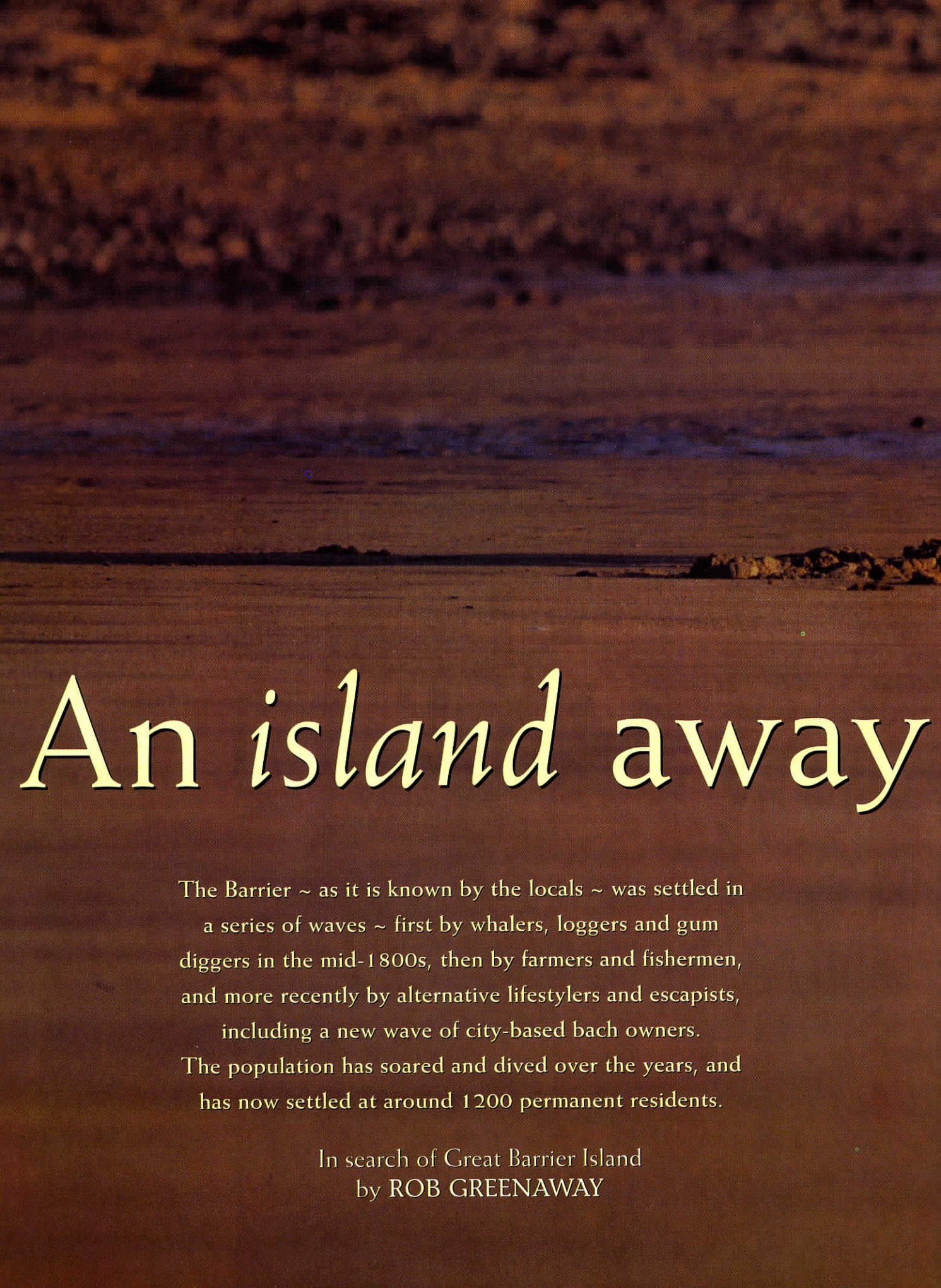
