

# Dreams of dust and deserts

From the heat of the red centre to snow-dusted Neika, this family is always up for adventure, as LINDA SMITH discovers



THE HILLSEEKERS: Author Karen Hamland with husband Al Demer and their children, Asha, 8, Clay, 6, and Xavier, 3, on the balcony at their Neika home.

Pictures: RICHARD JUPE





## WHERE THE HEART IS

Linda Smith

**K**AREN Harrland had no burning ambition to write a book. But when the now 38-year-old found herself living and working on a 215,000ha property in Australia's Simpson Desert almost a decade ago with a baby in tow, she started writing down her experiences.

Getting bogged in the middle of nowhere, fighting bushfires, driving for 90 minutes to reach the nearest neighbour and eating camel and emu for dinner were all part of the family's adventure-filled days on the land – not a typical environment for newborns.

Undeterred by the challenging experience, Karen has enjoyed stints raising all three of her children in the desert during breaks from the family's home base in Tasmania.

Now living at Neika, south-west of Hobart, Karen recently finished the manuscript for her book, *Spinifex Baby*, which has been shortlisted for the Finch Memoir Prize. If she wins – the prize will be announced at the Sydney Writers' Festival next week – Finch will publish her manuscript.

In the meantime, Karen, her husband Al Dermer, 37, and their children Asha, 8, Clay, 6, and Xavier, 3, continue to share tales of their desert lifestyle from their home on a 2ha property tucked behind Mt Wellington.

While their desert memories are fond, they admit the extreme heat and dusty red landscape – as beautiful as it was – has made them appreciate their home in Tasmania even more.

Their four-bedroom home, constructed from recycled materials, is spread across four levels, making the most of the sloping block and expansive bush views.

The inside of the six-year-old home is a mix of white walls, high ceilings, polished floorboards and blonde timber accents, with bi-fold doors and windows and a timber deck maximising the view at all angles. Other features include a curved wall in the hallway and Al's wildlife photographs on display from his trips to Macquarie Island. ➤

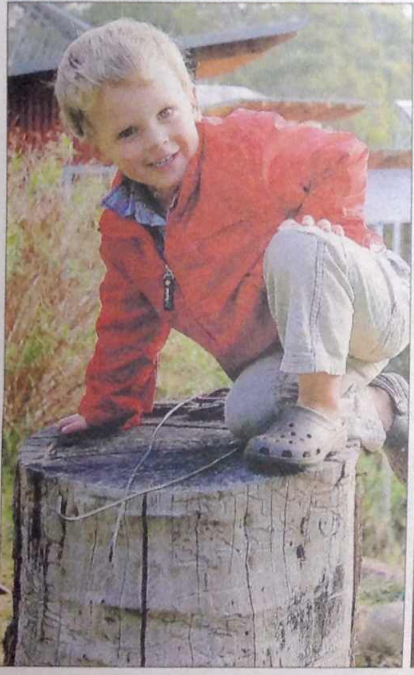


**OUT OF HER COMFORT ZONE:** Karen spent her early days as a new mum living and working on a 215,000ha property in the harsh Simpson Desert (inset), the experience of which inspired her manuscript, *Spinifex Baby*, which has been shortlisted for the Finch Memoir Prize.





CREATURE COMFORTS: Clockwise from above, Karen and daughter Asha enjoy downtime reading; Clay and Asha have plenty of space to play; Al and Karen on their balcony; Xavier plays in the yard; Al's Macquarie Island photographs are featured in a book; and the family grow much of their own produce.







ROOM WITH A VIEW: Karen and Al's home is built sustainably from recycled materials and features many vantage points for viewing the beautiful surrounds.

The family spends a lot of time outside: growing fruit and vegetables, tending to chooks, climbing trees and playing on tyre swings.

Another favourite activity is cooking an alfresco roast meal and toasting marshmallows around the campfire – just as they did when they lived in the desert. There's also an outdoor bathtub beside the fire – perfect for a warm dip on a cool winter's evening.

The family dogs Bella, a two-year-old kelpie/collie cross, and Shanti, a 13-year-old border collie/german shepherd cross, are always close by.

Karen, a garden teacher at Margate Primary School, grew up in the Adelaide Hills, while Al, who is regional manager for Bush Heritage Australia, hails from Yackandandah in Victoria.

Both moved to Tasmania independently – Al 15 years ago and Karen 13 years ago – and fell in love with the state. They met through their work as team leaders with Green Corps.

They found their land while visiting friends at Neika. Al had always dreamt of building his own home, and the property seemed perfect for the sustainable lifestyle the couple desired.

They lived in a shed on-site initially, with plans to build, but then in 2004 a job offer came up to manage Ethabuka, a former cattle property in the Simpson Desert near the Queensland/Northern Territory border which had been transformed into a conservation reserve.

