

THE WILSONS ABEL TASMAN STORY

From Baches and Boats to Lodges and Launches

The Wilson family's association with tourism in the Nelson region began in 1977 with John Wilson rowing passengers ashore at Torrent Bay in Abel Tasman National Park from *Matangi*, a boat he had built himself. The family business evolved as a model for sustainable tourism, including boats, lodges, walking and sea kayaking, leading to John Wilson being honoured in 2008 with a Queen's Service Medal for services to tourism.

Back in 1977, after the only boat operating a commercial service in the National Park was wrecked in a storm, locals started to hitch rides with John to Torrent Bay. To take on the responsibility of a regular passenger service, the *Matangi* was surveyed to commercial standard to operate for a summer season that lasted only two weeks.

At that time, John with his wife Lynette and four infant children spent their summer holidays at their small cottage on the edge of Torrent Bay beach. Lynette sold her paintings and local crafts from a tent in the garden of the "bach". She welcomed visitors ashore with a cup of tea and an invitation to browse.

As the children grew, they started showing visitors around "The Bay". In 1982, the family worked with Department of Conservation to create the first guided walk concession to operate in Abel Tasman National Park. The cottage on Torrent Bay beachfront had its first rebuild and extension to enable visitors to stay overnight in the Park. Tourism wasn't considered a suitable investment by public banks so the family relied on private benefactor, (Sir) Roy McKenzie, to loan them the capital to start their business.

In the early 1990s, the Wilsons were looking to extend their guided trips to include the length of the Abel Tasman Coast Track from Marahau to Totaranui. Lynette inherited land at Awaroa where, in 1884, her great grandparents had built a grand homestead, *Meadowbank*. The family decided to rebuild the homestead in 1994, preserving diaries, letters and photographs covering five generations of family stories. *Meadowbank* was included in the Wilsons family's guided trips in the park.

Over the years, the Wilson family has continuously upgraded their lodges, boats and services as technologies are developed to provide modern conveniences with minimum impact on the environment. Guided sea kayaking was introduced in 1995. The state-of-the-art Vista Cruise catamaran, launched in 2009, was flagship for the family's win in Tourism New Zealand's Innovating for Success Awards in 2010. A second Vista Cruise catamaran was launched in 2017 to provide four Vista Cruise departures per day in the High Season.

Darryl Wilsons says, "Our family has seen the change in attitude from the early settler's goal to 'break in the land' to the realisation that we must preserve our heritage for future generations."

TIMELINE

- Mid 1960s** John Wilson builds a launch, *Matangi*, at his home in Riwaka, for family holidays in the Park.
- 1968 -** John's wife, Lynette buys a holiday cottage at Torrent Bay.
- 1977 -** *Matangi* is surveyed to operate as a commercial eighteen-passenger vessel. Family business started as Abel Tasman National Park Enterprises.
- 1982 -** Wilson family granted first guided walk concession in the Abel Tasman. Torrent Bay cottage extended and refurbished for guided walk overnight stays in the National Park.
- 1984 -** The launch *Waingaro* purchased. Coach service introduced: Nelson to Kaiteriteri (now operated by ScenicNZ coachlines).
- 1988 -** *Abel Tasman Explorer*, 145-seat passenger launch, purpose-built in Nelson with legendary NZ boat builder, Jack Guard.
- 1994 -** John Wilson and family rebuild the Hadfield's (Lynette's great grandparents) original homestead after Lynette inherits land at Awaroa. *Meadowbank Homestead at Awaroa* operates as a 22-bed lodge with ensuite bathrooms to be included on their Guided Walks.
- 1995 -** Introduction of a Sea Kayaking options to the guided trips.
- 1999 -** *Awaroa Legacy* published; co-authored by Lynette Wilson and Carol Dawber.
- 2000 -** Family wins its first national tourism award: NZ Tourism Industry Awards - Outdoor Activity.
- 2001 -** Torrent Bay Lodge extended to include 13 twin/double ensuite rooms.
- 2003 -** Winners of Tasman District Council's Cultural Heritage award.
- 2004 -** Winner Large Business of the Year at Our Town Motueka Business Awards.
- Assisted local Iwi of Wakatu Corporation with their entry into the tourism industry.
- 2005 -** Rebranding to highlight Wilson name with unique sea fern logo.
- 2006 -** Winner Qualmark Mark of Quality at New Zealand Tourism Industry Awards.
- Nelson Tasman Chamber of Commerce Business Awards Overall Winner.
- 2007 -** Qualmark Assessment score of 98%. Finalists New Zealand Tourism Awards.
- 2008 -** John Wilson awarded Queen's Service Medal in New Year's honours list for services to the tourism industry.
- Solar assisted power & hot water installed at both Lodges.
- Meadowbank Homestead guest accommodation rebuilt and original rooms recycled as 2 self-contained holiday cottages.
- State-of-the-art catamaran, *Abel Tasman Voyager*, launched on Christmas Day to operate new Vista Cruise services in the National Park.
- 2010 -** Third national tourism award: judged best Visitor Attraction and Experience (small and medium) at 2010 NZ Tourism Industry Awards, Innovating for Success.
- 2011-13** New-look website designed with purpose-built booking software and upgraded computer servers to introduce real-time online booking.
- 2013 -** Qualmark Enviro Gold standard awarded.
- 2015 -** New base premises, purpose built at 409 High St, Motueka.
- 2017 -** Vista II cruising catamaran launched to replace two Vigour Water Taxis, and allow for four Vista Cruise departures every day through the High Season.
- Nelson Tasman Chamber of Commerce Large Business Winner
- 2019 -** Finalists for the Qualmark 100% Pure New Zealand Experience Award.

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