

GREAT YARMOUTH

Bought for a snip – a slice of tropical island paradise

By LUCY CLAPHAM

With a love of wildlife and the outdoors, Great Yarmouth-born globetrotter Andy Pownall thought he may one day become a gamekeeper.

At the time, owning a tropical paradise in the Philippines was not on his careers list.

But through hard work and being in “the right place at the right time”, he has found himself fulfilling an unscripted dream and is now the proud owner of Sangat, a five-by-three mile slice of sun-soaked heaven nestled in the warm waters of southeast Asia.

The 50-year-old runs a successful dive school and eco-friendly holiday retreat, the Sangat Island Dive Resort, which welcomes tourists from all over the world.

Divers flock to the island to explore the crystal clear waters, which lap onto Sangat's white sand beaches, and the historic wrecks they conceal – including several second world war ships – and to enjoy a plethora of other activities including kayaking, rock climbing, island-hopping expeditions, trekking, snorkelling and bird watching.

Mr Pownall, a father of three, said he enjoyed seeing the faces of visitors when, after a long journey by plane and boat, they see Sangat and its lush surroundings for the first time.

“You take it for granted like anything else, but because you get a constant flow of guests they remind me how lucky I am and how beautiful it is,” he added.

It was his underwater career as a professional diver that led to him first visiting the Philippines in 1986 while working with a Yarmouth-based marine archaeological company.

He was part of a specialised team charged with surveying ancient Chinese trade junks and, during the three years he spent in the tropical Asian waters, he fell in love with the country – and a local Filipino called Edith, whom he later married.

Mr Pownall, who is now a Filipino national and speaks the country's language of Tagalog, said: “I liked it so much I decided I wanted to stay and when my first daughter was born in 1992, that's when I decided not to come back (to England).”

It was soon after his marriage in the early 90s that he discovered Sangat was up for sale and took the plunge and decided to buy it, for around £60,000.

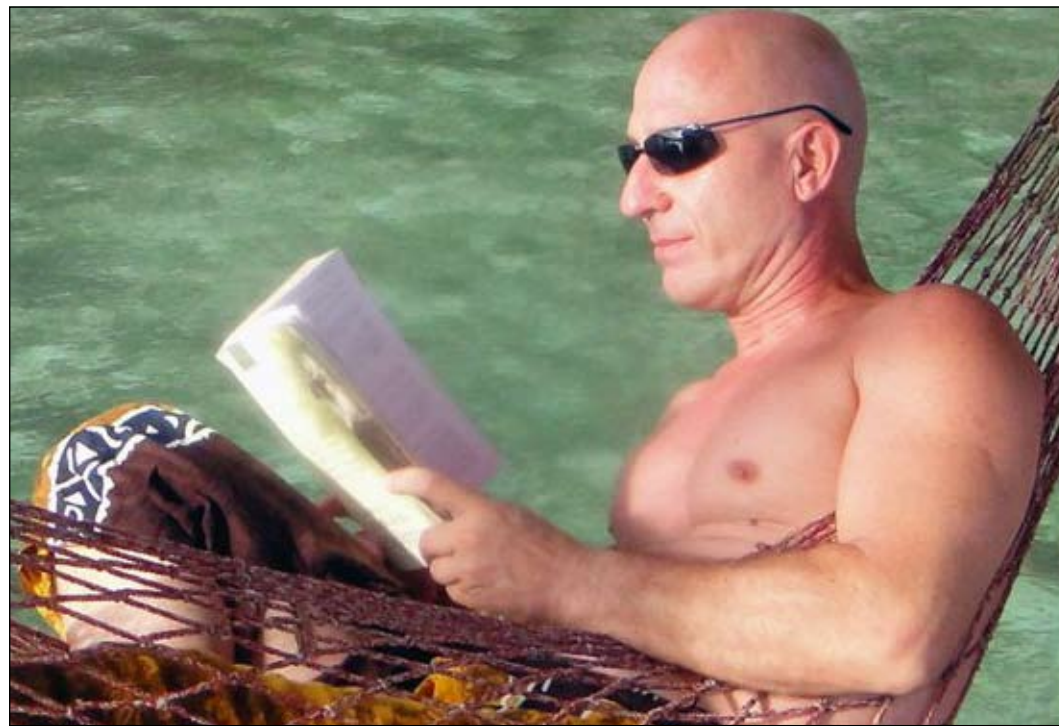
“It was very close to where we were based and we used to pass the island all the time and I thought I'd be silly not to buy something while it's so cheap,” Mr Pownall said.

