The lightkeeper: When living on a deserted island is your job

Solitude, space and a few thousand fairy penguins.

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"Going to Gabo?" asks the man behind the counter of the only pub in town.

Town being Mallacoota, the easternmost community in Victoria, a fishing and holiday hamlet surrounded by forests, beaches and waterways.

"There's nothing much out there," the publican tells me. "It's just a scrubby island with some rocks."
The place he’s describing is also home to the second tallest lighthouse in Australia, and possibly the largest fairy penguin colony in the world.

Six hours from Melbourne and accessible only by plane or boat, it’s the most remote work location in the state for Parks Victoria, which has maintained a presence on Gabo since 1996.

Island home

When Tony Symes first came to Gabo Island he was 20-something and shipwrecked.

He’d been fishing for abalone. A friend was diving and he wasshelling. The boat broke a crank shaft and they had to row six miles to Gabo with their catch in the hull.

The then-assistant lighthouse keeper put them up in the old signalman’s quarters.

Tony remembers how cosy and sheltered the house felt after jostling around on the sea. Next day, the mail boat came over and towed them home.

That was 40-odd years ago.
In the intervening years he has been many things. Husband. Father. Builder. Surfer. Never straying far from the coast.

*We asked you to share your experiences at Gabo Island in the comments below.*
At 70, he is a lighthouse keeper. Or technically, caretaker, since there are no manned lighthouses left in Australia.

Tony — alternating with two others — spends a month at a time on the island, lodged in the lighthouse keeper's residence and feeling very much connected to the long line of men who've done the same since the lighthouse was built from the island's distinctive pink granite in 1862.

These days the job is half janitor, half tour guide and 100 per cent vandal deterrent. Four times a day Tony takes weather readings, including one done in a sleepwalk at 3:00 am when estimating cloud cover is based on how many stars he can or can't see from the verandah.

Tony knows this "scrubby island" like the back of his hand.

Like a farmer who's tilled the same soil for a lifetime. Or the penguins that return year after year to the same nests.

There's the stealthy pass of shearwaters overhead if you crouch in the long grasses on the shore at night.

Totally silent. "Like Lancaster bombers," says Tony.

Just a push of air against your face.
He knows the way the windows rattle when there's a big swell. That's how Tony prefers the island. Wild and rugged.

The frogs in the rushes beside the chicken coop. "A symphony," he smiles.

Just where to duck your head inside the lighthouse to avoid getting sconed by steel.

Tony knows, too, the place where the dirt track encircling the island dips and a white picket fence comes into view, a tiny cemetery with three marked graves.

Butterflies flit in the air. Happy Valley, it's called.

Kneeling down, Tony runs his hands across the headstones, dirt beneath his nails. The inscriptions are so old they've been all but erased by the elements, but Tony knows two infants and one woman lie here. She died during childbirth, the wife of a stonemason who was building the island's rock walls.

As he fastens the gate, Tony mutters to himself that he needs to do some weeding around the graves. Maybe after he paints the spare room.
The constant trickle of marine radio is the soundtrack to Tony's days, filtering through the old house. One ear is always cocked, just in case.

Watching whales frolic from the back deck of the lightkeeper's residence is one of the great pleasures of life.

But the island can be like a prison too, Tony confides. Especially back when he used to stay all year round, rather than for one month stints. Once he was here for five years straight.

There were times he used to play hooky. His mates would call up from Mallacoota and say the surf was pumping. He'd check in with base and then hop in his boat and motor over.
Mostly Tony savours the isolation.

It can be a trap. You can get lost in your own rhythms. In the never-ending list of tasks, maintenance.

By the time you’ve finished mowing the air strip the grass has almost grown up again.

The salt air eats away at the jetty railings, rusting faster than you can paint.

Once Tony was so absorbed in his work, welding in the shed, that the first he knew of a visitor was when he saw a hand that wasn’t his own reach down in the reflection of his visor.

Then there was the time a man appeared at the door at 9 o’clock at night, clad in head-to-toe wetsuit, his face covered in black zinc. A windsurfer sailing from Sydney to Mallacoota, it turned out. Wondering if there was room at the inn.

Enter Karen
As Tony returns to the house a woman with long white hair emerges, kettle in hand. He wouldn't be here if it wasn't for this woman. Karen.

