

# Young skipper charts ferry service's new course



By Mike Hast

SORRENTO to Queenscliff ferry operator Peninsula Searoad Transport has a new boss who is on a mission to change perceptions about the service.

Professional skipper Matt McDonald, 30, replaces long-time general manager Jack McKeddie, who retired in March, and the young captain is already making his mark on the company.

High on his agenda is "reinvigorating perceptions of the ferry service", he told *The News* during an interview late last month in his Queenscliff office.

"Our car ferry is seen as too expensive, but the reality is it's the cheapest service in

Australia," he said, turning to his huge Apple Macintosh computer screen and calling up car ferry costs from around the nation.

"Kangaroo Island [South Australia], now that'll cost you \$86 a car plus \$44 for every person in that car.

"Our customers pay \$52 a car plus \$7.50 a head for the 40-minute crossing. Foot passengers pay \$10 or \$9 concession.

"In Queensland, it's \$115 a car on the Moreton Island ferry and \$84 for the Magnetic Island ferry plus \$13.50 a head for the 50-minute crossing.

"We receive no government subsidy or funding; we lease government land at Queenscliff and Sorrento, and we've spent a lot of money on our two terminals."

He said Mornington Peninsula Shire had told him peninsula senior citizens were concerned the \$1 concession was too low when compared with bus and train concessions, but "the government gives huge subsidies for seniors to bus and train operators".

Mr McDonald and his team are working on a marketing plan, which will be released in June.

He will outline plans at a Searoad staff seminar this month and request input from employees.

He wants to change the name of the company, Peninsula

Searoad Transport Pty Ltd, to better reflect its ferry business. "It sounds like we're a trucking company," he said.

In the biggest move so far, *MV Queenscliff*, the 80-car ferry launched in December 1993, will receive a full refit this winter and be ready by September.

Designed in Tasmania and built at Port Lincoln in South Australia, *MV Queenscliff's* rows of seat will be removed and replaced by a lounge-style interior with big television screens and other fittings. There will be an improved cafe, tourist information area and Wi-Fi for computer users.

He said Searoad did the basics of carrying cars and other vehicles well, and now "we want to make a trip on our ferries a better tourism experience".

An ally in the tourism experience for many years has been the resident pod of bottlenose dolphins, which more often than not flip across to the ferries as they make their hourly crossings and ride bow waves of *MV Queenscliff* and her sister ferry *MV Sorrento*.

News of this extraordinary sight has spread around the world and they could one day become as famous as Phillip Island's penguins.

People come to Melbourne and drive down to Sorrento or Queenscliff just to cross Port Phillip and see the dolphins.



Aye, aye: Captain Matt McDonald (left), the new boss of Searoad. Above, the old ferry *Peninsula Princess* and the new ferry cross paths in 2007.

## About Searoad

THE idea of a car ferry linking the Mornington and Bellarine peninsulas had been a dream of residents, local councils, businesses, tourism groups and some government departments for more than 30 years before the first crossing by the \$2 million, 35-car *MV Peninsula Princess* in September 1987.

Three sea pilots, Paul Ringe, Keith Finnemore and Maurie Cobal, founded Peninsula Searoad Transport in 1983, but it was to be four long years before the idea became reality.

The company opened a ticket office and transit lounge at Queenscliff in January 1990 and at the end of the Sorrento Pier in April 1992.

The 80-car, 700 passenger *MV Queenscliff*, designed in Tasmania and built in South Australia, started service in 1993 and gradually took over from *Peninsula Princess*.

Business continued to boomed in the 1990s and sister ferry *MV Sorrento* was built in Tasmania and began operating in March 2001.

Searoad now crossed southern Port Phillip 24 times a day, leaving on the hour from both terminals.

*Sorrento* looks similar to *Queenscliff*, but has better lounge areas and cafe, a function lounge, full internal lift for wheelchairs and prams, a light-filled conservatory and a bronze sculpture of a mother and baby dolphin.

The 5.6 nautical mile (10.3km) crossing takes 40 minutes. The road distance from Sorrento to Queenscliff is 220 kilometres and can take up to three hours. Searoad says cars travelling on the ferry emit the equivalent of 13.5 kilograms of CO<sub>2</sub>, but emit 57.2kg

travelling around the bay. The two ferries carry more than 100,000 vehicles and 600,000 passengers each year.

Searoad had an "interesting summer" with *MV Queenscliff* out of service for three weeks in February after a small part failed in the gearbox.

