

# HANDS ACROSS THE SEA

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*The only locally-owned general carrier in the Northern Territory continues to thrive – and is in the mood to grow*

Darwin-based Barge Express operates a crucial service across northern Australia.

Many remote communities rely on the regular sailings for their everyday needs.

The company's fleet of four superb barges services Croker Island, Maningrida, Milingimbi, Ramingining and Elcho Island twice weekly.

Owner Ken Conlon, who has lived in the Territory for 25 years, is keen to expand the services to Groote Eylandt and other remote communities.

"We're ready to grow as demand increases," he says. "We intend to extend our 20-year involvement in

servicing communities across the Top End."

Barge Express ran a service along the Top End coast for Toll Marine for three years.

Toll Marine last year sold out to Queensland company Seaswift, which is owned by a Singapore-based private equity company whose main shareholder is a Hong Kong tycoon.

Barge Express is continuing to operate this vital service on its own and is the only "local" company involved in "local" logistics by sea to remote communities.

"Private equity companies, such as the owners of Seaswift, buy and sell businesses simply for profit," says Ken. "But we're here for the long haul – we're not going anywhere and, in fact, are preparing for more expansion."



THE ARRIVAL OF A BARGE EXPRESS VESSEL IS ALWAYS A BIG OCCASION IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES

"The service we provide to remote Territory communities is vital – it's very important that the service continues uninterrupted."

"Our partnerships are with our customers, not investment companies."

Ken is proud to own a NT company that has an unbroken and unblemished record of services to remote communities.

"We know the Territory better than any competitor," he says. "We've been providing an excellent barge service for many years and have earned a lot of respect."

"Being local is a great advantage. It's good for our customers, which is the most important thing. I'm always available. You don't have to call overseas or send an email to a generic address to discuss your needs. Just give me a call or pop in to see me."

Barge Express is "always there" for Territory communities; for instance, the company's vessels freighted critical supplies to a remote community after a cyclone two years ago.

The company has a fleet of four top-class vessels – the 500-tonne *Sealink Express*, *Bima Express* and *Trader Express* and the 300-tonne *Sammy Express*.

"They are the best vessels in the Territory," says Ken.

The company employs 40 staff, mostly crew.

"Our crews are far and away the best in the Northern Territory," says Ken. "We've got a very good staff and fantastic vessels. We've also got a strong customer service focus."

"I am 'old school' – we answer our phones, we deliver on time, we provide the service we tell people we are going to provide and if there is a problem, we work with our customers to fix it."

"All that enables us to offer a second-to-none service."

"Our expertise is second to none. And our past performances relative to time-sensitive and critical services in remote areas indicate we set a standard that is difficult to match."

The roll-on roll-off barges are capable of carrying a vast range of goods – they have freighted everything from "miniscule" personal items to 500 tonnes of steel.

The vessels also carry frozen goods and bulk fuel.

Barge Express changed its name from Sealink last year, a decision that has been well received by customers.

Ken chose the name because it once belonged to a reputable and reliable sea transport operation.

Many Territorians remember the old company with affection because of the fine services it ran along the north Australian coast.

"I'm delighted at the number of people who stop me to say that they remember the old company."

"We're continuing to provide a good service at a good price. It is fitting the 'old' name is now associated with the 'oldest' carrier in the Territory."

Ken says the company name may have changed but the quality of service remains at the same high standard.

The ships are fitted with state-of-the-art equipment and are maintained to the highest standards.

Barge Express has a string of satisfied customers, including major mining companies and government agencies.

The company has an office in Darwin city centre and a depot at Hudson Creek. Ken has a lifetime of experience in the transport industry.

He started as a truck driver and arrived in Darwin to work for a big transport company.

But Ken wanted to be his own boss and borrowed the money to buy a truck after recognising that one important market was not being met by the big transport companies: supplying coastal communities with everyday goods, on a scheduled and regular basis.

Within a decade, he had 12 roadtrains servicing 32 communities.

Barge Express is eager to build on its excellent reputation and expand operations.

"We are looking to do even bigger and better things in the future," Ken says.

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