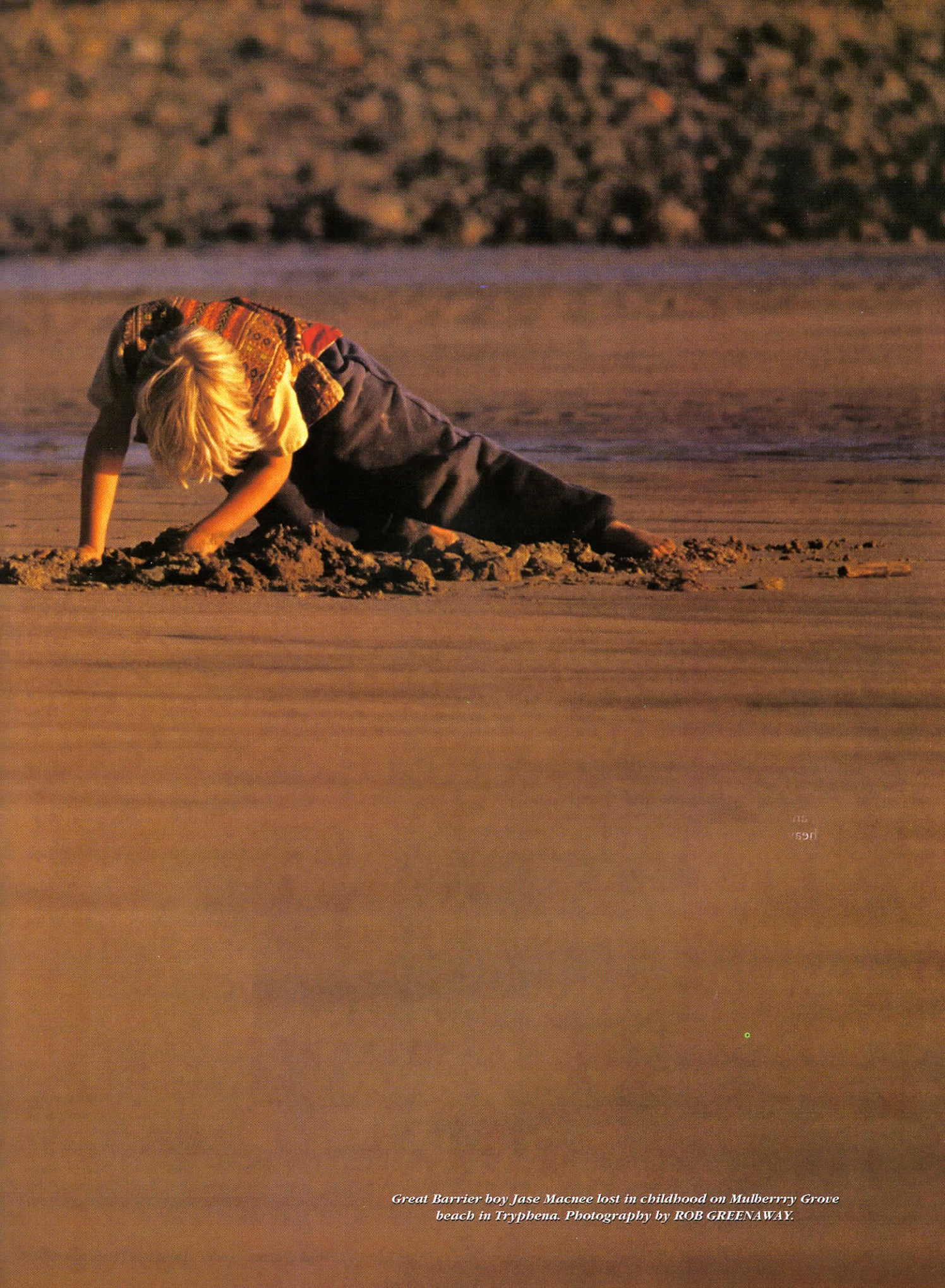


