



Future home where

As Australia's population ages, **Angela Saurine** takes a sneak peek at a pensioners' paradise



YOU don't have to spend long in the main street of Dalmeny to realise there is something unusual about the picturesque seaside town. After a few minutes sitting outside the Oasis Cafe, a car pulls up in front of the hairdressing shop next door.

A woman wearing a navy blue nurse's uniform and black trousers jumps out from behind the wheel and runs around to the passenger door to help an elderly lady out and lead her, slowly, into the salon.

Behind me two grey-haired and rickety gentlemen with the morning paper under their arms meet in the car park near the newsagency and exchange pleasantries.

Another older man is walking his dog along the path near the beach across the road as a white mini-bus with the words "Illawarra Retirement Trust" scoots along the quiet country road.

There are no bars or nightclubs, no graffiti, road rage is non-existent and there are hardly any noise complaints.

Everyone you talk to seems to be involved in some type of volunteer activity, whether it is Meals on Wheels, the Rural Fire Service or the Wildlife League.

Unlike inner-city Sydney, there is no waiting list at the town's only preschool and there is no school.

That's because the sea-change fishing hamlet, about an hour south of Batemans Bay on the NSW South Coast, has the highest proportion of elderly people in the state. Of its nearly 2000 residents, more than 400 are aged 75 or over.

At 22 per cent of the total population, that is almost four times the national average.

Demographer Bernard Salt, a partner at accountancy firm KPMG, says Dalmeny could provide a glimpse into what most of Australia may look like in the year 2030.

"It provides a peek at what many towns on the beach, in parts of metropolitan areas, perhaps even many country towns will look like," he says adding that other parts of Australia are facing similar fates.

"If you go somewhere like Hervey Bay in Queensland, you find there's almost a freeway network of cart tracks because after the age of 75 mobility becomes an issue," Salt says.

"Local government in particular needs to be very aware of the need to change the urban architecture. Maybe they need to start thinking about how to subtly

"age-proof" their streets, their paths, their street furniture, to make them more friendly for a coming older demographic."

Many Dalmeny residents live in the two big

retirement villages the suburb houses. Former treasurer Peter Costello, who introduced the baby bonus because of his concerns about Australia's ageing population, would surely find it his worst nightmare. But for those who live in the town, it is nothing short of paradise.

"It's an absolutely fabulous place to retire," says Robin Gourley, the recently elected president of the women's bowling side at Dalmeny Sporting Club.

"It's amazing the number of our population who used to come here as young people on holidays and have come back in our age group."

At the tender age of 60, Anne Luke is one of the younger retirees in town and can spot the differences to her former suburb on Sydney's Northern Beaches.

"You don't see any beer bottles lying around and this area has the most recycling in the state," she says. "Our generation keep the community cleaner."

Jeff Constable, 87, has a green named after him at the bowling club – the hub of the community.

He boasts that you couldn't find a better place to live than Dalmeny.

Constable can often be seen riding his scooter, complete with an orange triangle flag and his name painted at the front, along the new cycleway built by the local council, with the help of volunteers, of course. His dream is for it to be extended all the way into "town" – neighbouring Narooma – 7km away so he can scooter the whole way.

"There are a couple of nice places there to get a cup of coffee," he says.

The cycleway was just one initiative Eurobodalla Shire Council has introduced to cope with the unique community.

Last November, it held an ageing summit, with more than 100 delegates from business and community groups, to talk about how to move forward in a positive way. They conducted surveys and focus groups and began to prepare a Positive Ageing Strategy.

The list of suggestions included a planned and integrated footpath and kerb system to encourage older people to walk or scooter more, construction of single-level housing and consent for temporary granny flats.

Counselling services for those who have lost a partner, men's sheds and woodwork groups were also among the suggestions, as well as ways to encourage older people to record their life stories.

The council has already implemented an "On For Young And Old" program, in which teenagers teach the elderly how to take and send photo messages on mobile phones and they, in turn, tell their stories.

"It's kind of like a young and old speed dating," says 17-year-old student Shelby Fitzhardinge, who was one of the organisers.

"It's lovely hearing stories from the older people and the ways things have changed."

The council's social planner Steve Picton says most young people head off to the big city as soon as they finish high school.

"We do have a drop in young people," he says. "But they sometimes return a few years later with a family."

"We do have a lot of kids in Dalmeny but there's not so many between the ages of 18 and 24."

Electrician John Rowley is a founding member of a local community organisation called the Dalmeny Deviates – a loose association of tradies, many of whom met as part of a touch footy team in the 1970s – and have Norm from the Life Be In It advertising campaign as their "patron saint".

Now its members spend much of their time on charity work, raising money for the surf club, ambulance service, nearby Moruya Hospital or whatever needs to be done around town.

"If an older lady needs something done we might get stuff donated by the local hardware shop, they ring us up and we do the job," he says.

Slice of heaven: Dalmeny on the NSW South Coast has one of Australia's largest proportions of elderly people. Here Jeff Constable, 87, rides his scooter alongside Ray, 76, and Lyn Dunbar, 74

Pictures: Cameron Richardson



Time to scooter: Jeff Constable on the new path



A quiet one: Dalmeny Bowling Club members (from left) Bill Gourley, 77, Illya Naumoski, 59, Jeff Loudoun, 67, and Ross Stewart, 78, enjoy a beer at Dalmeny Sports Club

"You have to help the older generation, especially in a town like this.

"It's one of those places where the neighbours are friendly with each other and everyone lends a hand."

But it isn't all smooth sailing. Rowley remembers when the bowling club was "the rock capital of Narooma" on Wednesday nights in the late 1980s, with bands such as Chocolate Starfish and Johnny Devlin.

But some of the residents complained they were making too much noise.

As our population gets older, other governments and organisations will increasingly face the same challenges as this tiny community. The number of people over 85 in Australia has more than doubled in the past two decades.

Latest research from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows the median age of Australians is now nearly 37 – more than five years older than it was in 1988.

In 2009, the average life expectancy for women is 83 years, compared to 77 years for