

# Sunday Star Times – Garry Sheeran

## Driving force for a bright future

There's more than a whiff of optimism from one bloke sitting fair square in an industry – tourism – facing a nasty 2009.

John Managh, of Wilderness Motorhomes, is calling it "our year of fun". There's not a long face to be seen at the Rennie Dr, Mangere, Auckland, premises.

Then again, there are not many faces to be seen at Wilderness Motorhomes, full stop. It's a pretty small – sorry, boutique – operation.

Rennie Dr is Kiwi motorhome central. Across the road and down a bit is Tourism Holdings' big Maui operation.

At Maui you queue, then you get moved from counter to counter by people in smart uniforms as you move ever closer to eventual departure in one of Maui's 1500 vans. The atmosphere bristles with apparent efficiency. But it takes time to get the job done. At Wilderness you're met with a welcome sign by the front door carrying your name, and a smiling John Managh – the boss man himself – in blue jeans, to greet you.

He sits you down in the lounge and gives you the line – the Wilderness fleet of 36 vans is the best there is and the company is bucking the gloomy trend in tourism. Spring saw full occupancy of Wilderness's motorhome fleet and it is on target to do the same through to autumn.

Behind him on a shelf is a silver award announcing Wilderness Motorhomes as the fastest-growing tourism business on the Deloitte Fast 50 List. Over the past two years revenue growth was 303.74%.

Then again, the young and the vigorous find it easier to notch up these sorts of figures from a low base. And that is an apt description of both Managh and the company he owns 50-50 with his sister, Mary Hamilton.

A Kiwi bloke who had built stuff from way back, Managh built his first campervan while on OE in California, and another for an overland trip from London to Cape Town.

Doing the same after returning home to Thames was not a given. His father, the late Keith Managh, owned Thames Timber, a significant business in the town, since sold to a big US corporation.

"Dad's philosophy was join the family business, sure, but only after proving yourself elsewhere," says Managh.



But after discarding business plan after plan, Managh came back to motorhomes. He imported six Toyota Hiaces, which he fitted out himself, formed Wilderness Motorhomes in 2004, and began renting to tourists.

He discovered being young and vigorous is no guarantee of success. Even he had to agree his vans weren't the greatest, and decided to compete with the big boys on quality, not cost.

In 2006 he brought the business to Auckland, purchased a motorhomes service centre as well as much larger premise in Rennie Dr, and created another company called Roadcraft Group, which began importing new Fiat Ducato maxi panel vans, which he built as his new generation fleet.

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Roadcraft is the manufacturing arm of the business, selling 50% of its imports to Wilderness Motorhomes and the rest to other clients, fitted out for a variety of purposes.

It's that reshaping of the business which has seen things take off for Managh and his sister, and the team of 16 who work with them at Mangere.

Not that growth is everything for Managh. "We'll always be like a boutique hotel among the big accommodation chains," he said.

He does not envisage Wilderness Homes growing beyond a motorhome fleet of 150. But that would still allow plenty of blue sky for a business with a current annual turnover of \$8 million.

By GARRY SHEERAN – Sunday Star Times