

Expats make their mark on booming Asian tiger

FOUR years ago Maroochydore resident Rob Pratt and his wife, Yvonne, sold their possessions and left Queensland to travel the world. But their plans changed when they found themselves in the town of Zhanjiang on the coast of Guangdong province in southern China and began teaching English at Zhanjiang Ocean University, as they have done ever since. In the early days, they would be followed down the street by scores of people who had never seen a real live foreigner, let alone a blonde such as Yvonne. "We would be walking down the street and it would not be uncommon for us to have over 100 people following behind us," Rob recalls.

They are among 50 expats (only three of them Australians) in the city of seven million. "We hadn't counted on falling in love with the place," says Rob, who has given up the idea of leaving.

The Pratts are among a growing band of Australians living in China. Teaching English there, Rob says, has become a booming business for expats. "Everyone in China wants to learn English," he says.

Not long ago, living in China was a hardship post for many foreigners. But with 10 per cent-plus annual economic growth for the past decade, China's rapid rise and its more open approach to foreigners and foreign products has attracted increasing waves of expatriates.

GLENDA KORPORAL



Shanghai changed the way I thought and the speed at which I did things."

On her return to Australia she and her husband had an idea for a new company investing in a string of small automotive businesses. Instead of starting small, they asked the bank for \$20 million. They got it. Business has thrived and the company's share price has doubled in the past year.

Simpson has another engineering business with seven factories in China. She and the Pratts are not executives of BHP Billiton or Woodside or Rio Tinto but they are as much as part of the new coatface of Australia-China relations as any multinational.

Expats are putting down more than just financial roots. In Zhanjiang a few months ago, Rob's students urged him to enter a competition launched by the *China Daily* newspaper by which eight foreigners living in China would be selected to run with the Olympic torch when it passed through the

Austrade economist Tim Harcourt, who adopted a baby girl from the southern Chinese city of Guilin, estimates 12,000 to 15,000 Australians are living in China, with many following the growing trade between the two countries.

But many, such as the Pratts, probably don't even register on the radar of the embassy or the consulates or the Australia China Chamber of Commerce in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong, as they are quietly doing their own thing away from the main cities.

Harcourt says Shanghai and its associated Yangtze River Delta area is home to the biggest concentration of Australians in China, an estimated 5500. Australians in Shanghai can often be found at the many events held at the well-known M on the Bund restaurant, run by Australian Michelle Garnaut.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai runs a Friday drinks night for expats at the Radisson Xing Guo Hotel, which has become the first stop for an eclectic mix of Australians working in the city.

The Seven Network's executive chairman Kerry Stokes has an interest in the advertising and commercial side of the *Shanghai Daily* English-language newspaper, but for political reasons he keeps a low profile about it.

Shanghai and Beijing have their own AFL teams made up of Aussie expats who enjoy the networking, with an annual AFL on the field that is held in the Jinqiao stadium on the Pudong side of Shanghai (dubbed by competitors the MCG of China).

Sydney-based businesswoman Wendy Simpson, a NSW finalist in the Telstra businesswoman of the year contest, spent five years working in Shanghai building up the regional headquarters of telecommunications company Alcatel.

The exercise taught her that "thinking big is normal". Says Simpson: "Living in



Olympic dream: Australian Rob Pratt

country in the lead-up to the 2008 Olympics next August.

The competition has turned into a quest for Rob and his students, who have become passionate about their chance to participate in this way in the Olympics, which they will be able to see only on television. Rob features on the *China Daily* website (www.chinadaily.com.cn), which has a section devoted to the contest, allowing anyone on the internet to vote for the expats they want to run with the torch. He's concerned that he has slipped down the list as expats in China from countries that have much bigger home populations, such as the US, Japan and India, have recently outpolled him.

He's urging fellow Australians to log on to the site by the deadline tomorrow, click on "expats can be torchbearers" and vote for him. "I need as much support as I can to get into the top eight," he says from his far-flung part of China.

"I thought that Australians were the most proud and patriotic race in the world, but the Chinese are just as patriotic," he says. "The entire country has got Olympic fever. It's all everyone's talking about. It's their big chance to open the doors and let the rest of the world see their incredible country."



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