

Horses were an inspiration for the move to Maleny. **Facing page** The Leigh family (from left) — Julian, Amelia, 9, Charlotte, 12, Alexander, 13, and Gillian.





Long journey home

From a boyhood in WA to a new life and family in London, Julian Leigh has finally brought it all together in the Sunshine Coast hinterland.

WORDS BY LOIS NICHOLLS. PHOTOGRAPHY BY JARED FOWLER

The view from Julian and Gillian Leigh's Maleny home is striking. In the distance lie the Glasshouse Mountains, a smudged charcoal outline that contrasts starkly with the rolling green farmland in the foreground. A stately Morton Bay fig draws the eye to the front garden and a lily pond completes the serene picture.

The tranquillity is momentarily disturbed as Gillian arrives with a horse trailer, spilling children and dogs while apologising for a pony club meeting that lasted a tad too long. Julian emerges with a firm handshake and cheery "G'day!", looking every bit the farmer.

Shortly afterwards, a friend delivers a chocolate cake for our afternoon tea and the realisation grows that the setting is not the only attraction — it's the genuine friendships, lack of pretence and sense of community that draws people to Maleny.

The town on the Sunshine Coast hinterland is just over an hour from Brisbane, with great beaches a mere 45 minutes away. It's not hard to understand how this couple and their three children were happy to trade the hubbub of London for such a tranquil setting.

Julian left Australia with his family as a 13-year-old when work took his dentist dad overseas.

"I'd always had fond memories of my childhood in outback Western Australia and enjoyed the sunshine and freedom," he says. "I could ride my BMX bike and have lots of animals... The lack

Our place Maleny Queensland

of sunshine in the UK really affected me — I found it quite depressing.”

Julian completed most of his schooling in England and studied dentistry in London. It was here that he met Cambridge-born Gillian, who had studied art and worked as an illustrator. Gillian knew something of the land Julian hailed from, having backpacked in Australia as an 18-year-old; she says she fell in love with the country from the start.

The couple eventually settled into the pace of London, but by the time their family had expanded to three children, the lure of space and a sunny climate grew ever stronger.

“I wanted my children to have the same experience I’d had as a child,” explains Julian. “I worked from 8am to 8pm every day — many people in the UK work hard for the right car and right house. But before you know it, the kids have grown up and you’ve missed out on all the other things in life.”

Gillian was also keen for a lifestyle change and the decision was made to sell up and seek a new life in Australia.

They drove around Australia in a campervan for six months, looking for a place to call home. First on their wish list was comfortable, year-round temperatures for outdoor pursuits.

“We also didn’t want stingers or crocs, and it had to be no more than two hours from an international airport,” Julian says.

They initially settled on a waterfront home at Minyama, a 35-minute drive from Maleny, and bought the 16-hectare Maleny property with the idea of creating a weekender.

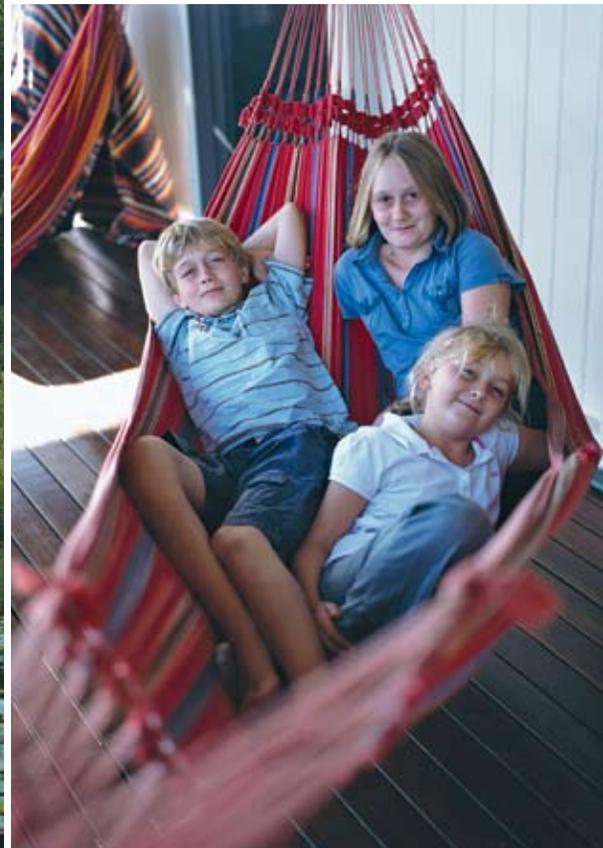
“We kept a horse here and had to drive an hour every day to ride,” Gillian says. “Then we bought more horses — and it made sense to move here permanently.”

First, they had to find a house. Gillian scouted the countryside for a Queenslander to complement the tropical surroundings. Her search ended in Hervey Bay where she found the perfect historical homestead. Built around 1872, it had originally been a surgeon’s residence. It survived being



Clockwise Noodle enjoys a nap on the verandah; the Queenslander home that was moved to Maleny; Alexander, Charlotte and Amelia swing out; mixed rides — Gillian watches the children on their favourite mounts.





cut in two and shifted to Maleny. All it needed was a lick of paint and some minor updating — fibro replaced and the roof redone — to bring it up to scratch. A sleek classic country kitchen, with a modern-day Aga stove and granite benchtops, was another addition.

One of the joys of their new location is the sense of space.

“I love being able to focus on things in the distance and watch a storm coming in,” Gillian says.

The property is a haven for the couple’s three children, Alexander (Alex), 13, Charlotte (Lottie), 12, and Amelia (Mimi), 9.

“It took a while for them to settle but they love it now,” Gillian says. “Mimi often takes a picnic basket and plays for hours near the stream or in the stables — sometimes she takes her pony, Angel, with her.”

It’s hard to believe the family have been in their home for only two years — roots

are already deep and friendships have flourished. Weekends are a happy mix of friends, motorbikes (Julian and Alex are avid trail-bike enthusiasts), horses and polo (the last being a particular favourite of Gillian).

“Our connectedness with Maleny stems from how we spend our leisure time, I suppose, and we enjoy quite a lot of it,” Gillian says.

The couple exude a love of life — perhaps made all the more poignant by a grave health scare that Julian suffered some 18 months ago.

“I simply stopped talking — and it turned out to be a brain tumour,” he says. The tumour was removed but complications forced him to take six months off work.

Now Julian works a three-day week at his Minyama dentistry practice. The rest of the week is taken up with looking after his herd of 20 Black Angus Lowlines, and seeing to

maintenance on the other properties the couple own in Maleny.

While not raised as a farmer, Julian says he has always been “hands on and prepared to give anything a go” — be it putting up fences or castrating cattle.

“I’ll invite a farmer friend around to teach me and we’ll have a beer and a few good laughs,” he says.

Gillian’s life is equally full. Apart from riding daily, she runs a bed-and-breakfast called Half Moon Hideaway on the property.

While their life sounds idyllic, Julian points out that it comes with a lot of hard work.

“It’s definitely not an elderly peoples’ property,” he says. “But I really enjoy the complete opposite to being a dentist, where I’m concentrating on a square centimetre. Here, I’m hopping on a tractor or chopping down trees.”

“And we don’t feel life is passing us by,” concludes Gillian. [ACS](#)