

L-R Victoria, Mark, Cathy, Jonathan.



“Something that we said straight off was that we’re portrayed exactly how we are. And all the people in the show, how they act, and how Channel 9 portrays them is exactly how they act,” Cathy said.

**“And that’s what we like. We’re ourselves. Halfway through the first series, I said to a producer, ‘How are we going? Are we alright?’ And he went, ‘Oh, you’re hilarious.’ And I said, ‘Well, I didn’t even know it was supposed to be a humorous show.’ We were just ourselves, so that’s just the way it went.”**

But while the Frens were clearly made for the show, becoming reality TV travel critics wasn’t something they ever planned to do.

In a case of something being meant to be, Mark and Cathy were actually approached by Channel 9 to audition for a completely different show – a short-lived cooking series called *The Hotplate*.

While that show was canned before a second season went into production as a result of legal action by Channel Seven, the Frens and their children were figuratively thrown out of the frying pan and into the fire with spots on *Travel Guides*.

Despite the completely different genre of the content, the Frens took it all in their stride and in the process became among the most popular stars of the show.

“A producer rang me from Channel 9 and had read all our restaurant reviews on the internet and asked would we audition for a restaurant competition,” Cathy said.

“So Mark and I auditioned for *The Hotplate*, which had been running for one season. They didn’t do it anymore in the end because Channel Seven wasn’t happy with the close similarity to *My Kitchen Rules*, so they asked Mark and I and the kids to audition for a new show they were bringing to Australia. So that’s how we got on (*Travel Guides*).

“Before we went, I said to the kids we’ll either love it or hate it, but it’ll be a great life experience. And I guess we like taking risks. Mark and I were school teachers for nearly 30 years in executive positions, and we opened the café to have

# Meet the

# FREN FAMILY!

## {Our very own Travel Guides}

➔ WORDS MICHELLE MEEHAN

**When it comes to reality television, what you see is truly what you get with Newcastle’s most popular travellers, the *Fren family*.**

Well known locally for their family-run German restaurant Oma’s Kitchen, in Watt Street, Newcastle, the Frens were catapulted into the national spotlight in 2017 when they starred in the inaugural season of Channel 9’s new reality television show – *Travel Guides*.

The premise was simple. Send six very different groups of “ordinary Australians” on week-long holidays across the country and around the world, road testing some of the destination’s most iconic, interesting and unusual hotels, attractions and culinary experiences. While the groups all

have the same encounters, their reactions and rating out of five stars are often wildly different.

For the Newcastle “*travel guides*” – parents Mark, 57, and Cathy, 55, and their adult children Jonathon, 27 and Victoria, 25 – the authenticity of their reactions is clearly where the crux of their popularity lies.

Mark is the upbeat and forthright dad who loves to negotiate hotel room upgrades. For more than 30 years he has been happily married to Cathy, whose quirky sense of humour and distinctive laugh is contagious. She jokes that marrying Mark was probably the “10th best thing to happen in my life”.

Victoria is always ready to voice an opinion but admits she tends to speak before she thinks, while Jonathon is the more reserved one of the bunch, often finding himself unwittingly involved in the family’s candid antics.

a family business, so we were keen (to give the show a try), and we loved it.”

Luckily for the Frens, audiences loved them as well, with the family invited back for the second season in 2018, followed by the third and current run of episodes, which are now showing Tuesday nights on Channel 9 at 9pm.

Mark said when they first signed on to the show, they never dreamed it would amount to anything more than the chance to enjoy a few free holidays.

But while the longevity of their stint with *Travel Guides* may have come as a surprise, he said the popularity of the format itself was an obvious winner.

“We thought basically it would’ve been like a lot of those shows where you get 12 months, and that’s it,” he said.

“So after series one, we were delighted when they said series two, and then we were on the *Today Show* (in 2018) for series two, and they said, ‘Right, can you announce that there’s a series three and you’re back?’ I mean, we didn’t even have a chance to process it. We had never told Cath’s parents, we hadn’t told our workers. So they’re all watching the *Today Show* and here we are saying we’re back for season three.

“So we’ll see how this series goes, but it is rating really well, which they’re delighted with.

“It appeals to a wide audience, that’s what’s so good about the show. I’ve got kids that we taught from kindergarten and their families coming in to watch the show, and then you’ve got people in their eighties that love it; it’s got that broad demographic of people that just love holidays.

“And of course everyone loves holidays, but this gives a different perspective... it’s not the dolly birds from some of these other shows. We tell others how it is and because of the mixture of people on the show, you’re getting the various

degrees of what you might like, I’ll hate, and vice versa. That’s why I think it’s such a light-hearted and good fun show. “A couple of episodes, like the one in Hawaii when Cathy was hugging Victoria after the surfing lesson, it just shows we are real people. In South Africa Cath was saying, ‘I never thought I’d be here with you kids to experience that’, and they’re the kind of things a lot of people relate to, that we’re just an ordinary family. We might be dickheads, I don’t know, and laugh at each other, rip each other off. But we’re just a family that is just enjoying the ride and are so grateful for it.”

And what a ride it has been so far. Overall the Fren family have been on 24 week-long holidays (including the episodes that are yet to air), travelling to everywhere from the Northern Territory and the Gold Coast to Bologna and Bali.

They’ve eaten chicken feet in Taipei (an experience Mark won’t likely forget) and abseiled down the side of Table Mountain in South Africa, flown over glaciers and volcanoes, ridden on the backs of elephants and gotten up close and personal with the snapping jaws of a giant croc – much to Victoria’s horror.

But whether the experiences have pushed their boundaries or tickled their fancy, they all agree they wouldn’t have swapped the last three years for anything.