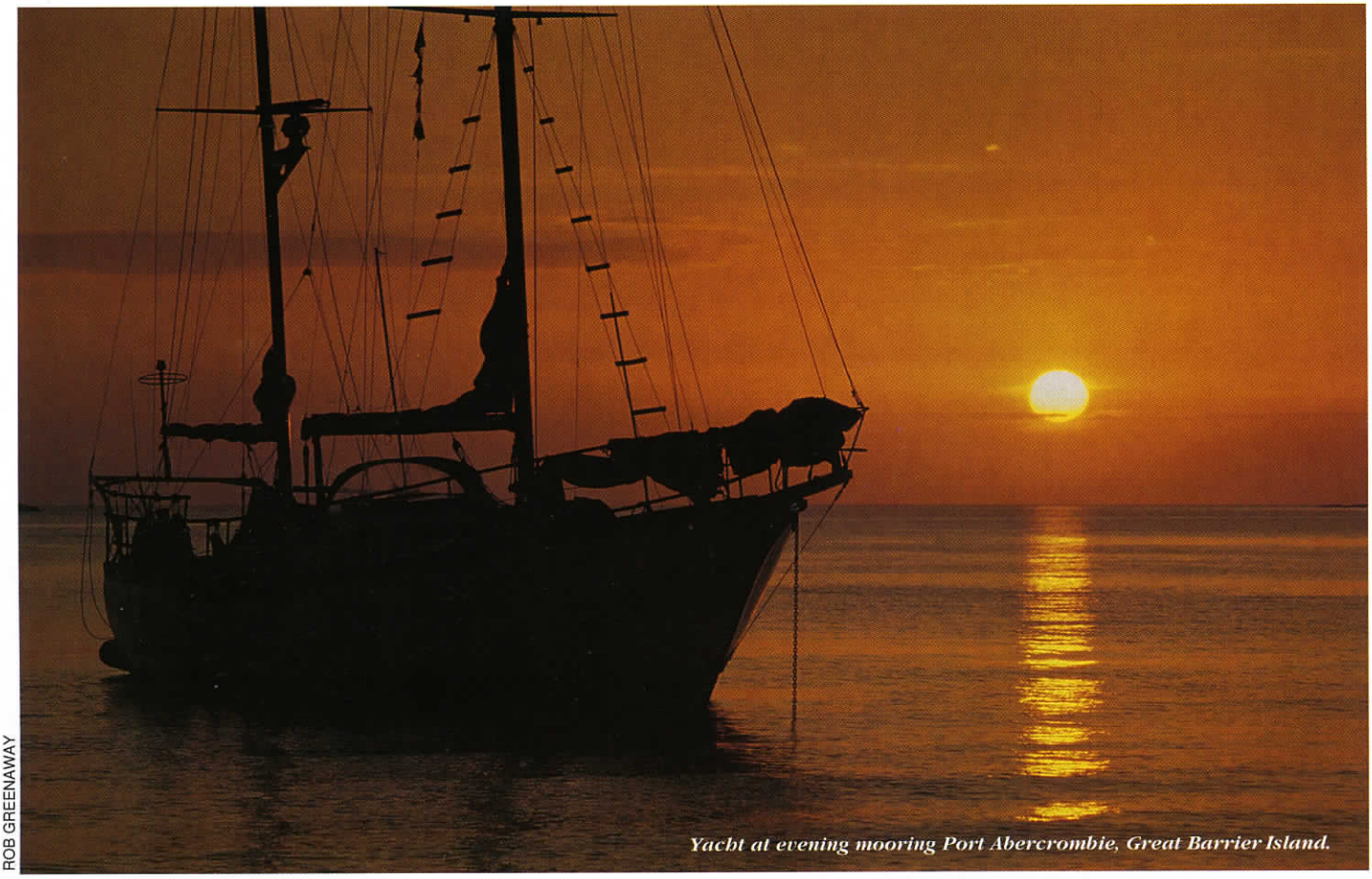
An *island* away

The Barrier ~ as it is known by the locals ~ was settled in a series of waves ~ first by whalers, loggers and gum diggers in the mid-1800s, then by farmers and fishermen, and more recently by alternative lifestylers and escapists, including a new wave of city-based bach owners. The population has soared and dived over the years, and has now settled at around 1200 permanent residents.

In search of Great Barrier Island
by ROB GREENAWAY



Great Barrier boy Jase Macnee lost in childhood on Mulberrry Grove beach in Tryphena. Photography by ROB GREENAWAY.



ROB GREENAWAY

Yacht at evening mooring Port Abercrombie, Great Barrier Island.

The population of Great Barrier Island triples during summer. What was once a rugged and self-governed contour on the horizon is now a growing destination for daytrippers.

Regular fast-ferry sailings to the island have become economical with expanding tourism numbers, and air services have competed heavily on price to win their share of the market. The island has also come under the administration of the Auckland City Council. The island is very much closer to the mainland than it was a decade ago. There are real estate agents there now.

If you do buy a piece of this paradise, however, you must endure what can be a harsh climate, and the pressures of isolation. Barrier people ~ permanent residents ~ have seen dozens of hopeful new settlers arrive with all the technical gadgets of modern alternative life, and have all too often picked over the remnants of their failed dreams when they sell-up and sail back to the reticulated electricity, water and sewage of the mainland. In reality the island lifestyle is so close, yet so far.