Though they'd both lived in Mallacoota all their lives, they didn't meet until 2005 when their paths crossed on this 154-hectare speck in the Pacific.

Tony was the caretaker. Karen was a guest, seeing the island for the first time.

. was gobsmacked at the beauty of the place," she says

"Before I came, all I knew about Gabo was it had this amazing light that spun around. I just couldn't believe I'd lived all those years in Mallacoota and never given the island a second thought."

Back then visitors rode from the jetty to the house in the back of a ute. Karen remembers a flash of attraction as Tony helped her down from the tray.

The group Karen was with invited Tony over for dinner. At the end of the night they were the last two left at the table.
Five years passed.

By this time Karen had moved to Melbourne, studying fine arts. Tony found her online and she moved back to Mallacoota.

It's mostly been on Gabo where their love has unfurled.
In Mallacoota they keep two separate houses. There are a lot of distractions. Here they share the same house and work side by side, splitting the one job.

“We’re a couple out here,” Karen explains. “A real couple.”

After a triple bypass operation, Tony and Karen — who, at 59, is 11 years younger — share the tasks.

He wakes her up in the morning bearing tea laced with ginger.

She cooks dinner. Tonight's is fish curry made from gummy shark caught by the current visitors.
Many Victorians know Gabo only in the abstract, a shipping reference mentioned on the weather reports.

But for Karen and Tony, it’s a second home.

Sometimes Tony will find something — a tool, a piece of equipment — sitting exactly where he laid it down years earlier. Who’s going to move it?
Karen doubts she could go back to being a guest.

"I would just see all the jobs that need doing," she laughs. "Every day is the same here. It's just work, work, work.

*People in Mallacoota think it's a bludge.*
hey think, 'What are you doing out there anywhere?' They've got no idea

As an artist, Karen's sketches are infused with a sense of this place.

She's drawn the lighthouse, of course. But these days she's more interested in the overlooked details. A decaying length of chain draped over a rail. A back corner of a building where the light catches.

The lighthouse

PHOTO: The Gabo lighthouse, constructed from pink granite quarried from the island itself, is the second tallest lighthouse in Australia.

(ABC News: Jane Cowan)

The beam from the Gabo lighthouse used to be so strong it would illuminate the walls of Tony's living room on the mainland as it swept around.

A loom, it's called.

Originally the lighthouse was powered by acetylene, then kerosene and finally by electricity when the island got a diesel generator in 1935. Since 1994 it's been solar powered. The panels crouch at the base of the tower, shiny squares amid the angles of the rocks.

It's a weaker light but still has a 20-nautical-mile range.
A sign warns against attempting to climb the lighthouse if you have heart problems but Tony's lost count of the number of times he's ascended its tight spiral staircase.

Being inside a shell is how it feels to look up.
. never regret going up there

Though you can see the mainland of two states from here, civilisation — and modernity — feels far away.

At its nearest point Gabo is separated from the Victorian coast by just 500 metres of water. But that land is national park, accessed only on foot.

To stand on the one-by-two-kilometre island is to be the easternmost person in Victoria, to catch the first rays of each new day a fraction earlier than everywhere else.

Tony's mind is a repository of knowledge about the island.

Details sprinkle through his conversation. That granite from Gabo can be found in buildings in Melbourne's CBD. That bodies wrapped in sail cloth washed up on the beach years ago, suspected burials at sea.
He shares the glass vinegar bottle from England, dated 1860, which he found in the dunes after a storm peeled back the grass. Thrown out by a lighthouse keeper, he guesses.

In a shed near the jetty, a makeshift paddle has been fashioned from a piece of wood with seal flippers affixed by rope at each end.

Against one wall hangs a giant mobile of sorts. Sun-bleached buoys, broken fishing rods. A higgledy-piggledy arrangement of flotsam and jetsam that’s washed up on the beach.

This scene, too, has gone in Karen’s sketch book.
In the kitchen of the lightkeeper's residence is a collection of arched white shells, paper thin and perfect. From the nautilus octopus, Tony explains.

The shells, somehow, capture the sense of accumulated history here.

They're rare finds on the beach — washing up only once a decade or so, according to Tony. But so many hands have been here to pick them up that the shells crowd the shelf as if plentiful.