during the problematic middle years, but this is surely one of the more remote.

Over dinner, one boy rattles off the local supermarket's prices. "Milk costs \$3 and ham is \$20 a kilo," he says, astounded. They aim to stay under budget each week, saving for a farewell meal at the local restaurant.

The college program aims to prepare students for life's challenges by encouraging active and reflective learning. Through physical challenges, recreational activities, research assignments and community projects, students develop an awareness of how their decisions affect others and themselves.

Flanked by treacherous waters, the island — a mere 64 kilometres long and 24 kilometres wide, and with about 1600 residents — is home to a famed dairy industry. The

college's connection with this speck began when it started taking boarders from the island.

Then, when staff visited the island to attend a fun run and hold a scholarship exam, they discovered the town of Grassy (population 130), with its large collection of unoccupied cottages — a legacy of a closed scheelite mine. The college bought up a large slab of the town for a song — \$120,000 — in 2001.

Students learn how to snorkel, surf, hike and dive for abalone while on the island. And they're welcomed into the community.

Brightly painted fibro homes, each topped with a solar hot-water unit, become group houses. There are one or two classrooms, an office, a kitchen and laundry, along with a greenhouse, chook shed, duck pen and plenty of compost.

Six to nine students live together in single-sex homes and each household manages its own food — budgeting, planning and ordering — and cooks the evening meal. Daily inspections keep things tidy.

Each day offers a different activity, set into the daily routine. Students meet at 7.15am to exercise, returning home for breakfast and a house inspection before the day begins. In the evening, dinner is at 7.15pm, followed by another house inspection and lights out at 9.30pm.

For many students, the most difficult part of the program can be learning to live with other students. After six weeks, Jack Watson still recalls the first week and the demand of having to learn everything from budgeting to cleaning. "The first day felt so long," says Jack, "I wondered if every day would feel the same."

Similarly, the "solo" presents a very personal challenge to many students. For 24 hours each student camps alone, relying on their own food and company. Each student completes two solos during the term.

"The hardest part was trying not to wave back at friends," says Jack, "but by the second solo, you need a break from the people you live with. I chased wallabies, read books and wrote letters."

Many physical challenges are undertaken twice — the repetition gives students a chance to learn from the first experience and move more confidently into the second.

The ramp-to-rock race is a group challenge at the beginning of term: a



Ballarat and Clarendon College's year 9 students get physical (left and above) at their King Island campus. Household duties in group houses (below), research assignments and community projects aim to prepare them for life's challenges.



PICTURES: EM WEEKES

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GLEN EWERS, teacher

300-metre swim in Grassy harbour and four-kilometre uphill run back to campus. Students race for personal bests later in the term.

The "southern challenge", an introductory trek around the south of the island, gives students a chance to test their stamina and get to know each other. By the end of the term, students guide their peers through the "northern challenge", a longer, seven-night trek.

For Heather Johns, 15, the southern challenge had its moments. An errant llama became infatuated with a boy and began chasing him. "We formed a guard of backpacks to block the llama, until it calmed down and lost interest," says Heather, "then laughed for the next six kilometres."

"Learning how to be equipped to make smart decisions is a crucial part of the learning process here," says Cathy Marchmont-Barlow, head of campus. Students learn how to be

sustainable as individuals first, then as households, as a campus and as a part of the island community.

The program also aims to develop awareness of sustainability on a global scale. Students visit local businesses to evaluate whether King Island industries are environmentally, economically and socially sustainable. They also work alongside locals on a regeneration project.

"The King Island program aims to prepare students for success, not failure," says Ms Marchmont-Barlow. Students set their own goals, identifying who they are as individuals and the challenges they face. Support is available on every level, with nine resident staff on-hand.

Now in his third teaching year on the King Island campus, Glen Ewers finds the remote setting integral to the success of the program. "Here, I get to see the whole person, not just the student studying maths," says Mr Ewers. "And students then see

me as not just the maths teacher.

"The rapport between teachers and students is at its highest when living side-by-side — warts and all."

But that also means that if someone's having a bad day, everyone knows about it. "Everything is on display," says Ms Marchmont-Barlow.

For Heather, living with seven other girls is a challenge. "Staying under budget each week and dividing up the duties can be difficult, but eventually, everyone pitches in," she says.

If there's one drawback to the program, it lies in the tyranny of distance between King Island and the mainland. Students can find it difficult to reconnect once they return to the Ballarat campus.

"Reintegration can be tricky for some students," Mr Ewers says. "It can be easy to fall back into old habits and routines."

Ms Marchmont-Barlow says: "While most students hold on to the lessons they've learned, it does take some effort."

Delighted parents have phoned her to say, "You've sent back a different girl."



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