


# Rehab for real

We read about stars checking into rehab all the time, but what happens once they get there? Ceri David pays a visit to one of Australia's top treatment centres and discovers it's no pampering health spa

PHOTOGRAPHY MARTIN MISCHKULNIG



Simon\* can't stop fidgeting. He pulls on his beanie hat and, seconds later, takes it off again, wringing it in his hands. "My addiction was pretty bad before I came here," says the 24-year-old, making eye contact at last. "I'd used for about 12 years: cocaine, base, ecstasy. When I was younger, I was physically abused by my dad, and I've realised now that I used drugs to create my own fake reality. I was either going to end up dead or in jail. So I came for help."

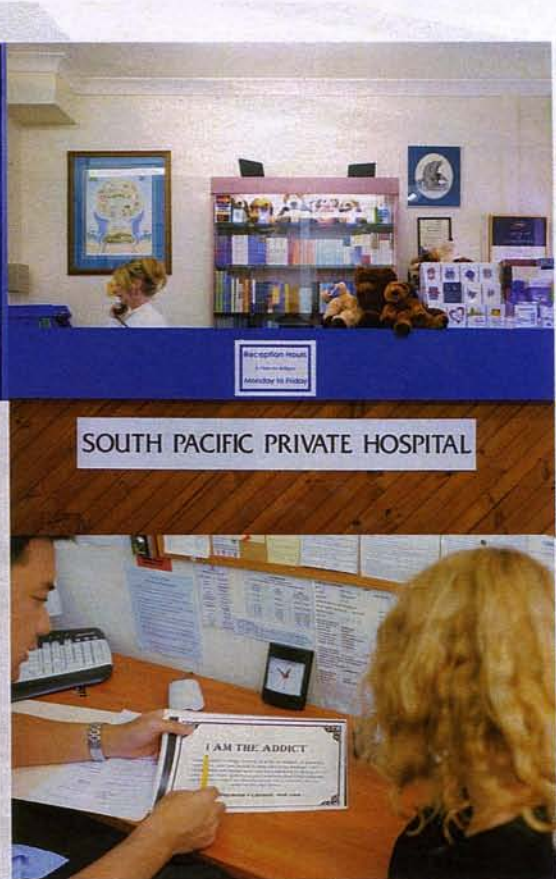
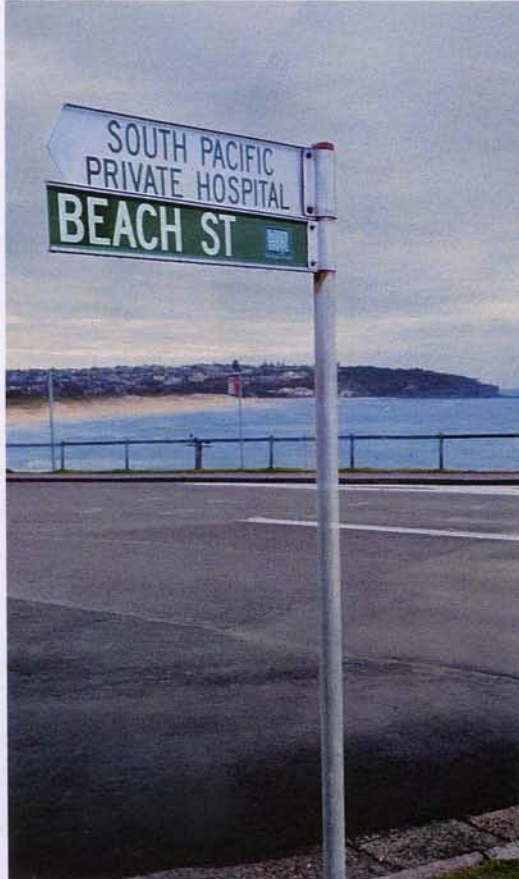
Welcome to rehab. Anyone who's flicked through a magazine or turned on a TV in the past decade will be no stranger to the word. Thanks to the newsworthy antics of stars such as Kate Moss and Keith Urban, it's bandied about like white powder at an after-show party. But what does "rehab" really mean? A deluxe retreat where members of the A-list recuperate after a strenuous few months on the social circuit? Or a boot camp where hard-core addicts are shackled to their beds and forced to go cold turkey? When I turned up at South Pacific Private Hospital – one of Australia's top treatment centres for problems such as alcoholism, drug and sex addiction, compulsive gambling and eating disorders – I had no idea what to expect. Nor did Simon.

