

actor BUILDS HIS OWN STAGE

The Gibraltar Hotel, Country Club and Day Spa snakes along the edge of the picturesque golf course at the Bowral Country Club. It's an impressive example of low-rise contemporary architecture designed to blend with the landscape rather than thrust jarringly from it. VIVIENNE GOLDIE takes a look at the Highlands newest luxury hospitality venue and meets its energetic creator.

JOHN ULIANA COULD HAVE BEEN A PROFESSIONAL musician, but as a young man a future in business, in particular in hospitality and later property development, seemed a more secure option.

"I am an actor and a baritone and would've loved to have been a professional singer," says John. He certainly has the physique – John is a big man with big ideas; a man passionate about family and friends, music, theatre and making the most of life. At 43 his silvery hair makes him look slightly more "mature" but his boyish enthusiasm much less so.

John and his wife Liz, an environmental and civil engineer, are the creative team behind Gibraltar Hotel, the Ulianas second development in the Highlands (the first being Annesley, one of the state's best-known senior lifestyle properties). The couple came to the Highlands 16 years ago. They have four children, Dominic, Alexander, Catriona and Anthony, ranging in ages from six to 14.

It was John's father Guido's illness that prompted the couple to develop Annesley (formerly a Methodist girls' school in Bowral) into a sophisticated retirement complex, "where people didn't have to throw away all their personal belongings but could make a home away from home" in a luxurious setting with pool and gym. "My father was a strong-minded man. Born in a town an hour from Venice, he immigrated to Australia in the '60s. When he became ill we looked for somewhere for him to live where he would receive specialist care, but as we inspected the options available we realised there was a real need for a facility that provided care as and when needed in your own home."

John was just 30 when he undertook the Annesley development, no small feat for anyone in business, especially such a young one. Like Annesley, his vision for the Gibraltar Hotel was in response to a gap in the market – a need in the



PHOTOGRAPH MULLER-MAHER PHOTOGRAPHY

region for more contemporary, luxury accommodation and conference facilities.

"I wanted something distinctly different; something to make people feel completely relaxed. I say Gibraltar is a place where people can attend a black tie function in the ballroom or be in Harvey's Bar in jeans and all come together, all belong."

While he wouldn't deny that his projects have been financially rewarding, it's not necessarily only the financial reward he's aiming for. He believes strongly in the natural beauty of the Highlands and the affection with which it is held by locals and the many visitors who have been coming here for years to relax away from the stresses of city life.

John's love of design is evident from the moment you enter the Gibraltar's grand glass doors. The building's interior, decorated in subtle tones of bronze and copper with touches of black, is understated yet sophisticated. John and friend interior designer Brad Solomon travelled overseas looking for artefacts and materials for the building. Copper from Delhi is used in feature walls; the tiles provide an almost quilted effect. "I love the fact that it's tactile" says John, proudly touching a section. In the entrance foyer stand two magnificent statues from India – "just look at the beauty of the patina", says John admiring the emerging verdigris.

John earlier revealed that he grew up playing the organ at church. He still enjoys playing the instrument so I'm not surprised when I'm told there's an organ in the lofty space above the gallery – where huge windows display the magnificent backdrop of Mount Gibraltar and the golf course. And, of course, it's no ordinary instrument.

"It's a pipeless pipe organ from Rome, a special commission for the hotel. "An ahlborn-galanti," explains John as he leaps to his feet and says, "Are you ready for this?" In just a minute or

two he's giving me an impromptu recital or, as he modestly puts it, "some waffle music". "Organists from around Australia will want to play it," he enthuses. Apart from weddings, John hopes the gallery will be used for high teas. And in the event of a professional organist being late for a wedding would he step in? "My card does read 'John Uliana – Everything'," he laughs.

The hotel features luxury accommodation, conference facilities, a restaurant, Harvey's Bar (named after Geoff Harvey, former music director of Channel 9 and a long-time Highlands resident), the gallery and a grand ballroom.

For John the Gibraltar is as much about promoting the region as promoting the hotel. "I truly believe in the Southern Highlands and creating something that not only supports the local community but brings visitors back to the area." And like Annesley, the hotel is providing employment opportunities for locals. "I particularly believe in providing training for young people so they don't have to leave the district for work."



OPPOSITE PAGE: JOHN ULIANA AS MAYOR OF THE TOWN IN A PRODUCTION OF *THE BAKER'S WIFE* AND (ABOVE) AT WORK IN *THE GIBRALTAR HOTEL*.

Earlier our chat was interrupted by a prospective bride and groom looking over the facilities. There needn't have been any interruption as they were being ably attended to by a staff member but as they pass our table John jumps up, smiling, his hand outstretched. Always keen to chat to people and make them feel at ease, he can't help himself. After they've left he reveals he's only had about three hours' sleep the previous night. It's been an exhausting few months in the lead-up to the opening but there's been some lovely family moments as three generations have come together and pitched in with the staff.

"My mother Anna, my brother Robert and my nonna who is 94 have also been working here non-stop over the past few months to help out," says John showing me a photograph of his son Alexander with his great grandmother. It's this relaxed family atmosphere that John hopes will make his latest project a truly Highlands experience that people will want to return to time and time again. And as the rain pours down a group of golfers scurry for cover ... "I can't understand why they chase that white ball around," laughs John as he welcomes them inside. 