

Can the Maremmas save Flagstaff Hill?



The Maremma dogs are flavour of the month at Flagstaff Hill, but can they really help turn the village around? Image: Warrnambool City Council.

Comment – Carol Altmann

WE all know the ever-vigilant Maremma dogs have saved the population of little penguins on Warrnambool's Middle Island, but it's doubtful they can save the Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village.

The 40-year-old tourist village made itself Maremma headquarters ahead of the national release of the movie *Oddball*, which gives a largely fictionalised version of the Maremma-penguin story and was filmed partly in Warrnambool.

Indeed visitors to Flagstaff Hill can, if they are there at the right time, meet the dogs and buy a made-in-Indonesia stuffed toy to [help continue the Maremma program](#).

Flagstaff Hill manager and head of tourism for the Warrnambool City Council **Peter Abbott** has also been particularly active – and successful – in trying to generate media coverage for *Oddball* and its links to our city. (How we stop enthusiastic tourists from wading across to Middle Island itself is another matter).

But behind the scenes, Flagstaff Hill has just recorded its worst visitor numbers in a decade and it's a long climb back to prosperity.

According to the council, Flagstaff Hill had 54,469 visitors in 2014-15 (excluding functions).

This compares to 60,000 in the previous year and continues the downward slide from the 81,000 that was recorded in 2003-04.

As council CEO **Bruce Anson** has said before, 80,000 is a *break-even* position.

This means at least another 25,000 people need to come through the front doors of Flagstaff Hill each year – not to show growth, but to catch up to where it was a decade ago and stop it bleeding around half a million dollars a year.

The “meet the canine stars of *Oddball*” is part of that plan. The other, even more significant part, involves another movie, if not quite as Hollywood as *Oddball*.



Warrnambool tourism authorities are banking on 'Oddball', the movie, to bring more visitors to the city and Flagstaff Hill. Image: Sydney Morning Herald.

This is the \$2 million being spent on updating the very-dated *Shipwrecked* sound and light show as part of a \$3 million upgrade of the village.

What this new sound and light show will focus on has not been revealed, despite initial hopes to have the project up and running by now.

When *Bluestone* recently checked with the council, the project was still at the "expressions of interest" stage, which suggests it has not been easy to find the right people for the job, or perhaps \$2 million is not enough to deliver what was hoped for.

In the meantime, the council is ploughing ahead with reconfiguring the front entrance (from memory, this is the third renovation of the entrance since the village opened) to blend the visitor information centre into the complex and improve access to Pippies restaurant.

The difficult truth, however, is that window-dressing the entrance and banking on movies to draw more people does not change the fact that the village itself will remain largely static.

This remains it's biggest failing and the most common complaint from those who pay their entrance fee to find there is not much happening at all inside the cute buildings.

At best, *Oddball* will provide a visitor spike to Flagstaff Hill while the movie is fresh, and the new \$2 million sound and light show may [draw another 17,000 people a year](#) until it, too, becomes dated.



Tower Hill has been named time and again as a potential tourism gem, but struggles for funding.

The short use-by date of these attractions is why I would rather see the millions that are being spent on Flagstaff Hill plunged into our unique, permanent attractions that don't date.

I am talking about our incredible natural environment and rich indigenous heritage.

We live on one of the most accessible and spectacular coastlines in the world with a rich indigenous history that is only now beginning to be taken seriously by tourism authorities, although there is still a long way to go.

Imagine what Tower Hill could do with \$2 million of state funds? A fabulous bush foods cafe/restaurant might be a start.

Imagine how far \$3 million would go in developing and promoting a trail linking Point Richie/Moyjil, to Tower Hill and on to the Budj Bim landscape around Lake Condah, Mt Eccles and Tyrendarra? The Budj Bim area is considered so special, [it is on the verge](#) of gaining World Heritage status and we should be ready.

If Warrnambool wants to pull tourists further along the Great Ocean Road, then this is how to do it: by becoming the jumping off point to an enduring and unique landscape and culture that fascinates people from around the world.

Tie this culture and landscape to quality accommodation, food and wine trails, biking and hiking and you have an attraction that is much more dynamic and organic than a static village.

This is the sort of long-term thinking required if we really want to see cameras and action, rather than a “spike” that lasts about as long as the popcorn.