"The day I arrived, I was like a deer staring into headlights," he says, now two weeks into his stay. "I was a lost soul. I'd used at 3 o'clock that morning, and the whole idea of coming here was really daunting." >





**GETTING CLEAN** (clockwise from right) Bedrooms are plain but functional; therapy rooms display thought-provoking program info; a quiet moment for a client; the beach is handy for 7am walks; a poster that sums up the philosophy of the place; cuddly toys are a gentle touch at reception; helping a client understand addiction in a one-on-one session; staff take part in a handover.



I, meanwhile, am not at South Pacific as a patient. Some of my habits may be questionable, but I'm here in my dual capacity as journalist and sticky-beak to find out what goes on in rehab.

My first impressions have exploded the luxury myth quick-smart. There wasn't a limo or paparazzo in sight as I parked outside the sun-bleached yellow and blue building on a residential street in Sydney's Northern Beaches. Inside, the reception area could belong to any local GP, with its standard-issue ugly sofa, piped music and disabled-access toilet. The only difference is the sign hanging over a corridor into the building. "Expect Miracles," it advises.

I'm guessing your average highly strung celeb might find such surroundings a touch humble – which suits South Pacific's CEO Lynne Fishwick fine. "Yes, we get high-profile clients here, but they're treated exactly the same as everyone else," she says, before reeling off a long list of regulations. Rooms are shared and clients are responsible for making their own beds. My favourite rule is the blanket ban on chocolate and alcohol. Mobile phones, iPods, computers and novels are also forbidden, and you can forget staying up-to-date with *The Biggest Loser*, since TV is also off limits, aside from a nightly dose of the news.

"We're very strict about our rules," Fishwick stresses. "Clients spend a lot of money to come to South Pacific, so the focus needs to be on what's happening here – not on going for coffee and thinking about what's going on in the outside world. It's crucial not to have those distractions."

If a stay here is already beginning to sound a little tough, the schedule itself is even more

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demanding. The day kicks off at 7.10am with a walk on nearby Curl Curl Beach and from then until lights out at 11pm, every minute is accounted for. There are appointments with psychiatrists and doctors, where progress and wellbeing are assessed and medication is administered if needed. Individual and group therapy sessions feature heavily, bringing patients' addictive behaviour into the open after what may have been years of secrecy. Art therapy and meditation help reveal repressed issues. And there are lectures throughout the day on subjects such as 'distorted thinking' and 'mindfulness'.

With a timetable like that, and no prospect of a glass of cab sav at the end of it, I'm not surprised to hear that people often quit. "It's a big commitment and it's jolly hard, so clients need to want to be here," says Fishwick. "They can leave any time they want, and people do, particularly if they're detoxing and are desperate to use. Sometimes they leave in a fit of anger and then phone later, asking to come back."

For those who stick it out, a typical stint lasts five weeks and follows a program copied from The Meadows in Arizona – erstwhile home to Elle Macpherson, Mike Tyson and Whitney Houston. South Pacific's founders, Lorraine Wood and her late husband Bill, spent time at The Meadows in 1986, when their marriage hit the rocks thanks to his alcoholism and her workaholic, co-dependent tendencies. Lorraine credits their visit to the centre with saving their relationship, and they decided to set up a similar facility here. Since its opening in 1993, more than 4000 patients have been treated at South Pacific.

Jonathan\*, 63, is one of them, currently three

weeks into his visit. A former director of a building company, he tells me that, having been a sex addict all his life, he decided to do something about it two months ago. "I'd been leading a double life, having affairs, going to brothels and telling a lot of lies," he says. "I realised through an experience with a prostitute that it had to stop. She'd been successful, but she'd spiralled down and there she was in front of me saying she was going to kill herself. I thought, 'That's me. I could lose everything, too.' It was a hell of a place to be."

Jonathan confessed everything to his wife, who agreed to stay with him if he stopped his affairs and sought help. "I was horrified about checking in here," he admits. "I'm a successful businessman and a father of a large family, with what the community would see as strong relationships. And I'm here. If they knew, they'd say I was a dirty old man."

As it turns out, relationships figure strongly in treatment here. Addictive behaviour can have a huge impact on friends and family, but it also works in reverse; events involving those close to us can lead to an addiction. "Rather than just treating the symptoms, we try to find out why a person has become addicted," says Dr Ben Teoh, consultant psychiatrist and specialist in addiction medicine. "You may discover there was childhood abuse, or suppressed grief, or that they're having marital problems. Even if it's not the cause of the addiction, it's at least contributing to it, and if you can do something about that, you reduce the risk of relapse."

To give me an idea of how that's put into practice, I'm allowed to sit in on a group therapy session. It's Family Week, and each client has invited someone important to them, although outside of the group sessions they can't speak or spend time together, to maintain focus.

