

Brothers keep their dream afloat

By Carolyn Webb

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Charles and Richard Davidson relax in the naturally heated spa complex they have built at Rye, on the Mornington Peninsula.

Photo: *Craig Abraham*

Like Jed Clampett of TV sitcom *The Beverly Hillbillies*, Charles Davidson has stumbled on liquid gold.

But it was hot springs, not oil, he found, in the Mornington Peninsula backblocks.

After eight stressful years of drilling and building, Mr Davidson, with his brother and business partner Richard, finally relaxed this week with a dip at the Peninsula Hot Springs centre at Rye, 85 kilometres south of Melbourne.

The \$5 million spa, which will officially open next Tuesday, is the first hot spring spa development in Victoria.

Its mineral water is naturally heated, allowing outdoor bathing without heating expenses. The century-old Hepburn Spa at Daylesford heats its spring water.

Serendipity led Charles to the Rye hot springs. In 1992, when he was a trader of Australian foods in Japan, friends took him to the spa town of Kusatsu, south-west of Tokyo. He was awe-struck by its steaming, outdoor natural springs, valley views and snow-covered trees.

In his spare time, Mr Davidson started practising onsen meguri - touring Japan's many hot springs resorts. Five years later, he was working for Austrade in Tokyo and, one Friday night, lamented to then Victorian office chief Kevin Knowles that there were no hot springs in Victoria.

Mr Knowles replied that there were - in fact he had once received a report that mentioned a natural hot spring on the Mornington Peninsula.

First thing on the Monday, Mr Davidson rang the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council. He discovered that Department of Minerals and Energy drillers had indeed struck hot springs in 1979. The bore existed - lidded and locked - on the side of Browns Road, Rye.

Between May and December 1997, Mr Davidson, helped by brother Richard and with government permission, arranged test pumping on the bore, which yielded warm, mineral spring water.

In late 1997, the brothers bought a 17-hectare hobby farm in Browns Road from unsuspecting owners, one kilometre from the bore. The Davidsons' first test drill, at 580 metres, drew hot mud, before the drill casing jammed and ruined the site.

Problems with contractors meant the second test drill at 637 metres took 18 months and cost \$200,000.

A passing tradesman told Richard, a former environmental scientist, he "had balls" to persist in the project.

In 1998, Charles quit his Austrade job to work on the project full time, but in 2001 he opened a bed and breakfast at Rye to generate income.

Then, one day in May 2002, an air pump gushed steaming water 10 metres into the air in front of the jubilant brothers. "After waiting for five years, it was a celebration," Charles said. "We put our hands in it, smelled it, tasted it and sat under it. It was amazing."

That stream will supply the nine public and private thermal pools on the site. There are also saunas, massage and beauty therapy facilities, a cafe and 15,000 indigenous trees. The brothers expect most customers to be frazzled Melburnians, but also expect interstate and overseas visitors.

The brothers have big plans for expansion - they have a permit for a 120-room hotel and a spring-fed fish farm. And they want to plant a cutting from a vine that their ancestor, grazier William Balcombe, planted on the peninsula in 1842.

Hydrogeologist Stephen Hancock said the potential for similar developments around the state was significant given enough cash and expertise.

A major aquifer, or water-bearing geological formation, underlies part of the Rye area, Mr Hancock said. Rocks underneath the formation have faults that generate heat by friction and, in turn, heat the water.

Mr Hancock said government geological survey drillings in the 20th century had detected a number of sites in Victoria with naturally heated waters, including Portland and Bairnsdale.

Charles Davidson said the memory of his trip to the natural mineral baths in Japan had kept him motivated. "Suddenly, eight years down the track... we can hop in the waters and go, 'wow, this is real'."