

A fascinating piece of local history. Here is a research summary for review:

Smiths Lake — Where the Flying Boats Landed

Long before the Lakes Way was sealed, before the holiday crowds arrived, and decades before a famous music video would put Sandbar Beach on the national map, Smiths Lake was the destination of one of the most extraordinary real estate adventures in Australian history. In the early 1960s, enormous flying boats landed on its calm waters, carrying prospective land buyers from Sydney in a marketing campaign unlike anything seen before or since.

The Aircraft

The seaplanes were Sandringhams — magnificent two-storey-high aircraft with 35-metre wingspans, chartered from Ansett Airlines. They were a civilian rebuild of the wartime Sunderland flying boat, capable of carrying up to 42 passengers, and were already famous for their flights to Lord Howe Island. Passengers departed from Rose Bay in Sydney Harbour and landed directly on the shimmering waters of Smiths Lake — an arrival that must have been breathtaking for anyone experiencing it for the first time.

The Man Behind It

The mastermind of the operation was Charles H. Degotardi, a high-energy Sydney real estate salesman whose name had been synonymous with property sales since the 1950s across Sydney, the Blue Mountains, and the Great Lakes region. In 1959, Degotardi built a boatshed on Smiths Lake — on the site now occupied by the renown Frothy Coffee café — and set about drawing Sydney buyers north in the most dramatic fashion he could devise.

The Experience

The production was pure theatre. Buses from Newcastle were timed to arrive at the lakeside at exactly the same moment as the flying boat, so that passengers stepping off the bus would suddenly round a corner on the Lakes Way and find themselves face to face with the towering Ansett logo on the tail of a flying boat rising above the lake. Degotardi was waiting on shore, apron on, barbecue fired up. The Forster Water Ski Club had been hired to put on an exhibition to entertain the guests. Flight tickets from Sydney were free — on the condition that passengers placed a deposit on a block of land.

So successful was Degotardi's operation that he entertained NSW Premier Bob Askin and his entire cabinet at his home in the area. The Lakes Way was tar-sealed in 1970, a development widely attributed to his persistent lobbying and influence.

A Brief but Defining Chapter

The flying boat flights are believed to have lasted only around six months — a short run campaign that left such a lasting mark. The land sales those flights generated helped shape the community that Smiths Lake is today.

The boatshed Degotardi built still anchors the foreshore, and the lake itself — so scenically framed by bush and sky — remains as compelling a sight now as it must have been to those first passengers stepping off a flying boat and seeing it for the very first time.

A Few Additional Facts

- The aircraft were Short Sandringham flying boats chartered from Ansett Airlines — two-storey-high former wartime hulks with 35-metre wingspans, repurposed from their usual Lord Howe Island passenger routes. These were genuinely enormous aircraft.
- Degotardi staged the arrivals with theatrical precision: he would be on the boatshed deck in an apron with a barbecue ready when the seaplane landed on the lake
- He ran two buses from Newcastle simultaneously, timed so the Sydney plane and the Newcastle buses arrived at the same moment — maximum audience, maximum drama
- The Forster Ski Club was paid to put on waterski exhibitions on the lake while buyers arrived — the whole visit was choreographed as a show
- NSW Premier Bob Askin and his entire cabinet were entertained at Degotardi's home on the lake for a Christmas party — the most senior political figures in the state were guests at Smiths Lake
- Flight tickets were free if passengers put down a deposit on land — the marketing incentive that turned a spectacle into a transaction
- A local source recalled: 'You'd come by bus around a corner on the Lakes Way, on Smiths Lake, and there suddenly you'd see the high Ansett logo on the tail of a flying boat sticking up. What a sight!'
- Former Great Lakes Shire president Jim Gilbey recalled the flights may have only lasted six months — brief, spectacular, and extraordinarily effective

Primary Source

Newcastle Herald, 2011 — 'Seaplane Adventures' — by Earl (surname not given) and Coomba Park resident Lyn Hanna, quoting from a district history book by author Wendy Williamson. The article is accessible at:

www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/472642/seaplane-adventures/
