

natural HIGH

by JULIE MCGLONE
photos by KERRY LORIMER

Chuckling in your day job to follow a dream is all very well, but for Paul and Suzanne Verity, the challenge to reach their utopia meant back-breaking work against the odds

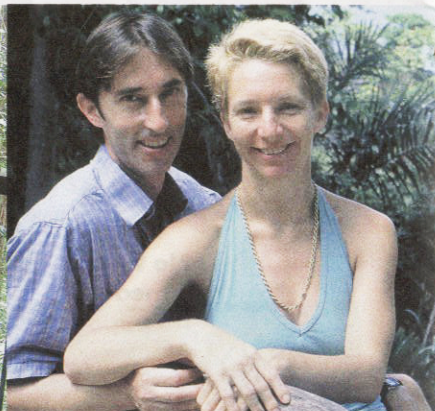
PAUL VERITY HAD all the appearances of a charmed life. There he was, in his mid 30s, a Melbourne boy living in London, working in a high powered investment job trading in foreign finance. Yes, he was on top of the ultimate big city heap.

So what was his next step? To chuck it in, return to Australia and set off on a road expedition in an old 4WD. "I had to get back to nature. When you're living in a city like London, you don't

star hotel in Cairns," explained Suzanne, also an original Melburnian who "took off for some warm weather" 20 years ago, found herself in north Queensland, and never went back. "He started telling me about a plan he had to build an eco resort with a difference, a totally affordable place where people could spend days or months just hanging out in nature, or explore surrounding areas for a just a few days. I loved the whole idea, but then when he found this land and

Finally, though, he found two teams of sub-contractors to build Sanctuary's stunning main building, where the kitchen, reception, bar and lounge are housed, and 14 guest huts which tickle the rainforest canopy. (Sanctuary has since grown to 16 huts and seven en-suite cabins, plus a new yoga studio where Suzanne holds workshops and retreats.)

Bringing in the material was literally a matter of loading as much as possible on the top of his



realise how much you miss the open spaces until you don't have it any more," says Paul.

It was not only a brave move, but as it turns out, a choice which was to change the entire focus of his life. After his road trip took him to Cairns in tropical North Queensland seven years ago, he met and fell in love with his partner, Suzanne. Together, they worked on a dream – and now, after years of hard work and planning that dream is a wonderful reality: they Veritys are the proud owners of their purpose built eco-resort, aptly named Sanctuary Resort at Mission Beach.

"When I met Paul I was working in a big five

said 'that's where we're going to build' I told him he was a lunatic. He didn't listen. He just said 'It's do-able' and I thought, well, let's give it a go."

Sanctuary is built on 18ha of lush rainforest, some of which had been logged up until the early '70s. "A lot of the forest has grown back, but the logging tracks are still there," said Paul. In fact, one of those logging tracks was the only gradeable road on the property for construction.

When Paul began looking for contractors, he got plenty of knockbacks – the site was so inaccessible, most local tradespeople thought he was mad even contemplating building there.

Landrover and chugging it up the steep hill. "At one point we contracted a four-wheel-drive timber truck to try to bring in the materials, but he got half way up the hill and lost the lot," said Suzanne. "From that point, we knew it was up to us to bring in the rest."

The enormity of this feat is only apparent when you're standing amid the treetops looking up at the soaring timber ceilings of the main building, which is propped by huge telegraph-style poles. You don't even like to ask how they got the pool in. "With difficulty," says Suzanne.

For the Veritys, though, the result was worth

the pain. Sanctuary is everything they had hoped and more. "I wanted a business that would sustain us but not at the expense of the forest," says Paul. "When we found this land we knew that it was special, but that invariably it would be subdivided and sold off as residential blocks. It is a wildlife haven and a magnificent parcel of rainforest – I knew we had to preserve it."

Suzanne agrees. She says that when they started looking for land, they had five check points: it had to be near a tourism town, it needed to be in a warm climate, near the beach, it needed to be saved and, ideally, it would be home to an

endangered or threatened species that needed to be protected. "This had it all. We sit here and watch the cassowaries wander around – they know us and we know them. To see our guests wind down after a few days here, getting up every morning and watch nature at work, look out to sea, enjoy the forest. It was worth all the work."

Paul wears a contented smile. "We even had time to make two babies along the way. Eve is now three and Zoe's one. To be a dad and watch the girls grow up in this environment is wonderful. And if people came here and hated it, I don't know what I'd do. But so far, no-one has."

Top: Breakfast in the treetops at Sanctuary's main building. From far left: Cute little carvings add a touch of fun at Sanctuary; relax on your private deck in a deluxe cabin; Paul and Suzanne; unimposing, the deluxe cabins blend in with their natural surroundings – but inside are all the modern conveniences; Sanctuary's bar is a popular meeting point at night; some of the colour of Sanctuary.

getting there

Sanctuary Retreat is just outside Mission Beach. Coach returns run daily from Townsville and Cairns. Deluxe cabins from \$120pn and huts from \$55.50pn. For information call 1800 777 012 or visit www.sanctuaryatmission.com