“I’m a real believer of things happening for a reason,” Cathy said.



**“If I were to be still teaching kindergarten, which I loved, I would never have had the opportunity to cook, to get invited by Channel 9 for a TV show, and to even get on *Travel Guides*.**

“The destinations have just been amazing, and afterwards if you ever have a down day, you only have to think about

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something we've done, and we just crack up. Even when we come back from trips, we say, 'Did we really say that? Did we really do that?' and have a good laugh about it.

"And I think people need to know that we're not made to do anything either. Like they don't say you have to do that. If you're frightened or it's not your thing, you don't have to do it. We're just crazy and choose to do it. I figure Channel 9 have worked it all out, and they're paying for it, so I'm going to go for it. That's the attitude I think we've got."

Known as the show's resident "bargain hunters" with champagne taste on a beer budget, they often struggle without creature comforts when travelling, but their background working together at Oma's Kitchen has certainly helped them cope with stressful family situations, allowing them to always find the funny side of any holiday disaster.

"I think we're used to being together all the time because of the restaurant, so we're lucky in that sense," Victoria said.

"We know when someone's going to have a meltdown, I guess, so we just let them go and do their own thing. But I'd say we get along pretty well the majority of the time."

Cathy adds: "I actually think that working in hospitality, in a restaurant with usually only the four of us, we're all really hard workers and we work long hours, and that has toughened us up to be able to do something like that. Because I don't think an ordinary family that doesn't work long hours would cope as well as we do."

The fact that the four of them work so closely together in their restaurant also saw the Frens decide to temporarily close Oma's Kitchen for the duration of the filming during the past two seasons.

Each year's trips are all completed over a three-month period, with holidays often falling on back-to-back weeks, making it impossible to continue "business as usual".

While they hired staff and a temporary manager during the first season, Cathy said tough economic conditions in Newcastle during the past few years, brought on by controversial inner-city street closures to allow for various infrastructure upgrades, had also helped force their hand in the matter.

But while they may have had to close for short periods, the unexpected upside for the restaurant is that it is now a beacon for the Frens' adoring fan base.

Audience members regularly travel from far and wide to eat at Oma's Kitchen, looking for a chance to enjoy a taste of more than just Cathy's mother's mouth-watering traditional German recipes.

"Channel 9's been a lifeline," Cathy said.

"I think we would actually be closed if it wasn't for *Travel Guides* because it's been so bad in Newcastle... we lost 90 per cent of our trade (during the street closures).

**"A lot of our customers now are most probably fans... we've actually created tourism for Newcastle because we have fans from all over Australia and from New Zealand who come to see us here."**

Marks adds: "We had somebody come down from Tamworth on Saturday and the weekend before, we would have had five different groups from Sydney. We've had a lady



ring up saying, 'I'm coming up at Easter from Melbourne, but I want to make sure you're there', and we had two ladies fly in from Tasmania that were going to the Gold Coast, who came to Newcastle, had dinner here, went back to Newcastle Airport and flew up to the Gold Coast for their holidays because they wanted to meet us. It's really amazing."

The Frens have been actively working to tap into the added interest in *Oma's Kitchen*, creating a range of merchandise including coffee mugs, stubbie holders, tote bags and even a calendar, which are available via their website [www.thefrenfamily.com](http://www.thefrenfamily.com)

Fans of the show – and their cooking – can also purchase the Frens' range of traditional biscuits and shortbreads online, or try to snare a spot at the exclusive screening parties held at the restaurant each Tuesday night throughout the season. The events, which sell out within days of the tickets going on sale each week, offer food themed to the destination that is on air that night, along with the chance to mingle with the Frens while they all enjoy the on-screen antics.

"Well, the first time we had the event night, we were all sick all day thinking, 'Shit, should we be watching this behind closed doors?' because we don't know what makes the cut (for each show), we don't see it until it is on air," Mark said.

"What we think is really funny may not make the cut, but we really like that surprise of thinking we really don't know what happens until we watch it with everyone.

"And having 65 other people in here watching the show, it's just hysterical, everyone's laughing, and that's what we like, the unknown."

Jonathon said it had been a "humbling" experience seeing how many people go out of their way to contact his family.

"For me, it's just personally really humbling because I'm so appreciative of people from Newcastle just coming up and saying, 'Hi, I love the show'," he said.

"Then there's people coming out of their way or travelling three, four hours to come visit the restaurant. It's just so amazingly humbling, to be honest, that people are willing to do that."

Mark agreed and said the family really appreciates the reactions they get and the support they've received from viewers.

"A great story too is when we were in Israel filming, these people kept walking past backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, and one of the sound guys said, 'Do you know those people?' And we said, 'No.' Anyway, when we finished filming, they came up because the show was screened in Israel and they recognised us and wanted to get photos with us," he said.

"Even at airports, even going to Marketown now, we get pulled up. Bunnings yesterday was hysterical.

"We get a lot of emails, and people can contact us through the business ... we've had emails from people that have been sick in hospital and nursing homes. A lady was having trouble with her pregnancy and was confined to the hospital for months, and she said the highlight of her week was watching us.

"Cath and I were down the street not so long ago, and this lady pulled us up and just broke down in tears and said she was going through such a rough time, but she put the TV on (to watch *Travel Guides*), and for that hour, she could just escape."

Cathy adds: "It's a real feel-good show. And I think for me that's been one of the big things that have come out of it, that we've made so many people laugh and be happy. That in itself is enough."

**Travel Guides screens Tuesday nights from 9pm on Channel 9. Oma's Kitchen is open Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 11am till late. ■**