



Saladin's story

Saladin Lodge owner, Kim Rycroft, fell in love with the Narbethong property more than 20 years ago and has since dedicated herself to transforming it into a place that offers something for everyone.

By Emily Friedel

There is a story behind Saladin Lodge that many people may not know about. Current owner, Kim Rycroft, was not aware of its backstory either when she jumped the front gate in 1999 to have a poke around and see if it might become her new holiday home. But over the last 20-odd years, Kim has discovered much about the fascinating history of Saladin Lodge and added her own story into the mix.

Today, Saladin Lodge is “a bit of everything”. The main building is an expansive, high-ceilinged structure with superb acoustics and a commercial kitchen – ideal for art exhibitions, concerts, weddings and all manner of other events. Built into

the main building are a conference centre and B&B accommodation. There is also a mezzanine lounge that Kim says is perfect for paper aeroplane contests, among other things.

Opposite the main building is a cosy little café and gift shop where visitors can get toasted sandwiches, tea, coffee, local products, sweet treats and other bits and pieces – or just pop in for a toilet stop. There are nature walks to the top of a nearby hill, and there are lawn areas for outdoor functions and sculpture exhibitions. Then there is the lake, adorned with water lilies, where people can swim, boat or take fly-fishing lessons. Clients and carers from Menzies Support Services in Alexandra are among the



A painting of the Crooke family's racehorse Saladin, that the property was named after.

regulars casting their lines into the water.

“They caught three quite big ones that other day, and the grins on their faces! They were absolutely stoked,” Kim says of a recent visit from the Menzies crew.

Offering a bit of everything,

and ensuring accessibility to accommodate any mobility restrictions, Kim hopes everyone who comes to Saladin finds something that appeals to them. She also hopes to impart her love of the land and sense of stewardship. ➤



Above: Inside the main building of Saladin Lodge, where people gather for weddings and art exhibitions and everything in between. Left: The view of the main building from across the lake.

"None of us owns this place; we just get the privilege of hanging out. I love sharing that aspect, and I hope people take that on board irrespective of how many hours or minutes they're here for. I think you've got to offer opportunities for them to get to know the land and hear it and smell it and enjoy all the sights. They can go for walks up to the top of the hill, and if they can't walk, I put them in my car and take them up there."

Kim first became acquainted with Narbethong's natural

beauty three decades ago when she started four-wheel driving – a hobby that eventually saw her running events for Landrover, including vehicle launches. Another hobby, teaching children horse riding, allowed her to explore the region more. Eventually, the trips from Melbourne were so frequent that a holiday home around Narbethong was warranted.

On the same day she put a deposit on another property, a friend told Kim she should check out Saladin Lodge,

which was also for sale. It was three days before Christmas, always a hectic time, and Kim wasn't sure whether she'd bother. But the sign on the gate caught her eye as she was driving home on the Maroondah Highway, and she pulled over. Undeterred by the locked gate once she'd made her mind up to check out the property, she went over the top of it and walked across what was the old airstrip.

"There was a little old stone cottage, and when I peered in the front door, I could see thigh-high weeds in the lounge room. There were other outbuildings all over the place. There was this little building, which I found out later was a doctor's surgery. All this activity had gone on here, and I thought, 'Good lord, why is it that no one has spoken about here?' There was obviously enormous history that I knew

absolutely nothing about in all the years I'd been coming up here. I just fell in love with it. I got on the phone and spoke to the real estate guy, who I'd literally just put down a deposit with for another property, and said tell me the story about this property."

As Kim discovered, the Crooke family were the original owners of Saladin Lodge. John Robert Crooke was the first person to drive a motor car over the Black Spur – the 'car' being a buggy-like contraption with a steam-powered engine. J.R. Crooke also built Aspendale Racecourse, which was initially used for horseracing and later one of the world's first purpose-built motor racing tracks was added to the site. The Crookes named one of their racehorses Saladin, after the famous Muslim hero and first sultan of Syria and Egypt, ➤

and the horse inspired the property name. Saladin won the 1872 Australian Cup, and later died under suspicious circumstances, possibly at the hands of those who wanted to end his winning streak.

The derelict stone cottage Kim had peered into when she first wandered around the property was also built by the Crookes. Sadly, the cottage was bulldozed by an unscrupulous builder without Kim's permission. Stones salvaged from the cottage are now built into the chimney and a feature wall in the main building, as well as Kim's office and some monuments outside. Kim says she feels it was very

important to honour the stones, and she greets them every morning.

After the main building was completed, she had the opportunity to meet J.R. Crooke's son, Dr Peter Crooke, who was in his 90s by that stage. Like Kim, he felt a special affinity for the cottage stones.

"What was really beautiful was that when Peter came, he started touching the stone. I stood beside him, and I said I do that too. He said I've always touched the stone."

Meeting Peter also gave Kim a chance to uncover more details of the property's story.

"I asked him why some of the pieces of stone looked a bit weird and not like they were from this area, and he said when they were driving along, they would pick up odd pieces of stone and bring them back here."

Through meeting some of the Crooke family, Kim also

put together the missing piece of the map puzzle. The large brightly-coloured map, which was painted on a wall in the old cottage, luckily survived the bulldozing and is now mounted on the wall of the mezzanine lounge of the main building. On the map, a small square marks

Below: The original stone cottage built by the Crookes. Stones rescued from the cottage are now incorporated into various structures around the property. Bottom: Water lilies blooming on the lake.





Above: Kim has created dedicated outdoor spaces on the property for functions and sculpture exhibitions. Left: Inside the gift shop and café – a great place for locals and day-trippers to experience Saladin.

Saladin Lodge's position amid the mountain ranges and waterways. For a long time, Kim thought it must have been the work of the Keoghs who owned the property before her. That was until Peter's daughter, Sally Crooke, dropped by.

"She was walking up the stairs, and at the top of the stairs she bellowed out, 'Oh my god, there's my map!'"

The Crooke connection has continued, with sixth-generation family member Dean Crooke having his wedding at Saladin Lodge a couple of years ago.

As Kim has uncovered more of the property's past, she has also been a part of some of its most memorable moments. Before the main building was even completed, the Black Saturday fires came through, destroying all the remaining historical buildings and most of the hundred-year-old garden. It was an enormous setback, but Kim adopted the warrior spirit of the property's namesake and soldiered on.

"Black Saturday didn't take away my love and desire to keep trying on the property, nothing could take that

away. The property will resurrect itself, it will heal itself, and it's up to me to go along with that. That's how I've always felt," she says.

Of course, history has also been made, and is continuing to be made, by the coronavirus pandemic. While the prolonged lockdowns were a blow to the business, they also gave Kim a new perspective on Saladin Lodge, what it means to her and her place in its story.

"During the lockdown, I felt like I turned into Shirley Valentine, saying hello to the wall. I made a joke with my friends that I hadn't actually said hello in ages, and I went out to practise on a kookaburra because I missed it so much. It was good to take another look at the business again and every area I get to say hello – hello to the fishermen, hello to the people who come to

the shop, hello to the guests who come here – I love that side of it," she says.

And now, with eased restrictions, Kim is busy considering the future and how she can get back to offering a bit of everything so that more people can experience Saladin Lodge and maybe learn a little about its story. The shop has reopened, fishing has resumed, and B&B guests have been welcomed back. The next step is to get the exhibitions, concerts and other events running again, and, as she did after Black Saturday, Kim is summoning Saladin's warrior spirit for a bit of extra courage.

"We just have to be brave and set some dates. It will happen."

For more information on Saladin Lodge, including upcoming events, www.saladinlodge.com.au or call Kim on 0429 699 969