

Hauraki Herald

A campervan business which started in Thames four years ago has cracked the list of New Zealand's 50 fastest-growing companies.

Wilderness Motorhomes is the dreamchild of John Managh, who several years ago returned to his hometown of Thames after extensive overseas travel. What started out as a business plan scrawled on the kitchen table of his parents' home has become a highly successful company, ranking 18th on the 2008 Deloitte Fast 50, with 303.74 percent revenue growth over a three-year period.

John runs Wilderness Motorhomes with his sister Mary Hamilton, with the company now based near Auckland Airport for logistical reasons. However, it all started in Thames. "After coming home from overseas, I spent a year at home at mum and dad's, drawing up business plans, screwing them up and throwing them away until I came up with one that worked," he says. That plan involved entering the campervan market. At first John looked at the backpacker market, but realised it would take 22 backpacker campervans to break even, but just six for the higher end market. Using his background in engineering – "I've built overland trucks in Africa and worked on crab boats" – John built the first six campervans in a shed at Totara, using local businesses for things like the interior joinery and some of the panelwork.

In those days, Wilderness Motorhomes was the epitome of a small, self-employed business. "I used to drive a campervan up to the airport in Auckland and wait for the customer to arrive, then hitchhike or find a ride back to Thames," John says. While he couldn't take on the bigger companies in terms of logistics or funding, right from the start John targeted areas where he could compete, such as customer service and internet presence. He says he saw too many small companies that had "small looking" websites, whereas he wanted a professional-looking site. Good customer service meant doing away with the hidden costs all too often associated with rental companies, and "doing the righty" by customers. "It's not rocket science – you build on the fundamentals of respect and trust," John says. This dedication to good customer service is reflected not only in the Deloitte Fast 50 ranking, but also in feedback on internet sites such as Rankers.co.nz, which allows customers to comment favourably or critically of businesses they have used. Wilderness Motorhomes has been ranked on the website



47 times, with 45 of those giving the company a 10/10 ranking and the other two a 9/10 ranking.

Wilderness Motorhomes has come a long way from those first six campervans built in a shed at Totara. Around 18 months ago John bought a Roadcraft – which now builds the campervans. Hauraki Coromandel residents will be familiar with Roadcraft as the main sponsor of the K2 race. John says what makes Wilderness Motorhomes' campervans different from the competition is that they're built for New Zealand conditions aren't branded with logos and are top of the line: "Like comparing a Ferrari with a Lada". Today Wilderness Motorhomes employs a team of around 15 people, and while it is based in Auckland, John says it is still a Coromandel business. "When I talk to customers I spend about half an hour talking about the Coromandel and two minutes on the rest of the country. I'm so passionate about the area."

He says the Deloitte Fast 50 ranking is great recognition for the hard work put in by his team, and something he could not have even dreamed about when he was toiling away in the shed, building the first fleet of campervans.