Although most of the locals are reasonably accepting of most immigrants, it often takes a few years for a newcomer to feel entirely at home.

"I generally don't go out of my way to become close acquaintances with a new arrival," says Bruce Macnee, resident of over 16 years," until they've been here for about two years and have weathered a few winters. Too often they up and leave within 18 months, and the time you've taken to get to know them is wasted. It's a close society here and we rely on our neighbours a great deal, and the best neighbours are those that hang around."

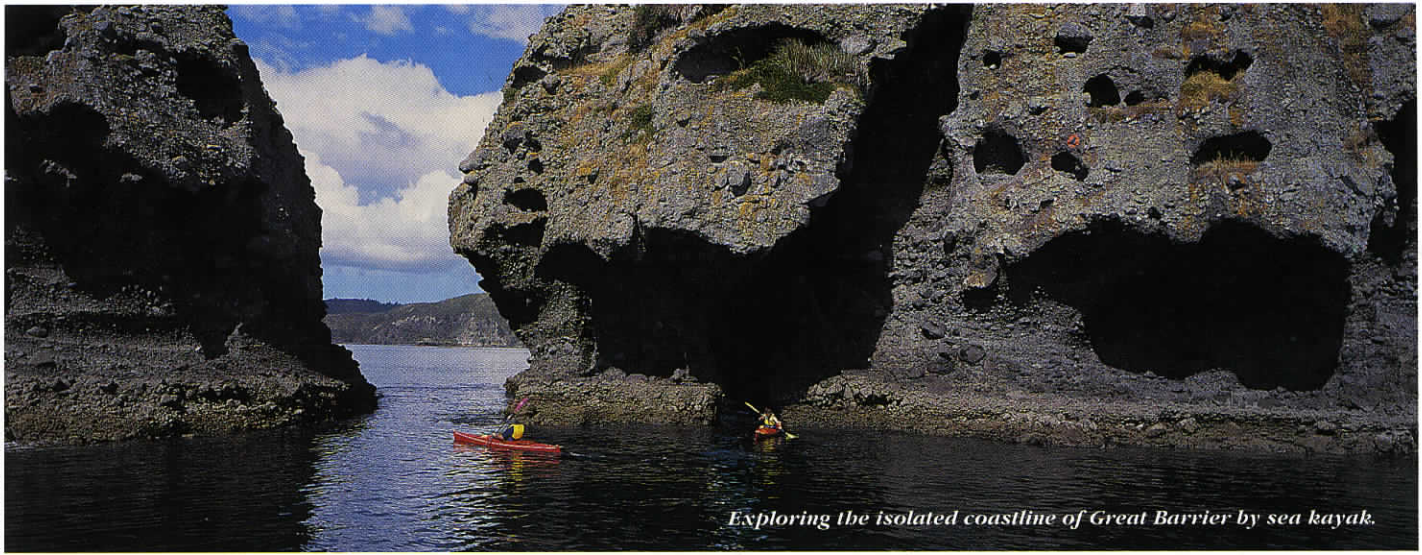
ROB GREENAWAY

Waiting for the tide to come in at Tryphena.

Bruce Macnee was a member of a wave of immigration that struck the island in the early 1980's ~ the Crosby, Stills and Nash generation seeking a new beginning. These well educated people sought lifestyles steeped in a type of realism they saw being extinguished by shopping malls and preservatives. Transport to the island then was infrequent, they had little money and serious ideals, and lived austere lives.

"It wasn't a political ideology we were following, but it certainly was an ideology," says Bruce. "We swapped cheese and preserve recipes. Our bible was a book titled *Self Sufficiency* written by Englishman John Seymour. It focused on how to make a living off five or ten acres of land. We learnt to work horses by the book and how to find the best topsoil. We made cheese, preserves and dandelion wine by the book."

Bruce moved from community to community on the island and as the years progressed the communities got less and less idealistic. Expectations were lowered and the concept of 100 per cent self-sufficiency waned in the face of pragmatism. Where the idealists failed, the realists survived. Bruce is a realist, but with high ideals.



TONY BOUZAID

Exploring the isolated coastline of Great Barrier by sea kayak.

