



Sydney Seaplanes: Welcome to Flight Club

Sydney Seaplanes, Australia's largest seaplane operator, is set to post turnover figures of \$8m this financial year – a 15% increase on 2016. This was bolstered by a 20% rise in bookings over the last year – you can count Ed Sheeran, Sam Smith, and 200 marriage proposals among them – plus the introduction of a hospitality offering.



It wasn't always such a sunny outlook for the seaplane industry in Sydney, though. Far from it. As CEO Aaron Shaw tells it, before he purchased and consolidated the five existing seaplane businesses operating in Rose Bay, there was something of a Wild West vibe in the air.

“The terminal was a shed, and at one stage there were four companies sharing it. It was like when you're at the airport and there's all the rental car companies crammed together. If people turned up without a booking, the

operators would undercut prices, and there'd even be physical fights. It was like a turf war. It was a horrible environment," Shaw recalls.

The current Sydney Seaplanes site is a far cry from that. The self-financed, 11-year-old business has grown from three staff to 30, boasts a fleet of five planes, and, after an 18-month DA was finally approved, an upscale terminal was constructed, which Shaw is looking to cement as both a dining destination and a corporate events space.

Shaw's dream business combination of aviation, tourism, and hospitality actually has its origins in a nightmarish incident. He takes us back to the early-2000s: "I saw an incident with one of our competitors seaplanes', the plane was upside down, the wing was mangled & the engine was twisted to the side and was in clear view. They pulled the plane out of the water and put it in the park beside the Seaplane base. The local newspaper's front page read: 'On a Wing and a Prayer.' I thought to myself, 'This has to change'. That was a major catalyst behind the decision to buy out the other operators. They were all losing money and it was a very tense atmosphere, so they didn't really want to hang around."

Shaw, 45, has spent much of his life working in aviation and tourism around the world, from his native New Zealand to Tanzania to Vietnam. This background positions Shaw perfectly for his current role, which requires both technical and business acumen. Despite his extensive credentials and revenue continuing to soar, Shaw acknowledges it's still a challenging gig. "Aviation is a tough business. Expect it to cost twice what you planned for and to earn half what you planned for. Weather is your main enemy, and that's entirely out of your control," he says, adding, "It's a high cost business: aircraft, infrastructure, skilled workers. The smaller Beavers cost about \$500,000 and the larger Caravans are about \$2.5 – \$3 million. If you have a component break down on a plane, that could be a \$20,000 hit you're taking."



On Sydney Seaplanes' mantelpiece are a Qantas Australian Tourism Award and two NSW Tourism Awards. Shaw is confident about the present and future of the Australian tourism industry. "Emerging markets are big for Australia. We're getting a lot of business from China and India. The surge in Indian passengers has been especially huge, and we're modifying our operations to accommodate more to the Chinese market by being active on WeChat, accepting payment on China UnionPay, and creating a safety briefing video in Mandarin."

With plans in place to boost local business through the new terminal and further cater to tourists from big markets, it's fair to say Shaw sees blue skies ahead. "Things have come a long way from that 'On a Wing and a Prayer' headline," he says. "The unwavering commitment to safety, quality product, and skilled people has completely removed us from the pre-Sydney Seaplanes days. We have a really good reputation among customers, the community, the industry, and the government – people love what we offer."

