

Board meetings in paradise

The Australian Lawyers Surfing Association knows how to run a good conference, holding professional development seminars between surfing sessions at tropical island resorts. At low tide, however, this motley crew has turned its annual surfing safari into a charity mission. KATE ALLMAN finds out how.

Imagine attending a conference where, instead of jamming into a lecture hall wearing prickly corporate attire, educational presentations are observed from the paradisiacal setting of a tropical island resort. Unabashed experts present academic papers in their bathing costumes, and pina colodas are sipped as a few CPD points are clocked up from the steps of the infinity pool.

Sounds tough, doesn't it? Hardly. Nine years ago, barrister Peter Strain and lawyer Matthew Warburton took on the task of creating a peak legal body that could provide this sort of idyllic symposium annually. Enter the Australian Lawyers Surfing Association (ALSA).

Strain, a Sydney barrister who practices from his home in Bondi, says the annual ALSA conference is more than a good excuse for a holiday.

"Have a look on the website – all the papers are there," Strain says. "You

sit in the pool and have a legitimate conference – it's just convenient that the timing of the conference is based around the tides and the winds."

The idea for ALSA was originally conceived under the shade of a pandanus tree at Spooky's Point in the illustrious surfing region of Angourie in northern NSW. Founding father Strain was on his annual trip to Angourie when he realised most of his surfing pals there were lawyers.

"Every year we'd go up to Angourie and say, 'This is crazy. As lawyers, we should really make it an annual conference,'" says Strain. "One year I just thought, 'I'm going to do it.' So I registered the ALSA name and incorporated the organisation."

At the same time, Matthew Warburton, in-house legal counsel for Hudson Recruitment, had been slowly gathering numbers for an Australian chapter of the American Lawyers Surfing Association. When he heard

about Strain's crew, they joined forces and, in 2006, the first "board meeting" was held in Uluwatu on the south coast of Bali.

Beatrice Ludwig, Principal at Ludwig Lawyers, joined ALSA and became their informal secretary a couple of years later. She recalls her first conference with fondness.

"I remember someone was presenting a paper and we were all just sitting around in our shorts and bikinis," says Ludwig. "You kind of gather there around the pool, and each of the participants gets up in front of everyone and presents. It's a beautiful atmosphere. But you also hear from some really smart people with amazing legal knowledge."

So, what kind of topics do bikini-clad surfing lawyers present?

"We usually try to start with a couple of surfing-related topics," says Warburton. "Questions about, for example, the drop-in rule. When does it apply? How does it work? The issues surrounding liability in the water."

For non-surfers, the drop-in rule designates who has the right of way when two people are paddling for the same wave. The "inside" surfer closest to the curl has the right to take the wave, while the person furthest from the curl must pull off.

"The legalities are very grey – there's no black and white," says Warburton. "There's no developed law on the issue, which is part of why it's so interesting."



Main image: Peter Strain dropping in, above from left to right: Peter Strain and James Walker-Powell, ALSA Conference members, Matthew Warburton

Besides surfing law, ALSA conference papers have explored a multitude of other topics ranging from sexual assault to lost trust deeds and the global economic market outlook. Warburton notes that all conference fees paid by the attending lawyers and their families are put towards various charitable missions.

"We don't count any administration costs," says Warburton. "Whatever money ALSA raises goes straight to charity and nothing else. No one at ALSA is employed by ALSA."

Most of the conference funds help provide infrastructure and sanitation projects for the East Bali Poverty Project, a small non-profit organisation established to try to save some of the poorest communities in the world, in remote mountain villages on the east coast of Bali. The conference itinerary usually includes a personal trip by ALSA members to the area, with one recent excursion resulting in the establishment of an ALSA-sponsored sustainable bamboo school hut.

Another of ALSA's beneficiaries is SurfAid, for which ALSA often does pro bono legal work. In the diary for January is a SurfAid corporate breakfast, featuring a number of local professional surfers, such as Julian Wilson and Adrian "Ace" Buchanan, as guests. But ALSA's highlight charity event every year is the Aboriginal kids' surfing day in December.

"Each year, we arrange with the headmistress of Jarjum College – an Aboriginal school in Redfern – to run a day where the kids come out to Bondi or Manly and learn to surf,"

says Strain. "We pay for the surf lessons with Let's Go Surfing and take the whole school surfing, then have a barbecue afterwards."

The event was first conceived by one of ALSA's Indigenous members, Tony McAvoy SC. Apparently the Jarjum kids can't count their sleeps fast enough in the lead-up to this year's event, scheduled for 11 December at Bondi.

"The kids love it," says Warburton. "It's the best day of the year."

If, like the Jarjum kids, you are in need of an extracurricular activity to look forward to, Warburton and Strain advise you to stop surfing the net and organise to get on board some real waves by registering with ALSA via its website. Registration is free and costs will be incurred only if you decide to attend the annual conference on a remote island – which, by the look of their photos, is a priceless experience. **LSJ**

Register free at
surfinglawyers.com.au