He's the sort of guy you'd notice in a queue. Tall, blond, vegetarian, healthy suntan. He met his wife Cynthia in a queue in India. She's from New York. He'd been living on Great Barrier for the previous ten years, she was taking a break from working for the United Nations and UNICEF and helping put together such events as Sport Aid. They married and now live with their two sons on a hill above Tryphena, surrounded by pohutukawa and nikau and a view of the entire island. Both are in their mid to late thirties, and the type of people who are alive, and know it. That's sometimes not so common on the mainland.

"I arrived in New Zealand for the first time in 1988," says Cynthia, "spent two days in Ponsonby and then went straight to Great Barrier. We lived in a kiln shed, built by a local potter in Schooner Bay, with gaps between the walls and floor, no hot water, no power, a copper for washing clothes, a bath by the river, Tilley lanterns and a glass washing board. Bruce was very serious about the alternative lifestyle.

"After three weeks, Cyclone Bola struck. Mind you, winter and the cyclone were very similar. Spring was very much the same too.

"In comparison with New York, the Barrier's social life is pretty limited," she says. "You see the same people all the time, with their gumboots, beards, pig and goat hunting. I really felt like a voyeur when I first arrived, and a lot of the rough guys had personalities that took a lot of time to get

ROB GREENAWAY

Bro Benson in his engineering workshop near Tryphena.

to know. Now I don't see the stylised images at all.

"I believe that newcomers are captured by the island's beauty, but it is the people that keep them here."

According to Bruce the alternative lifestyle on Great Barrier is not a trendy thing. It's seldom a matter of choice. "You are forced to be self-sufficient on the Barrier. Once you are here there is no alternative to being 'alternative'. There is no electricity, no piped water. Tilley lanterns are romantic on the mainland. Here they are essential.

The need for such things as wind and solar generators, and sensible house design is no longer academic. If you don't site your house properly, you're chopping wood when your neighbour's not. If you make a mistake, it hits you."

Most of Bruce's ideological kin arrived from Auckland, with a few others trickling in from the States, Switzerland and Germany, all escaping the threat of nuclear war, pollution, and to a large extent, escaping reality.

According to Bruce, in the early days there was a definite stand-off between what were largely regarded as hippies, and the original settlers and their descendants ~ farmers and fishing families. "They had little faith that we would last. But most of the original farmers have retired, there has been plenty of inter-marriage, and we are now the backbone of society.

"The island is made up of one community. Despite all the different backgrounds, the isolation means we have to live by old fashioned values. There has been intense rivalry and parochialism within the community ~ between the settlements of Fitzroy, Tryphena, and Okupu for example ~ but if there's a fire in any one place, you'll see everyone working together. If someone is sick, they'll have 24 hour care and food from neighbours."

Bro Benson is a totally different kettle of fish. Now in his seventies, Bro arrived on the island over 20 years ago: "because I don't like multitudes of people. They get up my snorer," he says.

His house sits on a 50 hectare property ~ one of the last big privately owned blocks adjacent to the sea. His kitchen looks over a corrugated iron engineering workshop, a fringe of pohutukawa and the unmitigated beauty of Tryphena harbour. And it's for sale ~ he's looking to move to Tasmania to join his wife and one of his sons.

Bro loves engines. He once owned the Tauranga Engineering Company. "I had a good business there but I got fed up with people. It's the public ~ the customers. You can never keep them happy. I realised I didn't have to deal with them so I closed the shop, sold the property and moved here.

"It was also the challenge. The island was dying at that stage. Farming was dying. It seemed at rock bottom, but it has risen since then."

Shifting house for Bro was a major undertaking, requiring the purchase of a scow. Tons of professional engineering equipment was loaded aboard and delivered to the shed he and his son had built. The lack of electricity ~ particularly the three phase power required to run heavy engineering lathes, hydraulic presses, drills and grinders ~ required some imaginative engineering solutions. The entire workshop is powered by one ancient marine engine ~ a 60 year old Aisla Craig, once the driving force within one of Bro's many boats. This ball of thundering grease and oil runs a series of drive shafts suspended from the ceiling throughout the workshop, and each machine has a long flat belt descending to the most elemental of clutches. With the motor running, the workshop hums and rumbles as belts and pulleys spin. And Bro still has all his fingers.

"If people want something that I can help with or they need to use my machines, then they come to me. Otherwise I couldn't care less." As Bro said these words one 'neighbour' (he could have lived anywhere on the island) hoisted a beautifully reconditioned Lister diesel onto a trailer, soon to be recommissioned as a generator, while another worked at Bro's hydraulic press, repairing the clutch on a four wheel motorbike.