"This week is very powerful and healing," says Maria Dolenc, the family therapist, before we start. "People learn to be honest for a change and share difficult things in a way that doesn't separate them, but unites them. Once that happens, they learn to trust each other, and the healing process can begin."

Inside the therapy room, a circle of chairs has been set up and, as the clients and their guests file in, they're impossible to differentiate; no one looks like a stereotypical addict. Everyone is dressed in ordinary clothes, although some are wearing slippers. The only thing out of the ordinary is the quantity of hostile glances being thrown in my direction.

Maria asks how each person feels. The words "angry" and "anxious" are popular, although one gentleman is more forthcoming. He doesn't trust the media and doesn't intend to say another word with me in the room. Three others agree with him, and I can't recall a time I've felt so unwelcome.

Maria comes to my rescue with a solution; those who are happy to participate can go first. Once they're done, I'll sling my hook.

She asks the first client and their guest to move to two chairs facing each other at the centre of the room. One of the pair repeats a phrase after Maria: "What I'm going to share with you in no way questions your value as a person. This is about your behaviour and how that has impacted on me."

The man's hands tremble as he clutches a piece of A4 paper and reads from a long list he's prepared, detailing exactly how his wife's addiction has affected him. Before long, tears are streaming from behind both their glasses and I have no idea where to look. Sitting within arms-reach of two people going through something this painful and intimate knocks me for six. With each daughter who's been forced to switch roles and look after her mother, or

boyfriend whose self-esteem has been dented by sexual rejection, or wife who felt useless as her husband continued to self-harm, my journalistic steeliness corrodes just a bit. I tip my head back, willing the brimming tears to drain back inside my head before anyone notices and asks me what right I have to be blubbing; I was no addict or long-suffering companion with a tale of woe. Heaven knows what they think of me, but in the end, every person there agrees to talk with me present.

Once the meeting comes to an end, and the rest of the group has left, Maria comes over. "Can I give you a hug?" she asks. "You look as if you might need one." As if it were planned that way, she is exactly the right size and shape for such duties.

Two days later, I'm back at South Pacific. My first stop is the daily handover meeting, where all overnight happenings are discussed by the staff. One client has decided to leave after another expressed romantic feelings for her, something that's actively discouraged. Further drama occurred in a craft workshop, when a chap ran off with some braided wool, fashioned it into a noose and feigned hanging himself. It was done in jest, but these events are always noted, just in case.

From there, it's back to family group. It being Friday, this is the final session, and I'm wondering how things have changed. Once again, the first pair moves into the centre of the circle. The man holds his sheet of paper and reads a list of 'amends' – or changes he vows to make. His wife does the same, before they move on to the second stage, and another list. This one transforms the mood completely. Slowly, he tells her each and every thing he loves about her, point by idiosyncratic point, and with each revelation, the smile on her face widens. There's not a dry eye in the room as Maria tells

them to stand up and give each other a hug – the first they've been allowed to share all week.

Later, Brooke\* comes to see me. A 28-year-old training coordinator from Melbourne, she's suffered eating disorders for years and has just completed Family Week with her boyfriend. "He didn't want to come at first. He wasn't even sure he wanted to be with me," she says, slowly. "But it was magical. I've been able to get all my anger out – I didn't hold anything back – and he stayed. I was scared I'd lose him once I'd said it all, but he didn't go."

My time at the centre is up. As I prepare to leave, I glance around the nondescript building and think how different it looks now that I've witnessed the emotional roller coaster going on in the rooms inside. Unexpectedly, it's been a truly inspirational time.

As I reach the door, I run into Simon in his familiar beanie rushing off to a lecture. His plans, he tells me, are to stay clean once he's back home and eventually to do a university degree in business management. He looks well. "I've never felt so good in my life, actually," he says. "I've cried my eyes out since I've been here, but I haven't even thought about using drugs, which is a weird experience."

He gives a nod towards the sign over the entrance. "I suppose miracles do happen." **SM**

For information about South Pacific Private Hospital, visit [www.spph.com.au](http://www.spph.com.au).

#### where to find help

The following organisations offer help with addictions:  
• Sex Addicts Anonymous, [www.saa-recovery.org](http://www.saa-recovery.org) • Gamblers Anonymous, [www.gamblersanonymous.org.au](http://www.gamblersanonymous.org.au) • Narcotics Anonymous, [www.naoz.org.au](http://www.naoz.org.au) • Alcoholics Anonymous, [www.alcoholicsanonymous.org.au](http://www.alcoholicsanonymous.org.au) • Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia, [www.adca.org.au](http://www.adca.org.au).