

UP CLOSE

Still home away from La La Land

Former Aussie soap starlet has made a name for herself in LA but still feels the call of the north shore

By Caroline Jumpertz

Tammin Sursok has worked as an actor, singer, writer and director in London and Los Angeles, but she says there's one place on earth that makes her feel grounded — Sydney's north shore.

"I go back and I can actually breathe again," she says of the leafy suburbs where she grew up, St Ives, Wahroonga and Turramurra.

"I think the freneticism of our business and just life in general, it's so hard to feel like you're at peace," Sursok says. "Going back to the north shore, something about the greenery and the memories and the fact that the lifestyle is just a little slower, it makes me feel a lot more grounded."

Staying grounded is something that Sursok finds challenging in the "absurd culture that is La La Land" as she describes Los Angeles, the reality of which is a far cry from the glamorous houses outsiders have of Hollywood, according to the actor.

"It's never glamorous, it's always hard work that gets you there," Sursok says, quickly adding that "it has been a wonderful ride and I'm very grateful that we are where we are".

The ride started when Sursok was 15 and Martin Walsh of Chadwick's modelling agency offered her a contract with the company's acting division. Walsh still manages Sursok; she says he has been her "backbone" since her teens. The first audition for the young actor was for local soap *Home and Away*, the launch pad for talents including Isla Fisher, Chris Hemsworth and Melissa George.



PHOTO: ANDY HARRISON

(Clockwise from left) Tammin Sursok in Sydney last week; with her mum Julie; in her Australian TV soap days as a teenager in 2004; with husband Sean McEwen and daughter Phoenix.



"I thought the rest of my life was going to be easy like that," she says of her first big break, "You know — walk in, get the role, but it was a little harder."

Sursok won a Most Popular New Female Talent Logie in 2001 for her *Home and Away* role as Dani Sutherland. After three years on the soap she pivoted to pop singer, living in the UK for a time, then spent two years on US-based *The Young and The Restless*, for which she was nominated for a Daytime Emmy.

Later, there was a regular gig on TV series *Hannah Montana* alongside Miley Cyrus and she landed a role on the huge TV hit *Pretty Little Liars*, which continues to attract massive audiences across the globe.

The 34-year-old has recently finished filming a feature she co-wrote with husband Sean McEwen, titled *Whaling*, and which McEwen directed. Previously the couple wrote a series titled *Aussie Girl* together.

"I never set out to be a writer, it was borne out of

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frustration that I could never do the material that I really felt like I was put on this earth to do," Sursok says of her more recent credit of screenwriter.

"My husband and I had a discussion seven years ago and it was 'How do we do that?' One foot in front of another, we create it for ourselves, and that was the genesis of *Aussie Girl* and *Whaling*."

During her current trip to Australia Sursok's attention is on ABC Reading Eggs Junior, a reading preparation program for two- to four-year-olds from the makers of the popular online learning system, ABC Reading Eggs. Sursok's daughter with McEwen, three-year-old Phoenix,

is right in the middle of the program's target demographic.

"She's, like, my whole world, but she changed me," Sursok says of her daughter.

Phoenix features constantly on a candid blog Sursok writes about her experience of motherhood. *Bottles and Heels*, she says, is about "finding the truth in motherhood, through the messy moments and the exciting times and the shitty times".

"You lose a sense of identity at the beginning, which no one talks about, and then you always feel guilty, which is a new thing that you have to figure out," she explains.

Amid the ups and downs

of being the parent of a young child there is one experience Sursok knows she wants for her daughter — her own upbringing north of the Bridge.

"I didn't know anything else, that was just my childhood. But now that I look back I realise what a blessing that was," she says of the time she spent on the north shore, after she emigrated from South Africa with her family when she was not much older than Phoenix is now.

"That makes me scared for Phoenix a lot, because our lifestyle is so frenetic and this business is so self-destructing in so many ways, that I want her to have the upbringing I had."

Her parents, Daryl and Julie, still live at the St Ives home, near Warrimoo Ave, where they moved when Tammin was 12 years old. She attended just one school from Kindergarten onwards, Ravenswood in Gordon, although during her final school year Sursok was working on *Home and Away* and doing school on the set.

"When we emigrated from South Africa we had to start over, so we were very close and very tight knit," Sursok says of her family. She has an older brother, Shaun, and a sister, Michella.

"My mother and father were very involved in all the activities we were doing, so I had a happy childhood." Her fondly remembered

stomping grounds include the St Ives Shopping Centre, the mall at Gordon, hanging out in Chatswood and going to the Bearoma Cafe in Lindfield, now Bella Blue.

Like many expats, Sursok admits to being torn between the opportunities inherent in her LA life and the comfort and familiarity of her Australian connection, particularly when she thinks about her daughter enjoying a similar upbringing to her own.

"What I do like about Los Angeles is that no dream is too big," Sursok says. "You decide one day that you are going to change your life and everyone is there to support you. But the sensibilities of Australia, the way of life, the people and the nature of Sydney as a city, is what I also want for Phoenix."

Sursok is very conscious of the need to find a balance between opportunity and lifestyle for her own and Phoenix's future but she is well aware of the conundrum inherent in living away from her family and home country.

"You always want what you don't have, like you come here and you say, 'Oh, I wish I had some more opportunities', and then you're in the States and you go, 'Oh, I wish I was running along the beach with my daughter', so you just have to be where you are, when you are."