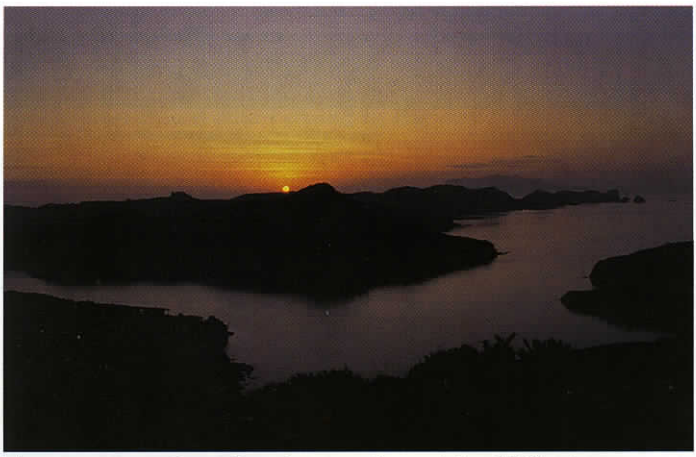
Bro had given the flat under his house to a young family desperate for accommodation, and toys, puppies and hens littered the front lawn. For a grumpy escapist he appeared to be doing a hopeless job.

"I consider myself to be a useful person," he says. "I have my machinery and I and my neighbours can do things with it. One day I'll be no bloody use to anyone, but not yet."

Bro laments the coming of the unemployment benefit to the island. Prior to the late 1980s only long-term residents were

TONY BOUZAID

Great Barrier has numerous inlets and waterways accessible by boat.



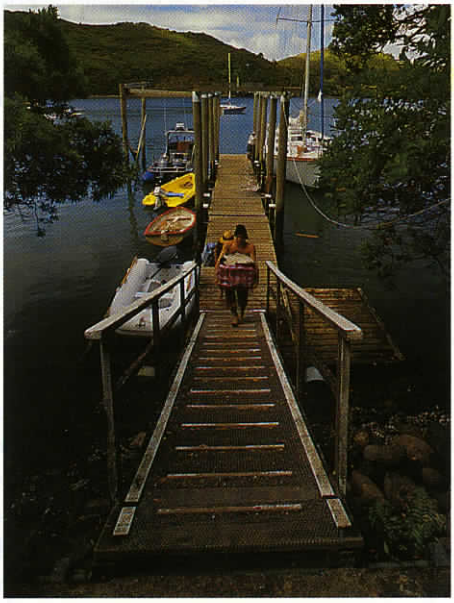
TONY BOUZAID

The sun sets on Great Barrier ~ on the mainland Tilley lanterns are romantic, here they are essential.

permitted to claim it. Now anyone on the island is entitled to the dole and it has attracted a new sector to the community.

"The dole was a big mistake. It let in an element of people who are unproductive. In the past you had to be productive to survive here. I see vehicles in the rubbish dump now with years still left in them. The younger people just don't maintain them. It's a throw-away age. I worry about the future."

Without the likes of Bro as a neighbour, the younger generation will have no idea of just how long an ancient piece of machinery can be kept serving a useful purpose (regardless of what purpose the machine was originally designed for). People like Bro epitomise the innovative nature of the New Zealander.



ROB GREENAWAY

DOC's Forestry Bay wharf in Port Fitzroy~ a watering point for yachties.

Real estate agents should be thrilled to have Great Barrier land on their books. It is more than likely that every visitor to the island thinks at some stage of what it would be like to buy a little piece of this gem.

Young couples on day trips look at the 'for sale' signs and ask each other what it would be like to live on the island ("for a while"). Tourists gather around property listings in the shop windows and gaze at the photos of bush clad sections facing views of white beaches and blue seas. It is all too tempting.

Beware. Moving to the Barrier requires Commitment with a capital C. If you don't have it, you'll be starting a new life again, somewhere else. And if you stick it out, if you survive a few seasons and become one of the Barrier people, then you'll never escape. You might live elsewhere ~ Bro might end up in Tasmania and Bruce and Cynthia might head to the mainland to get closer to a secondary school for their two boys ~ but they will always be Barrier people. A special breed of self-reliant individuals living by strong values ~ the very fabric of which keeps society together today. ○