Rehab for the rich

At Byron Bay, one of the world's most expensive rehabilitation facilities offers a new perspective on the pitfalls of privilege.

By Emily Ross

In the same region as Gerry Harvey's luxury resort, Byron at Byron, at Byron Bay in northern New South Wales, a very different five-star facility has been quietly operating for the past 18 months. The Sanctuary offers one of the world's most expensive rehabilitation programmes, costing almost $3000 a day, for treatment of drug addiction, alcoholism, depression, anxiety, workaholism and other behavioural problems.

This is one of the places where burnt-out chief executives, entrepreneurs, heirs, heiresses, spouses and members of the BRW Rich 200 (in short, the only people who can afford it) come to face their demons. Often it is not the first attempt at rehabilitation. Some may be trying for the sixth time, for example, to embrace sobriety, to quit painkillers, cocaine or heroin. They are here because families and partners have given them an ultimatum, or because a car crash or other crisis has forced them to act. They are here because other rehabilitation programmes have not worked. Fees at The Sanctuary must be paid in advance. For many, that means a six-figure investment in the slim hope of recovery.

There is no sign saying "Welcome to The Sanctuary". Ask Byron locals about The Sanctuary and they may have heard about it, but have no idea where it is. The Sanctuary's 40-year-old founder, Michael Goldberg, likes it that way. His operation is shrouded in secrecy. Its 50 employees and contractors work in the rented luxury homes in the area that are used by the clients. Each client has their own palatial house that becomes a private retreat during their stay. From the outside, the client can seem like any other up-market holiday maker. Up to four clients are on individual Sanctuary programmes at any one time. They seldom meet. The only group situations are 12-step meetings (along the lines of the programs run by Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous), if they choose to attend them, or when spouses or other family members come to the house towards the end of some programmes.

Guests must sign a 20-page list of rules covering such things as sexual conduct and swearing. They hand over their mobile phones, laptops and wallets. Some work-addicted clients even have to give up their watches. Clients typically stay in houses with
elaborate alarm systems and have 24-hour supervision that, for some, includes round-the-clock medical care, especially during the gruelling early stages of detoxification.

A typical day for a Sanctuary client may involve a dozen practitioners of various Eastern and Western disciplines, including cognitive behavioural therapy, clinical psychology, general practice medicine, acupuncture, yoga, physiotherapy, shiatsu massage and 12-step meetings. Personal chefs, drivers and other maintenance staff are also on hand. Individual programmes are faxed through to clients each morning. A yoga session will be followed by a 90-minute psychotherapy session, lunch, acupuncture, Qi Gong, physiotherapy and a massage. The team of practitioners meets twice weekly to discuss a patient's progress, tinkering with the programme when necessary.

There are reams of statistics on the difficulty of recovering from alcoholism or drug addiction. The failure rate is high because, by nature, addiction is a chronically relapsing condition; the craving is never far away.

About 90% of alcoholics relapse within four years, and an estimated 70–90% of drug addicts relapse within a year, according to the Langton Centre, a clinic in Sydney that provides treatment for alcohol and drug abuse. It estimates that each year, only 2–5% of heroin addicts permanently quit using the drug. A Langton Centre report states:
DETOK DELUXE
Rehabilitation centres for the wealthy addict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACILITY</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>ESTIMATED COST PER WEEK ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Sanctuary</td>
<td>Byron Bay</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver Hill</td>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>11,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promises</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>10,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Meadows</td>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>9000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hazelden</td>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>7500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Priory</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Clapton’s Crossroads Centre</td>
<td>Antigua</td>
<td>4700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty Ford Clinic</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>4400</td>
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"At this time, there is no evidence that treatment improves on the rate of spontaneous remission of dependence and achievement of abstinence from drugs."

Cynics might question why people would spend tens of thousands of dollars on rehab if the chances of recovery are slim, at best. Michael Goldberg, who has faced his own substance-abuse problems, disagrees. His programmes are producing positive results. Goldberg will not reveal his success rate but insists that the relapse rate is much lower than the national averages. The fees pay for more therapies, more intensive treatment and follow-up relationships when clients leave than lower cost programmes provide.