“There was no tourism back then and I bought it as a bit of an investment.

“But when I decided to stay, it seemed that the obvious thing for me to do was to start a small resort.”

Since opening in 1994 the business has expanded as tourism in the Philippines has grown, and the demand from jetsetters to visit his tropical paradise has rocketed.

Mr Pownall, who attended the former St Edmund's secondary



Pictures: SUPPLIED

HOME SWEET HOME: Former Gorleston schoolboy Andy Pownall relaxes in a hammock on Sangat – the tropical island he bought for just £60,000. The father of three now employs 50 staff and runs a diving school on the island.



MARINE LIFE: Clown fish, left, among the fauna that can be spotted off the shores of Sangat; Above, divers exploring the Okikawa Maru, one of the wrecks off the island's shore; above left, a view of Sangat's white sand beach

school in Gorleston, now employs more than 50 staff and, with his fleet of 10 boats, runs two to three dives a day for keen underwater explorers.

He wanted the resort to sit in harmony with the natural beauty of the island and so built the bespoke guest accommodation with local materials using time-honoured native techniques.

He also employed renewable energy schemes to provide water and power

to the island and plans to make Sangat more self-sufficient, starting by establishing an organic farm.

His dad Nick, 84, from Seafeld Close, who is also a professional diver and has visited Sangat annually, said: “When we first looked at the place, there were about 12 chickens and now he's got solar power and a desalination plant, it's really amazing.

“He has always loved doing things

with wildlife and when he came out to the Philippines and saw the wonderful wildlife out there, and combined it with his diving, I think he thought he'd landed in heaven.”

Mr Pownall added: “I love the wilderness and natural places. I have never been one for living in towns and cities and I have always loved travelling and warm countries.

“I wouldn't change it for anything.”

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Picture: SUFFOLK WILDLIFE TRUST



DESTROYED: The tree smoulders.

KNETTISHALL

Fire destroys tree at ancient burial mound

A tree at a Bronze Age burial mound has been destroyed in a blaze at a Suffolk heath.

A dog-walker alerted the fire service to a burning tree at Suffolk Wildlife Trust's Knettishall Heath nature reserve, near Thetford, on Wednesday evening.

The tree sat on top of an area of the heath called Hut Hill, an ancient Bronze Age burial mound and a landmark of the site which dates from 2400-1500BC.

A fire crew from Thetford was called to put out the blaze just after 5pm and was there for about two hours. The cause of the fire has not yet been established. All that remains of the tree is a stump and charred trunk.

Ranger Samantha Gay said: “It is a shame this isolated incident has happened, and we are glad nobody was hurt. We are grateful to the dog-walker who alerted us and are pleased the fire did not spread and cause any greater damage to the heath and its wildlife.”

“We enjoy great community support at Knettishall Heath and over the summer holidays we are running a young rangers scheme where 12 to 16-year-olds can learn about the ecology of the heath and get involved in practical habitat management.”

Knettishall Heath has been in the ownership of Suffolk Wildlife Trust since the beginning of the year following a public appeal to buy it from Suffolk County Council.

DEREHAM

New store opens for triathlon fans

A new business which is believed to be the first shop dedicated to triathlon sports in Norfolk has opened in Dereham.

Tri Harder, on the Greens Road Industrial Estate, is run by friends Ben Walker, of Dereham, and James Walsgrove, of Easton, who are both 33.

The shop specialises in equipment and clothing for swimming, running and cycling.

Both Mr Walker and Mr Walsgrove are amateur triathletes and have taken part in the British Ironman Triathlon.

Based in Bolton, competitors have to swim 2.4 miles, cycle 112 miles and run a marathon – 26.2 miles.

Tri Harder, which also delivers items, is open between 6pm and 8pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays and between 10am and noon on Saturdays.

The pair can also open the shop at other times for pre-arranged appointments.

■ Visit www.triharder.co.uk, call Mr Walker on 07968 785928 or email sales@triharder.co.uk