"We were ready for an adventure," recalled Karen, who did a lot of travelling in Australia and overseas in her late teens and early twenties.

Soon after arriving at their remote new home, she fell unexpectedly pregnant with their first child.

"It was part of a very vague plan," Karen said.

But she didn't think it would happen so soon.

However, she and Al had committed themselves to a two-year stint in the desert and were determined to see it out.

They flew back to Tasmania for Karen to give birth, returning to the desert when Asha was six weeks old.

The trio lived there, along with their dog Shanti, until Asha was one.

"We had no idea – we thought we could just sling the baby in a backpack and go and work as usual," Karen said with a laugh.

"But it didn't really work out like that."

Still, they devised ways to incorporate a baby into their rural lifestyle – which involved mustering stray cattle on the property and monitoring the wild camel population.

They were sad to leave when their contract was up, but excited to return to their Neika home.

Again they lived in a converted shed on the property, while Al began building a family home.

***“We had no idea – we thought we could just sling the baby in a backpack and go and work as usual”***

Progress was slow at first – he did most of the work himself, relying on help from friends and a few labourers where necessary.

But when Karen fell pregnant with the couple's second child, the need to finish the house became urgent.

After 10 months of building, they moved in just two days before Clay was born.

"We were still screwing doors on and sweeping out the sawdust," Al said.

The energy-efficient home is an eclectic blend of timber, glass, metal and other recycled materials, which suits the growing needs of the family.

The main living areas, master bedroom and Al's home office are upstairs, while the children have their own space downstairs.

The surrounding greenery is always in sight and it is possible to laze in bed or the bath enjoying the view.

The couple spent the best part of a year pulling down old sheds and stables around Tasmania to gather enough materials to construct the house.

"Al really wanted to build his own house," Karen explained.

"It was a bit of a dream for him. So we designed it according to that."

The house had to be north-facing, sustainable, have a compostable toilet and use recycled materials as much as possible.

Double glazing and good insulation have ensured the house captures and retains heat and solar panels have significantly reduced power costs.

Karen said moving into the house felt like luxury after living in a shed, which had a toilet in a separate outbuilding that was freezing during winter.

"Some days you had to literally sweep snow off the toilet seat," she said.

The house, surrounded by bushland in Tasmania's cool climate where the hills are often dusted with snow, offers a stark contrast to the red dust and 48C heat of desert life.

The family returned to the desert for five months in 2010 – this time to manage Ethabuka and neighbouring property Cravens Peak, a total of 445,000ha.

Like Asha years before, Xavier took his first steps in the desert.

When the family wasn't driving across sand dunes for hours, camping in swags or watching dazzling red sunsets and impressive full moons, the children were homeschooled by Karen.

She said that when she first went to the desert she never imagined she'd write a book.

"It was the experience that made me start writing," she said, adding that she'd "always loved writing".

Initially she started writing to capture her own thoughts and feelings and create a record of the family's experiences. Then, through a course at the Tasmanian Writers' Centre and an ongoing writers' group, she realised she had a story to tell and unearthed a passion for words.

After writing a blog to share tales of desert life with family and friends, she turned her attention to a book.

Karen said the isolation of raising a baby in the desert was not unlike the isolation felt by most new parents, regardless of where they lived.

"Anyone can feel isolated as a new mum, whether they are in a remote place or in the middle of a city," she said.

She said coping in a tough situation, away from the tight-knit Tasmanian community she was used to was difficult, but she wanted to show parents that life always got easier and the effort was worth it in the end.

"I found it hard at times, but it's OK for it to be hard," she said of being a parent.

"You can come out the other side and be really happy."

Just as Karen didn't intend to write a book, Al also never imagined he would have his photographs published.

A *Hostile Beauty: Life on Macquarie Island* was released last September, a compilation of images he snapped during two visits to Macquarie Island.

Al was fascinated by glossy books as a child, especially those with images of far-flung destinations like Antarctica.

"I always had a life dream to get there," he said.

So when he got the opportunity to visit Macquarie Island for six months as a field assistant for a seabird project in 2001 he jumped at the chance.

And the photography enthusiast took his camera because he felt he should bring a few photos back.

"I've always liked photography and I figured if I was going down there I should come back with some photos to share," he explained.

"I only ever wanted to have an exhibition of a dozen good shots."

He visited again in 2011 and ended up with enough shots for a book.

Being away on so many great adventures in some of the most remote parts of Australia has made Al and Karen appreciate being back in Tasmania.

"Living out in the desert, the conditions are so harsh," Karen said.

"It was an incredible landscape and we'd do it again."

"But being back here is just so comfortable and warm and beautiful."



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