

Extra action: John Harris, 76, plays a villager in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Picture: Richard Waugh

ACTING UP

A Brisbane grandfather finds some swashbuckling action in Johnny Depp's latest blockbuster pirate movie

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Forget bowls and bingo. John Harris, a 76-year-old retiree from inner-Brisbane, has spent the past five months working as a movie extra in the latest *Pirates of the Caribbean* film. And he's had a ball.

Filming on set at Maudsland on the Gold Coast has just wrapped for the father of three and grandfather of eight who was cast as a townsman on the village set of *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales*.

"Of all the work I've done, it's been the most enjoyable," Harris says of the part-time gig, which included some pretty close brushes with the film's A-list stars. "Johnny Depp and Geoffrey Rush, at different stages of filming, would move close to where I was standing. I've stood perhaps 10m from both of them."

Harris says he worked as an extra one or two days a week, with his shifts running as long as 12 hours and the only downside having to wake up at midnight to "start the day".

In his downtime – and he jokes there was plenty of downtime between scenes – Harris made friends with young and old movie extras alike.

"Joking together made the time fly," he says. "It was good to have a laugh every day that I was

on the set. A few of us have arranged to get together and have a cup of coffee, or something stronger, sometimes."

Acting is an unusual change of pace for Harris, who was born in the Queensland bush just before World War II.

He fondly remembers riding a horse to school and playing all four main football codes as his family moved around country towns, before eventually settling in Brisbane.

After a brief stint at 16 selling clothes at Allan and Stark, the big department store in Queen St at the time, Harris went on to study law at Queensland University. He was also drafted into the national service, stayed on in the army reserve and reached the rank of lieutenant.

Until his late-60s, he worked as a lawyer across many branches of law. He wanted to learn and experience everything that he could – a trait that also pushed him to travel.

During his time at international legal firm Minter Ellison, Harris explored exotic locations, such as the Hebrides, Singapore, China and Japan. His favourite trip was to Egypt, where he ventured into the tombs of pharaohs.

When retirement finally beckoned, he found a unit in inner-city Bowen Hills and decided his next adventure would be exploring Australia in detail.

"To do that, you need money, especially if you have a big four-wheel-drive with a rooftop tent to keep away from crocodiles at Cape York,"

Harris says. "That's when I started to think about getting a part-time job."

Finding a suitable job was no easy feat, but on a whim, he registered with a movie agent. The first job that came along was a TV show called *I'm a Celebrity ... Get Me Out of Here*.

"Bemused by the title, I went to an audition. When I was asked how many live cockroaches I would eat, I said I wouldn't do that, so that didn't go any further," Harris says. Fortunately, the next role his agent contacted him about was for *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales*. "It didn't require any acting experience or training. I thought I'd give it a go. It could be a lot of fun and it turned out to be exactly that," Harris says.

While he had never seen the first four *Pirates of the Caribbean* films before landing the role, his family were fans of the series. His granddaughters were particularly enthusiastic.

"The eldest have just become teenagers and you could tell they had a bit of a crush on Johnny," he says. "He has that good baddie image that seems to fascinate females."

Harris, who often spends his weekends watching his grandkids play sport, is excited to be the cool grandpa who his grandkids brag about at

school. "When this movie eventually comes out, I'll buy it on DVD so I can pause it to show the grandkids where I am in the movie. That's hoping I don't end up on the cutting room floor."

Kitted out in two hours' worth of costuming and make-up for each shoot, Harris warns they won't recognise him as a poor, dirt-covered villager. While he doesn't have any other grand Disney productions lined up, his next role will be in a futuristic movie by Griffith University.

Before filming starts in August, Harris plans to take some time off to drive across the Nullarbor Plain.

"It's the last part of Australia I haven't done. It's on my bucket list," Harris says. "Now that *Pirates of the Caribbean* is finished filming here, I can start planning. This time

I'm just taking an old mate to share the driving. Instead of camping out and doing it rough, we're going to stay at motels and do it in luxury." After that, he is open to whatever acting work comes along.

He recently did a day course to prepare for roles on TV and commercials, but he hopes more Hollywood productions come to southeast Queensland.

"I hope to keep doing these acting jobs as long as I'm above the grass," Harris says.

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