In his previous life, Goldberg, a pale, robust middle-class boy from Melbourne, ran a construction company with 50 staff, and was part of Melbourne’s nightclub scene in the 1990s. He worked successfully and hid his long-term alcohol and drug addiction. When he finally sought help, Goldberg experienced first-hand the cash-strapped resources in mainstream rehabilitation. He could afford to supplement his own recovery programme and added yoga, meditation, intense psychotherapy, a healthy diet and exercise. He has attended more than 1500 Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. In 1999, Goldberg spent time at a drug and alcohol facility near Byron Bay called The Buttery. He has been drug-free and sober since then and recently celebrated his sixth "birthday" at Alcoholics Anonymous. (AA members celebrate each consecutive year of sobriety.) Goldberg was so grateful for his recovery that he began helping out at The Buttery, doing maintenance work and taking patients to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

He did not want to go back to his old life in the construction industry, and his other business idea, an organic farmers market in Byron Bay, did not work out.

Once Goldberg had the idea for the centre, he knew he had found a potentially lucrative, underserviced niche. Rehab for the rich is not new — the Betty Ford Clinic opened in Rancho Mirage, California, in 1982 — but combining so many therapies away from group residential situations is a new approach.

The Buttery director, Barry Evans, says: "Michael is catering to a slice of the population we can’t hope to service." The Sanctuary is Goldberg’s ideal, no-expense-spared model of rehabilitation, where anything a client may need to help them recover is available, thus increasing their chances of living a clean and sober life.

A psychologist at The Sanctuary, Catherine Stokoe, says: "Money can save people a lot of time. Most of our clients are high-functioning, socially. They don’t need to spend six months living with people in communal houses doing cooking and shopping and working out food budgets." Stokoe is quick to add that wealth cannot buy recovery. The recent trend of using Naltrexone, a rapid detoxification drug, is a case in point. "Thinking you can buy recovery totally discounts the emotional aspects of addiction."

The Sanctuary’s fee does not protect a client from the pain of coming off drugs or sobering up. The detoxing process typically involves stomach cramps, diarrhoea, spasms, violent shivering, vomiting, craving, insomnia and severe anxiety. Guests may have higher-quality sheets at The Sanctuary, but they still have to suffer through withdrawal.

Former heroin addict and author of the novel *Shantaram*, Gregory David Roberts, describes the experience of coming off heroin as "lift with the skin torn away."

Stokoe says: "It is absolutely hard work. It is not easy to stop full-flight addiction and come into treatment. They are faced with the emptiness and all the dysfunctional way: they have been interacting with people."

DESTRUCTIVE WEALTH
Goldberg has often been quoted as saying that money is not an issue for his clients. They drive 7-series BMWs, they live in palatial homes and can afford to come to Byron Bay. But money actually is an issue. The Sanctuary’s head psychologist, Jane Williams, says: "Money does come into the picture, often. Wealth and success, it seems can be incredibly destructive.

The rich also face what Williams calls: "reverse discrimination." Rich alcoholics and junkies do not elicit much sympathy no matter how tragic their personal circumstances. The Sanctuary’s clients include wealthy tycoons such as the company director almost dead from drink, or the entrepreneur whose preferred fuel is cocaine. Their partners are leaving them and they really don’t know why. ("Haven’t I been a good provider?") Other clients include the children, spouses and other relatives of the super-rich who were brought up by nannies who grew up knowing that the business always takes priority over relationships. Williams says: "They put up with the horrible family because of the money. Money is not just money in those relationships. It is power, control, authority and it gets tied up with anxiety and guilt."
Money can even become a way to measure a person’s worth, as opposed to their wealth. One recent client, an heir, told the Sanctuary’s yoga and meditation therapist: “I probably have $40 million in the bank but I feel worthless.”

Williams has treated addiction in homeless youths and worked in rehabilitation in facilities ranging from Melbourne’s Pentridge Prison through to The Buttery. “Most people come to The Sanctuary not because they are terribly worried about being addicts. It is not the addiction per se that drives them here, it is the fact that their relationships are disintegrating and they feel lonely,” she says. “What they feel is unbearable. It takes a crisis to make her patients take stock.

Williams, 43, is dark-haired and speaks with a slight Afrikaans accent. She is a long way from Pentridge Prison, where she used to work as a caseworker, as she sits on the deck of one of The Sanctuary’s deluxe rented houses, eating rice-paper rolls filled with duck and organic herbs prepared by one of The Sanctuary’s personal chefs. An $80 French lily-of-the-valley candle burns fragrantly as she speaks.

