

PARTY TIME



FIFTEEN YEARS AGO HE BROUGHT HIS LOVE OF ENTERTAINMENT TO THE BUS INDUSTRY. NOW HE'S TAKING HIS 'PARTIES ON WHEELS' ACROSS AUSTRALIA. **NICOLE HOLYER** WRITES

Roland Ott

Roland Ott's Nightcruiser party buses have prowled the streets of Perth for a decade and a half.

Now the entertainment manager-turned-bus operator-turned entrepreneur is inviting the wider bus and coach industry to the party.

As it happens with many successful businesses, what became Nightcruiser started off as just a hobby.

"I started off as a mobile DJ [disc jockey]," Ott says. "That progressed to band and artist management, which led into radio and television productions, and stage productions."

Ott worked with artists such as Kamahl, Duke Ellington and Normie Rowe, to name a few, touring with them across the country.

"When I used to bring John Farnham to Perth, it was absolute pandemonium," he says.

"When he performed at that time, the servicing of alcohol virtually stopped because people were sitting on all the bars because it was that busy.

"I also spent a bit of time assisting management up at Cloudland [in Brisbane] before it got knocked down — what a shame that was."

Ott then took a part-time job driving seniors' tours for a friend's coach company, Chris Hedland's Seniors' Choice.

"He [Hedland] approached me, asked me to drive for him part-time," Ott says.

"I thought, 'gee that's exciting, being able to drive, doing commentary — it's almost like a holiday for me, give me a break from the entertainment side'. I got my licence and I started doing that.

"I really enjoyed getting out and about, including doing school work."

Ott liked the job so much that he branched out to work for other bus

companies. It was only a matter of time before his two worlds merged.

PARTYING FULL-TIME

"One of the companies I was working with allowed me to use their bus as a party bus and it carried on from there," Ott says.

"I started to buy vehicles and I ended up with a fleet of 20 vehicles at one stage. Most were 303 Mercs — ex-Transperth vehicles. Then I woke up one day and thought, what the heck am I doing? This is a specialised field. I didn't want the headaches of administering the fleet and all that."

Ott sold the fleet to his former operations manager, Adam Barnard, who now owns and runs the Perth-based Adam's Coachlines.

Divesting the buses meant Ott could focus on developing the Nightcruiser brand and the tours that give the brand its spark.

He recently issued Adam's Coachlines with a full licence to operate Nightcruiser party buses in Perth.

"It means that they do all the bookings, operate the full licence, which then in turn has allowed me to start spreading it throughout Australia — because there is a demand," he says.

"We've got some fantastic vehicles now, here in Perth — Adam has replaced the total fleet with Renaults."

Barnard says Nightcruiser has grown within the wider Adam's Coachlines business to the point where it needs a dedicated, full-time manager. He considers the venture a "highly-profitable strategic operation".

"One of Nightcruiser's greatest strengths is its ability to generate income during a period when bus operators' fleets are traditionally not utilised," Barnard says.

"It really is a great opportunity

for other operators in the eastern states to embrace — I am very passionate about the brand's strength."

TO THE STREETS

Passengers book over the internet or telephone, with the details of their tour sent to their e-mail account.

"The good part about it is it's online; they can [book] from their home or on their mobile phone if they want to," Ott says.

"They might be out and say: why don't we get a Nightcruiser? And they'll ring you at 8 o'clock at night, and they want to get the answers on the spot. Every licensee provides a different type of service. It just depends on whatever the demand is."

Listing bars, wineries, breweries, distilleries and restaurants, the website offers venue recommendations and dozens of tour schedules.

"I've probably got the largest range of party bus tours in the world, according to the internet," Ott says.

"It's a service for people so they can plan and invite their guests, knowing that everything has been planned out."

Party people can choose from a pub crawl, a café crawl or a karaoke crawl. There's a boogie bus tour, a Mother's or a Father's Day tour, a buck's and/or a hen's party tour, a nightlife tour, an April Fool's Day tour and a St Patrick's Day tour.

Nightcruiser hosts birthday parties from 18th through to 60th birthdays.

"We've got sub-woofer sound and party lights on board," Ott says.

"Sometimes, people bring their own iPods. If it's a 40th birthday, they might not like the music that we have, so they bring along their own music.

"Also, we have a teen fun bus tour as well. You've got 15-year-olds

"WE UTILISE THEIR VEHICLES WITH NIGHTCRUISER LIVERY AND THEY UTILISE OUR EXPERTISE WITH OUR PARTY BUS AND LEISURE TOURS."

STRATEGY

NIGHTCRUISER PARTY BUSES

that all pile on and it's the highlight of their birthday party, driving around with the party lights, playing the program that that person has made up on his iPod.

"They may have spent a whole month putting that thing together and now they're presenting it in the bus."

