

Sovereign Hill strikes gold as 'Flaggy' struggles



Children dressed in period costume pan for gold at Sovereign Hill: just one of the many daily activities for visitors to the site. Image: Sovereign Hill.

Analysis: Carol Altmann

Why is Sovereign Hill in Ballarat still booming after 45 years and Flagstaff Hill in Warrnambool is struggling to survive?

Both are in regional Victoria, both opened in the early 70s and both rely on a mix of reality and fiction to capture our colonial past – yet their individual fortunes could not be more different.

The numbers for Sovereign Hill are simply staggering: in 2013-14 it recorded **731,000** visitors of which more than 100,000 came from overseas.

Flagstaff Hill recorded less than 60,000.

In 2013-14, Sovereign Hill turned over \$24 million in revenue and recorded an operating profit of **\$775,000**. It employs 360 staff and has 250 volunteers.

By contrast, Flagstaff Hill has gone from making a profit to running at loss of around \$500,000 a year, it employs only 13.5 staff and has 135 volunteers.

The first response might be, oh, Sovereign Hill must receive more government funding. No, it relies on generating its own income to survive.

Oh, but it is only 90 mins from Melbourne! Yes, but Flagstaff Hill is only an hour from the 12 Apostles, one of the top tourist attractions in Australia.

Perhaps the entry fees are cheaper at Sovereign Hill? No, in fact they are more than double the entry fees to Flagstaff Hill at \$49.50 adult/\$22 child/\$122 family.

To my mind, the difference comes down to two critical things: i) Sovereign Hill has aggressively and successfully gone after the lucrative Asian tourist market and ii) Sovereign Hill itself is full of life, characters and *things to do*.



While Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village occupies one of the best spots in Warrnambool, it is a largely static museum whose fortunes are flagging. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

In his submission to a recent state parliamentary inquiry into heritage and eco tourism, Sovereign Hill Chief Executive Officer **Jeremy Johnson** laid out some startling facts.

Having sniffed the wind early on the growing Asian tourism market, Sovereign Hill [now employs four staff in China](#) to sell itself as a destination direct to the Chinese. (In January it hosted a hugely successful 1850 fashion show and competition in Shanghai. [See here.](#))

It also hires **17** Mandarin and Cantonese speaking tour guides on site – and has used such guides for 20 years.

Incredibly, **one in three** Chinese tourists to Victoria now visit Sovereign Hill.

Of course Flagstaff Hill has known about the burgeoning Asian market too, but only now is it lumbering into life to do

anything about it, with an upgrade of its sound and light show that will be multi-lingual.

When I visited Flagstaff Hill a few weeks ago, there were no multi-lingual maps or signage, and the introductory film shown to all visitors is in muffled and difficult “olde” English (being extracts from a colonial diary).

There were certainly no Mandarin-speaking guides about, in fact there were very few people (visitors or volunteers) about at all, despite it being the height of the school holidays.

Which brings me to the second point. Flagstaff Hill is more static now than it was 30 years ago.

Tourists love things to see, do, touch and listen to, and this is where Sovereign Hill leaves Flagstaff Hill in the shade.



The winter blues have been transformed into a tourism winner at Sovereign Hill with its “Christmas in July” event that taps into the White Melbourne light show theme. Image: Sovereign Hill.

It Sovereign Hill, visitors can pan for gold, have their name printed on a “Wanted” poster, buy some Raspberry drops from the boiled sweet shop, or watch a building “burn” down, and on it goes...

At Flagstaff Hill, the visitors walk into the re-created shops, bar and blacksmiths etc expecting to see someone doing something and – apart from one or two exceptions such as the boatbuilders – there is nobody doing anything.

One more example: Ballarat is freezing in winter, even colder than Warrnambool. But Sovereign Hill turned this down-time into an up-time by launching a two-week [Christmas in July event](#) across the school holidays.

Among other things, they light up buildings, create fake snow, run plays by the local theatre group and, last year, the crowds reached a record 42,000. In other words, almost as many people visited Sovereign Hill in those two weeks than for two-thirds of the year at Flagstaff Hill.

So what is Flagstaff Hill doing in response to its troubles?

Well, it is about to [spend another \\$3 million](#) (on top of the \$5.7m spent in 2003) “refreshing” the sound and light show (\$2m), adding a handful of holograms rather than real people to its buildings – which sounds like a maintenance nightmare – and upgrading the wharf and main entrance.

According to [its own masterplan](#), a full makeover of the village will cost up to \$15 million, so rather than throw \$3 million into it for little impact, we could **try to do more with what we already have.**

For example, if the council is [persisting with the Fun4Kids Festival](#), why not hold it at Flagstaff Hill, refocus it with a strong maritime theme (pirates, stowaways, shipwrecks...) move it to the early January school holidays when – compared to events in Port Fairy, Warrnambool is dead – and run special

trains from Melbourne (*The Shipwreck Express?*) that deliver visitors virtually to the door.

And why not offer studio space at Flagstaff Hill to the many artists and crafts folk around the area who do metal work, wood work, glass work, textiles and so forth, so that they get exposure (and sales) and visitors can see people in action?

And why not consolidate all of our historical artefacts in one place, rather than have them spread between Flagstaff Hill and History House (that few visitors even know exists), so that people can see, touch and learn about them?



Despite having historic lead ingots from the Loch Ard on loan from the Federal Government, there is not one sign at Flagstaff Hill explaining what they are or where they come from. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

Lastly, and most importantly, why not make more of the treasures at Flagstaff Hill, such as the *Loch Ard* ingots which, [according to a report in the local paper](#), Flagstaff Hill founding member **John Lindsay** thinks are no longer that

important at all.

Despite having several hundred of these lead ingots on site, there is not one explanatory sign telling visitors what they are or where they came from.

During my last visit to Flagstaff Hill I was in the *Reginald M*, that houses some of these ingots, and a young boy asked his mother what they were. She didn't know, so I said that they had come off the *Loch Ard* shipwreck and he should try and lift one to see how heavy it was.

His eyes opened wider and he tried to lift one end.

"Orrrrrrr."

History comes alive in those moments – and, as Sovereign Hill well knows, they don't cost a fortune, but they are pure gold.