

LIFE'S A BEACH

Merewether Surfhouse brings three levels of distinctly beachside experiences to locals and tourists alike.

STORY: SOPHIE GEBHARDT

*Merewether Surfhouse
Henderson Parade, Merewether Beach, Merewether NSW
(02) 4918 0000 or www.surfhouse.com.au*

AV: On The Down-Low

Impact AV Australia provided an audiovisual design and installation for the Surfhouse's new function centre. The design was specific to suit the low ceilings and the high ambient light from the glass exterior walls.

Impact AV liaised with Screen Technics to design new flip-down ceiling-mounted screen lifters for 100-inch DNP front projection screens. The Australian-first design is built into the roof with the roofing panels attached to the back of the screens to provide a seamless and customised vision solution. To complement the 100-inch screens, Impact AV also installed Panasonic 6000 ANSI lumens DLP projectors using Screen Technics' in-ceiling projector lifters.

ETC Source Four Jr. Zooms profile lamps were perfect for the Surfhouse because they have wider lens angles for shorter throws. Martin Smart Macs were suitable because of their fan-less feature using alloy heat sinks to dissipate heat, this reduces the noise levels inside the venue. The Smart Macs also have the wider lens angles for the short throws.

130 metres of Show Technology Pro Shop Tri Colour LED strip lights (30 LEDs/m) were installed in the coffered ceiling section for a coloured roof wash. The LED strips are controlled by low-voltage dmx controllers, allowing colour changes and various light levels. The lighting control for the venue uses the Jands Vista Lighting System.

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Merewether Surfhouse opened in November 2011 to a fair degree of immediate success, despite a summer plagued with rain and unseasonably cold weather. Starting on the ground floor, where the café and kiosk provide beachgoers with snacks and drinks, the focus moved to opening the top-level restaurant and bar, with its dramatic backdrop of surf, sand and sunsets. Then it was on to the function space in the middle, which, as General Manger Marc Allardice happily recounts, is now booked out through 2012 and beyond. "It's been ticking along very, very well," says Marc. "We're a bit blown away, actually, as to how well the Surfhouse has been embraced."

WETHER VAIN

A slightly convoluted path led to the creation of the Merewether Surfhouse, which is situated on Crown Reserve land and was the site of a rundown and rarely used 1930s clubhouse. A number of Newcastle and Merewether locals approached Crone Partners' development of the site with understandable misgivings, given the size, scope and landmark position of the building; however, according to Tony Green, Executive Director of the hospitality consortium that operates the venue, the future of the site had been heatedly debated amongst locals for nearly 20 years. And some of the apprehensions about the new building have been allayed now the place is up and running, with many locals taking advantage of what the Surfhouse has to offer. Tony comments that, "We've run into a few people who objected to it but they've been coming in here and good enough to admit, 'we think you guys have done a good job'. And it is a good-looking building—there's lots of glass and the roofline fits in with the surrounds. It's been done well."

POLE POSITION

Marc Allardice has worked for the Green consortium for 10 years, managing a number of the group's pubs in Sydney, North Sydney and Cockle Bay. He jumped at the chance to relocate to Newcastle and run the Merewether Surfhouse. "I thought it was a great opportunity. Newcastle is really growing and it has everything that Sydney has—the harbours, the beaches—I just love it. And an offer of a share in the company was a great lure!"

The pole position of the Surfhouse was another draw card for Marc. "The top level, with the à la carte restaurant and the

wine and cocktail bar, has been a great success. It's probably my favourite part to run, sitting on the terrace and enjoying that view. We're lucky to have something like this on the east coast, so close to the beach. It's just a lovely spot to be."

And a big mix of clientele seems to agree, with Marc describing Sundays at the Surfhouse as a burst of varied activity. "With a few thousand people around on a Sunday afternoon, we attract a lot of visitors for a lot of different reasons. There are people who come in for casual cocktails or a beer on the terrace, families having Sunday lunch in the restaurant, and then there are the young kids and tourists or surfies on the beach, who pop into the kiosk or café for a snack or a coffee."

CO-AP APPROACH

Sydney-based CO-AP (Collaborative Architecture Practice) came up with the interior of the Merewether Surfhouse, working with what was pretty much a concrete and glass shell with a spectacular view. William Fung of CO-AP says that streamlining the eye away from the inner workings and out to the decks was a key criterion in the design. "The kitchen and wet bars have been split into two areas, in order to define circulation routes and separate the restaurant and bar visually and acoustically. Both share the same guest amenities, which are located behind the wet bars and purposefully obstruct the view of the beach from the entry. This means the spectacular views are revealed as the visitor moves from the maître d' station into the restaurant, or to the bar and outdoor terrace."

Tony Green is by and large very happy with the new enterprise, which is a move in a different direction for the largely pub-based consortium. "We've had a huge number of people through the place... I think we've done a good fitout. There are a few things we need to change but, generally, it looks good, people are using it and it's getting a good response." Yet Tony is adamant that the selling point of the magnificent view is only the starting point, and that what the Merewether Surfhouse has to offer in terms of service and food is really the key to its success. "We are very conscious of the fact, and emphasised this from day one, that having a fantastic location and great fitout is just the first step. If people don't get good food or good service, the view doesn't matter—it only lasts for the first five minutes. You have to give good service and I think we are doing that, and people appreciate it."

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