



LAT/LONG 33.64'S 151.29'E

SCOTLAND ISLAND

STORY BY GEMMA BLACK PHOTOGRAPHY BY ESTHER BEATON

Hidden in an estuary in Australia's biggest city is a remote island community of artists, eccentrics and families, and their prize-winning pooches.

IT'S CHRISTMAS EVE, and for the island and bay-side residents of Pittwater, in northern Sydney, that means one thing: the dog race. A handful of locals have gathered at Church Point, a peninsula suburb at the end of the Pittwater estuary, to secure the best vantage points. It's early afternoon and the rain that fell through the night has cleared. Yachts bob lazily on their moorings and children play in the cool, muddy shallows while their parents sit, watching them, on a low sandstone breakwall.

This could be almost any Saturday afternoon at Church Point. The suburb is the main meeting place for the 'Offshore Communities', a group of people who live on the remote western foreshores of Pittwater, at Elvina, Lovett and Morning bays, and on Scotland Island. Today, however, there's a festival feel and a sense of anticipation.

Colourful plastic tablecloths adorn picnic tables in the courtyard next to the Church Point General Store and Waterfront Cafe. The area has been the event's hub since the dog race began almost 40 years ago, on Christmas Eve, 1974. Chris Cowper, who was 21 at the time, is one of the event's founders and his labrador Mandy was one of the first competitors. Chris used to run the local barge service out of Elvina Bay. Over a beer one afternoon, he and his mates Lawrie Duff and Dave Baume, who were skippers on competing Pittwater ferry services, came up with the idea.

"We all argued about everything, including whose dog was the fastest swimmer," says Chris. To settle the feud, they organised a race from Bell Wharf, on Scotland Island, across about 450m of water to Church Point, on the mainland.

When the day came, the gathering of local participants had grown from the original three to 14 people. The blokes "threw their dogs off the back of their boats and it was chaos", says Chris. "People yelled,

dogs barked and the water churned white." Thirty-seven years on, and one thing hasn't changed: the entry fee of a longneck of beer and a tin of dog food. But Chris, Lawrie and Dave couldn't have imagined their rivalry would lead to the event that is set to take place today: more than 2000 spectators and 60 dogs are expected to arrive this afternoon.

"This race has created legends," says this year's race organiser Russell Loewenthal, as he jots down competitors' details at the registration area. One such legend is six-year-old Cooper, whose owner Martin Mulholland was born on Scotland Island in 1980. Cooper is a lively black labrador who has won the event for the past five years running and is the popular favourite to win this year.

Local artists Tracy and Paul Smith wouldn't miss this event for anything, even though their dogs Dart, a 17-year-old mini fox terrier, and Alfie, a 15-year-old Jack Russell, aren't built for racing and are no match for Cooper. Tracy and Paul have been Scotland Island residents since 1984, and they ran the Gone Fishing Gallery, which, until recently, was located on the ground floor of the once-iconic but long-vacant Pasadena restaurant. It was donated by its previous owners to the large group of Offshore Community artists so they could exhibit and sell their work, much of which is inspired by their island lifestyle. Due to a recent sudden change to the building's ownership, the artists are in search of new digs.

"Living here attracts a certain type of people," says Paul. "You've got to be fairly eccentric. You're relying on water that you've got to cross in all sorts of weather. ►



Dog's day out. Scotland Island's annual dog race draws crowds of spectators, such as one of the island's longest-term residents, 81-year-old Bob Blackwood (above left), Isabella Parnell-Major (above centre), 13, and local artist Tracy Smith (above right).



Catch me if you can. Race day on Scotland Island can be chaotic, as dozens of wet, four-legged friends mingle with excited spectators, before lining up on the race start line (above). Dog owners must accompany their pets, but don't have to swim. Dogs can also hitch a ride on their owners' paddle craft (far left) – but they won't be in the running to win. Race organiser Russell Loewenthal (left) has maintained the light-hearted spirit of the event by keeping the entry fee the same as it's been for almost 40 years – a longneck of beer and a can of dog food.



Island antics. There can be only one race-day winner, and entrants know that five-time champion Cooper, shown here (centre) with his owner Martin Mullholland, is the one to beat. Runners-up can take home the 'Diesel King' memorial trophy, which is awarded to the favourite performer on the day – the 2011 winner was Kango (above left), pictured here with Phillip Meek.

The boat can break down, it can fill up with water, but the payback is like being on permanent holiday."

The lifestyle sounds romantic – and it is – but when a storm is in full force, it can be a struggle, and the locals know it. So those who make it, the stayers, carry a fierce sense of loyalty and pride. "Residents here have a pioneering spirit," says Tracy. "There's a strength about them." One such character is Bob Blackwood, 81, one of the island's longest-term residents. Any local worth their salt knows Bob. A member of the Scotland Island Rural Fire Brigade since he built his first house there in 1960, Bob is possibly the only resident left to remember the arrival of electricity there in 1962. "The irony was that I worked for the electricity commission," he says. "I spent all day on the mainland connecting people with power and building substations, and I'd come home at night and I didn't have it myself."

As the clock ticks towards 6pm, when the race will start, more and more people arrive, with dogs of every size and disposition in tow. Proud Hungarian vizslas, water-loving labradors, trembling fox terriers, and one minuscule chihuahua – which will complete the entire race airborne, held aloft by its owner – crowd the shore.

A barge driven by local Scott Taylor pulls up to the wharf at Church Point to ferry the dogs to the island. He needs to make two runs because there are 56 dogs in total, plus their owners, who will swim or paddle alongside their pets. From the sandy shore of Scotland Island, the racers are afforded a view they wouldn't see at any other time of year: several thousand spectators take up any and every available vantage point on the mainland, and are piled into boats on the estuary.

Scott yells a countdown to the race, which is met by a roar of support from the crowd and from the dog

owners in the water. From the get-go, Cooper is at the front of the pack. Other dogs seem more interested in sniffing their rivals, and some, perched on the front of their owners' paddleboards and kayaks, are simply along for the ride.

Close to the finish line, confusion strikes and Cooper's lead is lost. He inexplicably veers north, quite possibly attracted by the bare legs of the crowd, which dangle enticingly over the jetty. In his wake charges forth a new winner, a kelpie-collie cross named Dog, owned by Ben Thomsen of Raymond Terrace on the NSW Central Coast.

A swarm of wet dogs follows, and then slides between the legs of the heaving crowd as the MCs announce the winners. One of the prizes is an award for the best-performing local dog. This year, it goes to three-year-old bitzer Kango.

"As the race has grown in recent years, the ratio of local dogs to their mainland competitors has got smaller and smaller," says Kango's owner Kelly Ambrose, who is a Scotland Island local. "But as a community, we enjoy sharing our slice of heaven." 

BEARINGS: SCOTLAND ISLAND

Permanent population: 715 (ABS; 2011)

Postcode: 2105

Number of residential blocks: 377

Distance from Sydney CBD: 33km

Non-residential buildings: Kindergarten, community hall and fire station

Highest point: 120m above sea level