

PROFILER: IAN THOMSON INTERVIEWS ZOE ZANIDAKIS

Time for a Rest

Survivor star ready for her next challenge

She has skipped a lobster boat in mountainous seas and below-freezing conditions, ploughing through ice and gale-force winds.

She has handled thousands of giant, carnivorous lobsters in a job where one slip and powerful pincer-claws will take your fingers off.

And she has spent 40 days on a South Pacific island in the American reality TV show, *Survivor*. The island is surrounded by shark-infested waters and was once the home of cannibals.

Zoe Zanidakis came out of it all unscathed. But her most frightening moment was when she was cleaning up Tucabia's Squatters Rest museum after buying the place a couple of months ago.

Zoe was about to throw out an old cereal box when she heard a scratching

sound. She peered in and four small, bright eyes peered back. She screamed and dropped the box. It was a shock for Zoe, not to mention the female possum and her baby who both did a runner after being rudely interrupted.

Tucabia is a heck of a long way from a speck of land called Monhegan Island, about 18 kilometres of America's most northeastern state of Maine. It's just below Nova Scotia in Canada, where all the bad weather comes from.

Monhegan Island was where Zoe spent 17 years as the only female skipper of a lobster boat. And she insists on using the word "fisherman" to describe her chosen profession.

"Never refer to me as a fisherman or a lobsterwoman," Zoe says during our chat in just one of the many charming Squatters Rest buildings.

"I was a fisherman, and proud of the title."

With the aid of helpers, or steersmen, the single mother put down and retrieved her allocated 600 lobster pots day in and day out during the winter fishing season which starts in December and ends in May. She learnt the trade in a two-year, hands-on apprenticeship on other boats before buying her own vessel and taking on the men at their own game.

Interviewed for a story in the

respected Christian Science Monitor in 1999, Zoe was asked what it was like to be the only woman captain in the Monhegan lobster boat fleet.

"I guess I'm known to be pretty aggressive out there," she replied. "I'm always aware of the 'girl thing', so I take my work very seriously. I often hang out with the guys at the fish house, but I keep in mind that the day is a work day. I've always had a work hard, play hard attitude."

A fish house, by the way, is an informal hangout, workshop and drinking spot for lobster fishermen after a hard day on the water.

During the summer months, when fishing off Monhegan Island is taboo, Zoe Zanidakis (her father was Greek) ran a rustic, weather-beaten guest house called Monhegan House.

Like lobster catching, running Monhegan House was a family tradition. She met several Australian tourists during those days, when Monhegan's population would swell from 60 to 400.

"The Aussies used to talk about their country and I liked what I was hearing," she says.

"So one day I decided to pull up everything and head for Australia."

But that wasn't before the extremely fit and adventurous single mum was selected to be a part of the smash-hit reality TV show, *Survivor Marquesas*, in 2002.

She was one of 16 castaways surviving on grit and determination and trying desperately not to be voted of the South Pacific island of Nuka Hiva in the Marquesas archipelago and miss out on the chance of being a million dollars richer.

"I felt comfortable on the island," Zoe recalls. "I felt a sort of spiritual connection to the place and got on well with the other castaways and film crews. I remember the sharks very well. They were huge and there were plenty of them."

Zoe Zanidakis was the 10th survivor to be voted off the island. So near and yet so far. She had taken an immediate shine to the cameras and before moving to Australia she played the part of a bar-room floozy opposite veteran actor Paul Newman in a made-for-TV movie called *Empire Falls*.

The film was all about a local mill town in Maine. "It was great working with such a respected actor like Paul Newman," she says. "I got a great deal of energy from that man."



NEW CHALLENGE: Zoe Zanidakis contemplates her changes for the Squatters Rest museum at Tucabia.

Photos: SIMON HUGHES.

"There's a lot of history here and it needs to be preserved . . . there are surprises around every corner."

When Zoe waved goodbye to Monhegan Island and headed Down Under, she fell in love with the North Coast. She lived for a couple of years at Nana Glen ("No, I didn't see Russell Crowe in my time there").

Then she read an article about Squatters Rest closing down, phoned the owner and had a tour.

"I fell in love with the place and went into partnership with two friends from Nana Glen to buy it."

The new owner has plans for the Tucabia landmark and its three hectares of surrounding land. At the moment, only busloads of tourists can wander

through the amazing collection of 19th century equipment and artefacts so lovingly put together.

She plans to have the museum open to the general public, so more people can take it all in. And she's hoping her 19-year-old son, Ron, can come to Australia and be with her during her latest adventure.

"Ron's still in the States, where he's very much into (ice) hockey," Zoe says. "It would be great to have him out here with me, so I'm working on it."

"I just feel so comfortable here. The old stuff on display is priceless. I have changes in mind, but I've no intention of turning the place into a theme park which are everywhere in the United States."

"There's a lot of history here and it needs to be preserved. School children can learn a lot just by strolling around. There are surprises around every corner."

And Zoe's planning a change of fare as well. There'll still be the billy tea and delicious damper on offer for her guests, but she's looking to introduce a delight she knows very well.

Lobster pie.



HANDLE WITH CARE: Lobsters are carnivorous and can inflict nasty wounds (above).
LOBSTER HUNTER: Equinox, with Zoe in the wheelhouse, sets out for another day of lobster catching (left).
CASTAWAY: Zoe, second from left, on the island set of *Survivor Marquesas* in 2002 (above left).