

## Natural Treasures Tours of the Great Ocean Road

Paul Sandells, Founding Owner

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Most people would think that the combination of Great Ocean Road scenery, it's colourful history, plus the experience of someone well versed in cultural and natural interpretation would be enough to create a winning tourism product.

However, Paul and Kathryn Sandells realised that their proposed new tour business needed something special to make it stand out from the flock.

Paul's experience in natural resource management and interpretation with the National Parks Service had taught him that the public responded most enthusiastically to information and new experiences when presented in novel and engaging ways.

"We had a saying... 'M&Ms, not N&Ns'; 'magic and meaning', not 'names and numbers'. As a park ranger I would often use a time capsule to engage with people, especially school children, but it was the Port Arthur ghost tour that really showed me how interpretation could emotionally connect with people."

With this philosophy firmly in mind, Paul left his job managing events at Sydney's Centennial Park and began researching an innovative way to bring to life the social and natural history of the Great Ocean Road region.

"The region is rich in stories and I wanted to bring it to life for people through its characters and history. The mass touring market was taken care of by the likes of AAT Kings and the backpacker market was also catered for, which left us with those international visitors who were seeking a more intimate and meaningful experience."



Paul took 12 months to think-through the concept, conduct research and market test. He eventually decided to present the region through its more personal elements. He scoured historical collections, museums, consulted with Aboriginal communities and poured over old newspapers to come-up with a collection of original artefacts and stories that formed the basis of the Natural Treasures Tour. The souvenir book for guests was even presented in the form of an old diary. He hired staff who shared his environmental values and whose personalities could bring the region to life for guests.

The centrepiece of the tours was a wooden locked treasure chest, which was opened at each stop to reveal some personal object relating to the location or to a story about it.

"We even played themed music in the vehicle before we arrived, so that by the time they disembarked there was a real sense of anticipation."

Many of the original artefacts were tactile objects that could be passed around the group for inspection. One of Paul's favourite items was a calling card of Victoria's first Government Protector of Aborigines, George Augustus Robinson. Extracts were read from Robinson's notes and diaries at the stops relating to Aboriginal history. Paul consulted with the elders of the Framlingham Community to determine what elements of their history and culture they were able to interpret.

The entire two day program was carefully paced to retain interest and was programmed like a theatrical performance.

“ We even introduced the element of silence to great effect. There were some places that didn't need words, just an appreciation of the beauty and the natural sounds. Sometimes we blindfolded guests at places like fern glades and waterfalls to heighten their senses.

“ We would also try to program 10 minutes of free time every so often, so that people could wander off in some beautiful locations to reflect and contemplate. Some just sat and thought, others wrote poetry and some were even moved to tears. Places like the Loch Ard cemetery, where we spoke about the hardships of sea travel to Southern Australia, were always quite poignant.

“ We had multi-lingual speakers on staff and we even worked with a university professor and secondary school teachers to make the content as rich as possible.

However, it was important that we didn't bombard people with facts and figures. In some places we might just recite a poem or read a diary entry”.

The treasure chest not only captured interest and focussed people's attention, but it also became a strong marketing tool for the business. They took it with them to trade shows to spark the interest of the travel industry.



The success of Paul and Kathryn's approach to tourism interpretation saw their business steadily expand into conference and education markets, as well as custom-designed tours for special groups. They also provided step-on guiding services for the bigger tour companies. Their customer surveys recorded a 95% satisfaction rate with the style of tour.

The Natural Treasures Tours of the Great Ocean Road began in 1998 and was sold by the Sandells in 2002 to two of their employees.



Paul is now Parks and Leisure Services Manager for a Melbourne council, but it is with pride when he says that the business he carefully innovated is still operating along the same lines and has grown to even greater success.

[www.naturaltreasures.com.au](http://www.naturaltreasures.com.au)

### Key findings:

*Innovation to achieve product differentiation often involves extensive research and can be assisted by gaining input from other people*

*In the crowded tourism marketplace, an innovative product is often the only thing standing between you staying in business or joining the dole queue*