

An outback experience – Kakadu to Katherine

The Northern Territory is well-known as a destination full of surprises. On a recent visit, Joe McFadries found this to be very much the case.



THE INVITED GUESTS FROM DARWIN

When young Sydney-sider Ken Beresford decided in the mid-sixties that he needed more excitement and adventure in his life, he packed up the trusty old Ford and headed for Darwin where he took a job as a panel beater. But it didn't take him long to realise that there was one more stage in his journey, so he moved 330kms southeast to Katherine to better service the local market. He has been there ever since.

I was invited by AAP, a Darwin-based public relations firm of almost 20 years' experience to attend the "Grand Opening" of Katherine Smash, and although it was indeed a grand event, it was very much a celebration of the latest incarnation of Ken's business.



KEN BERESFORD AND DUNCAN BELL

The day started with a charter flight from Darwin with 20 invited guests, which included representatives from the Automobile Association of the Northern Territory (AANT), major local car dealer networks and accounting and legal professionals from both Darwin and Adelaide. This flight exposed us to the

majesty of Kakadu National Park and, whilst it was still the dry season, the vastness and beauty as seen from the air was nothing short of spectacular.

On arrival in Katherine and en-route to Ken's facility, we passed a number of other local automotive repairers, all of which paled in comparison to Katherine Towing, Smash & Mechanical. We all know that you only get one chance to leave a good first impression and it seems that Ken Beresford knows this all too well. The retro theme and distinctive branding makes the facility really stand out in Katherine.

The formalities began with a Welcome to Country by Lisa Mumbin, Jawoyn traditional owner, who spoke about the work that Ken has done in the local



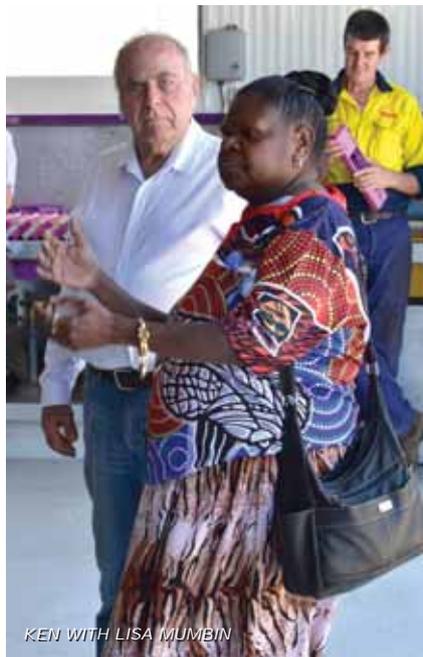
indigenous community and how important it is that this work continues through other local businesses for the mutual benefit of the entire Katherine community. Ken then welcomed everyone and invited us to wander through the shop where he proudly explained the most recent upgrades and expansion of the business.

I was able to drag Ken away from his guests to share with me the short version of his 50 years in Katherine, which was a town with a population of only 1,500 when Ken first arrived – a true outback town in every sense of the word! Although he tried his hand at a number of trades, Ken initially established Katherine Towing and Smash and built a caravan park in 1972, introduced tilt trays into the Territory in 1974 and subsequently operated a remote area transport service with tow trucks.

Ken was the AANT contractor for 22 years and was well on his way to building a great business until nature stepped in. The "Flood of 1998", wiped out Katherine Towing and Ken lost everything. "I had a 20-year-old Ford and one change of clothes," Ken recalls. However, with the resilience of a transplanted Territorian, Ken had no hesitation: "There was only one thing to do – start again. My old mate, Ray McMartin of Sydney Automotive Paints & Equipment helped me get back on my feet and I'll never forget that," he added.

Ken has gone on to train some of the most successful and best Indigenous apprentices with Charles Darwin University in Katherine and he provides all his apprentices the incentive of a lifetime – an all-expenses paid trip to the SEMA for those who achieve or exceed 90 percent excellence for quality service.

"I am the only Toyota Australia Certified Welder for Toyota motor vehicle chassis in the Katherine region," he tells me as he



KEN WITH LISA MUMBIN

proudly shows off the certificate. "I also operate a towing service that covers the Top End, extending as far west as Karratha in Western Australia."

Ken highlights some of the challenges of life in the Territory. "In the wet season, we

have 42 degrees in the shade, humidity of 98 percent and not only do we have to keep the team cool, we even need to cool the panels before we prep and paint them! And if that's not enough, snakes are regular visitors as they seek shelter under the cars in the workshop." Interestingly, Ken does not cite the tyranny of distance as one of the challenges (parts deliveries that can take seven days): "It's just the way things get done in the Territory," he says.

It's clear Ken takes a very traditional approach to not only repairing cars, but to everything he does in his business. The NRMA premium care service uses Katherine Towing exclusively for their breakdowns and recoveries in the region and, at the request of the Royal Automobile Association of South Australia, built a new workshop to once again handle road service. "Katherine Towing & Crash Repairs is not 'gonna do it – we do it' safely and with high quality service from start to finish," said Ken.

Ken is proud of his achievements as he outlines the things that he believes really make the difference. "We have the best workshop and facilities, long-term qualified staff, high visibility main road position, plenty of parking and turn around for caravans – including on-site camping facilities. In addition, we operate a fleet of tilt tray tow trucks and late model Hilux courtesy vehicles that are taken on the truck to the breakdown site and can be driven back by the client with their belongings, if required," said Ken. "To be successful in the Territory, you really do need to provide a complete service – and that what we do," he added.

Ken continues to have plans for the business and is already looking to the next stage of development. We will watch the progress of one of our industry's true characters with great interest. **NCR**