Nightcruiser also caters for weddings, transporting the wedding guests from venue to venue over the course of the big day.

And should things go horribly wrong Nightcruiser has the 'Divorce: freedom party' tour, helpfully located under the 'Wedding — Associated Tours' tab on its website.

"We also do things like progressive dinners," Ott says. "People use the transport to have an enjoyable night out as they go from restaurant to restaurant, have pre-dinner drinks and that type of thing."

Providing transport to and from

concerts is also a major part of the business.

"For some reason or another, when there's a big concert on, people ring us straight away, and they [charter] the Nightcruiser to go to the concert in a party atmosphere," Ott says.

"They'll bring 30 or 40 people together. Sometimes we take them to the afterparty. Or we do a pub crawl afterwards — that's the other options we give them.

"We work in with promoters that hold all the concerts. We encourage them to provide free transport for the concert-goers."

When riding a party bus, the emphasis is on fun, "rather than being boozy".

While legislation varies from state to state, in Western Australia alcohol is not allowed aboard buses. The Nightcruiser website clearly spells out the company's no-alcohol policy.

"We don't really have that problem any

more," Ott says. "It's now understood that you can't drink [alcohol] in Perth on a bus.

"We'll just say, 'go and have a few drinks before you leave, you're not very far from the first venue anyway'. We try and assist them with the responsible consumption of alcohol.

"The last thing you want is people too intoxicated so nobody has any fun and they don't remember the good time they had."

Adult supervision is required on all under-age party tours, and passengers are searched as they board the bus.

"The driver needs to protect himself," Ott says. "If people do smuggle something on board, we will talk to the person who [chartered] the bus.

"After all, they're their guests. That's all part of the terms and conditions."

COMING TO A PARTY NEAR YOU

Ott is now on the search for other companies — like Adam's Coachlines — to operate Nightcruiser party buses on a licensee basis.

"This is an excellent way for people who own fleets to have additional incremental revenue, when the fleets are basically down — on weekends and at nights, when the vehicles are dormant," he says.

"We utilise their vehicles with Nightcruiser livery and they utilise our expertise with our party bus and leisure tours."

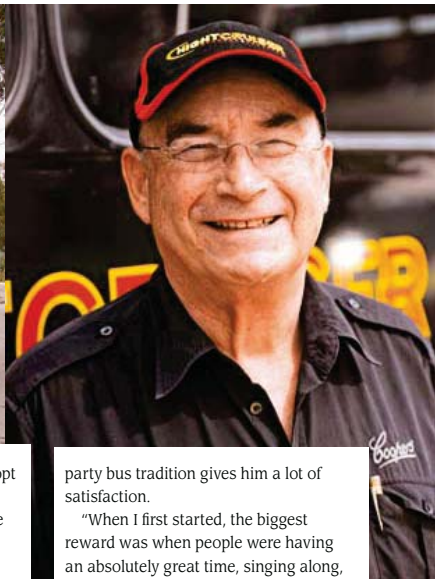
Drawing on his extensive experience in the entertainment industry, Ott sets up local promotions and develops the tours to local themes.

"Because I've toured the whole of Australia with artists and shows, the whole of Australia is like a metropolitan area for me," he says.

"There have been so many clubs and



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halls I've performed in, and I know all the different cities. That's sort of a plus for me — to be able to go into the different areas and promote things locally."

Despite originally only operating in Western Australia, Ott says he's taken calls about Nightcruiser from people right across the country.

"We licence a company in Melbourne to carry out the Nightcruiser party bus tours; they use Nightcruiser-liveried vehicles to our terms and conditions," he says.

"And we've had calls from Brisbane, Darwin, it's really serious — they want to do it but there's only so much I can do."

Licensees are directed to an online booking program call 'NCBooker',

allowing "anybody in the world" to adopt the system.

"If they've [licensees] already got the vehicles they can pick up our system, which they'd never be able to develop because they're a bus charter company, they're not into the tour side," he says.

"It's an automated system from the point of view that when you punch certain things up, it collates the venues, the deals that we have there, the opening times, the description of the tours, what they consist of, and it attaches the terms and conditions."

As you might expect, the rewards of running the Nightcruiser party bus business are many. Ott says training other people in the Nightcruiser

party bus tradition gives him a lot of satisfaction.

"When I first started, the biggest reward was when people were having an absolutely great time, singing along, dancing, carrying on and all that sort of stuff because of the music that I was playing and the things that I was saying on the microphone," he says.

"Getting everybody to sing 'happy birthday', and those special things — that's been very rewarding for me.

"I've been able to train other people to carry on that tradition. You're rewarded by people shaking your hand or giving you hugs on the way out because they had such a fantastic time.

"It's a total party on wheels." ■