Mid-February saw *MV Sorrento's* arrival at the Sorrento berth delayed by about 35 minutes when ferry skipper Wayne Gallop spotted eight scuba divers lurking in the berth area.

Despite attempts to get the divers to move, police had to be called and the divers were later charged with obstruction.

Searoad is offering free travel for children during the holidays from 9-21 April. It applies to children under 15 travelling in vehicles only. It is also offering free meals for kids with the purchase of an adult meal at the Queenscliff ferry terminal Beach Cafe before or after the crossing.

Children's activities on board the two ferries during April will include Queenscliff's Marine Discovery Centre "look and touch table" on 11 and 17 April, face painting and balloon sculpting on 13 April, Mr Ree the Magician on 20 April, and talented Queenscliff children entertaining passengers to raise money for the Royal Children's Hospital Good Friday Appeal on 22 April.

The ferries reverted to the offseason schedule last Sunday with the last sailings at 6pm from Sorrento and Queenscliff.

Details: (03) 5258 3244, email [travel@searoad.com.au](mailto:travel@searoad.com.au) or on the web at [www.searoad.com.au](http://www.searoad.com.au)

## Skipper at age 18

McDonald's last job before taking over from Jack McKeddie was as captain of *MV Platinum*, a luxury motor yacht for "adventurers".

The sleek 38-metre (125ft) vessel was custom built in Tasmania of steel and aluminium, with teak decks and interior of English beech, Tasmanian myrtle, oak and leather.

It was launched in 2008, and in May 2009 was a star attraction at Sanctuary Cove international boat show, the biggest in the Asia-Pacific region.

For \$10,000 a day you could charter *Platinum* with accommodation for 10 people in its four double cabins, owners' suite on the main deck, and six-person jacuzzi on a sun deck.

Captain McDonald skippered *Platinum* for two years on charters before she was bought by Australia's second-richest woman, Perth-based mining heiress Angela Bennett, who with her brother inherited father Peter Wright's

fortune after his death in 1985. Mr Wright and the late Lang Hancock, friends from primary school days, made their fortunes in iron ore mining in the west, sealing all their partnership deals with a handshake.

Matt McDonald took Ms Bennett and friends on a mega-cruise through Asia before returning to Victoria to join Searoad.

Born and raised in Gippsland, Captain McDonald sailed aboard the tall ship *Alma Doepel* at age 14 and became a coxswain (first level ship's captain) at 18. By 26 he was a master 4, entitled to skipper boats of 35 metres and since then has added to his qualifications.

The young captain is happy to be off the water, driving a desk and enjoying the challenge of taking Searoad into a new era. Now Mornington Peninsula residents, he and his wife Alena are expecting their first child in July.

## Call to crush hoon cars

CARS of hoons "should be crushed after their first offence" was the call from a majority of people at a meeting in Frankston Arts Centre late last month.

About 100 people were at the meeting called to tackle hoon driving, organised by Frankston Council and chaired by Cr Glenn Aitken.

Cr Aitken said a vast majority of people called for tougher hoon driving laws and they were backed by attendees including federal MP Bruce Billson and state MPs Geoff Shaw, Neil Burgess, Donna Bauer and Jude Perera.

"The state government is bringing in new laws on 1

July, but they're just not tough enough," Cr Aitken said.

He said recent statistics about social disorder showed people were more concerned about noisy, hoon drivers and dangerous drivers than drug-taker and graffiti vandals.

"The Australian Bureau of Statistics crime victimisation survey figures show 13 million Australians claim to be affected by hoons and bad drivers," he told the meeting.

"People feel unsafe in their homes, property is being damaged and, worst of all, hoon drivers are taking the lives of pedestrians and other motorists.

"Frankston Council has called for stronger laws to

combat hoon driving, as have many other municipalities; the laws are out of touch with community expectations."

He said police were frustrated with hoons being taken to court but receiving a slap on the wrist. He called for stronger laws to combat "this rising selfishness of a minority of drivers; this mongrel mentality".

Cr Aitken said he called for a show of hands of people supporting the crushing of cars for first-time hoons and for cases of bad speeding: "There was a sea of hands; almost everyone in the room."

Frankston's hoon hotline is 1800 NO HOON (1800 66 4666).



Crash call: This was left abandoned along the same stretch of road at Crib Point where, two days after the Frankston meeting, ratings from HMAS Cerberus died after their car hit a concrete power pole. Picture: Snezh Plunkett