Twenty years’ work has made Williams outspoken in her dislike for tough love approaches to rehabilitation, the hard-core let’s-break-you-down intervention that shames people into entering rehabilitation. The Spartan dormitories, floor scrubbing and military-style rehabilitation simply do not work, Williams says. Rather than a hardline approach, she prefers something more like a dance of the seven veils. “It is a very delicate process,” she says. “Often people don’t have the skills to rebuild after such a breakdown.” She is a firm believer that life keeps giving people chances. “People’s regrets are normally, ‘I wish I had been a better parent, I wish I had been there more for my family’. It is those things that haunt people.”

Stokoe agrees. “What a lot of people have done for most of their lives is put money first. They do not know how to care for themselves. All they know and all they focus on is money.” Williams says: “It is a hell of a price to pay.”

**High expectations**

Whatever their financial position, most parents want their children to be happy. The difference between wealthy parents and others, according to Williams, is in the expectations they have for their children.

“There is a great deal of pressure on children who are born to wealthy families, even if it is an unsaid, never-expressed pressure,” Williams says. “These children feel they have to live up to something, and quite often that standard is difficult to live up to.”

The children are burdened with a sense of having to be as successful as their parents, and it makes them feel terrible. The children miss out on simple things like playing with their parents for the sake of it. Drugs then become the only fun they know. Sanctuary patients have been known to take up playing the guitar, painting and even belly-dancing for the sake of it, activities that tycoon dads would always have dismissed: “You’ll never make any money out of it.”

“It sounds idiotic and simplistic,” Williams says, “but corporate people need to play. They miss out on this because of that great rate of pressure and performance.” Their lives are planned months in advance and everything is managed. The time spent making money is at the expense of other parts of life: family, friends and health. (Williams is always pleased when patients start enjoying the local lizzard population and taking an interest in the tide reports to plan their beachcombing activities.)

An average of 50 people call Goldberg’s office each week to ask about The Sanctuary. Williams screens potential clients in a one-hour long phone interview. The patient then signs a consent form and contact is made with relatives, doctors and other people who know the patient’s history. Williams will then try to ascertain how drugs affect the person’s life, how anxious or depressed they are, and the level of commitment to recovery they may have. Often, clients have been lying about how much cocaine they are using (the wife thinks it is $400 a day, the businessman actually has a $1000 a day habit), or a heroin addict’s parents cannot quite bring themselves to ask their child directly about the problem.

Clients pay the entire amount of the programme in advance (it can run into several hundreds of thousands of dollars), so the stakes are high. Williams needs to pick people who will make it through their programme. Often, she refers potential patients to a person or programme in their local area if there is a risk they are not ready to make the full commitment to rehabilitation.

Goldberg does not pretend that everyone who leaves The Sanctuary will remain clean and sober. Leaving idyllic Byron Bay, with those lizards, sunsets, the therapists on call, the cooking and the personal attention is not easy. To ease the transition, family members often come and stay, are involved in family sessions where problems are brought out in the open. Before a patient leaves, Goldberg has been known to fly to the patient’s home, get the house ready, stock the fridge and even have the floorboards sanded to cover up all the cigarette burns accrued in the patient’s drug haze. The Sanctuary keeps in touch with clients, checking on their progress. Many guests return, wanting to spend more time working on themselves.

Sanctuary clients are exposed to the “real world” during their stays and are strongly encouraged to go to 12-step meetings in little church halls and clubs in the hinterland and along the coast. At Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, they hear the testimonies of others, most of whom struggle with sobriety without any support outside the meetings, let alone a driver, a night nurse and two psychologists. This grass-roots therapy is something many clients cannot stomach at first, being uncomfortable in such a stripped-back place, where their CEO status means nothing, where they share their stories with tradesmen, housewives and the unemployed. It is a big come-down. By the end of the stay, many are much more comfortable in such places, empathising with other people’s struggles rather than seeing them as failures.

Goldberg’s phone continues to ring as he juggles the next wave of clients. One girl will not be admitted as her commitment is being questioned, another client is returning for a refresher week. As Goldberg said at the very start of his business: “I knew the clients were there.”