

Arrival in NZ

The low clouds parted as we descended towards Auckland. Our first sight of land as we rapidly lost height was the west coast. Glittering black sandy beaches were backed by intensely green bushland, and if there were any houses there, they blended invisibly into the landscape. It was exciting but it was tempered with the odd, rather surreal sensations that accompany the end of two days of near-constant travel. So we felt elated to be arriving, but detached from our feelings at the same time. A bit like when you wake up within a dream and know that you are still dreaming.

Our passports had just been renewed, and were the proud bearers of a page-sized blue sticker that declared

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us residents of New Zealand. To our delight, at passport control, the officer looked at the stickers, looked at us, beamed, and said: “Welcome to New Zealand!” We breezed through the rest of that maze of officialdom and conveyor belts that is an international airport, floating on what felt like a cloud of elation (but was probably what the experts call jet lag).

A very helpful man, armed with paperwork, maps and an inimitable Kiwi drawl, showed us to our little rental car and explained to us, gravely, that the road north through Auckland is confusing, poorly-signed and counterintuitive (in fact I think he said “she’s a total bugger to get through”) and warned us of the idiosyncrasies of driving in New Zealand; the (now defunct) “give way to drivers turning right” rule and the (still in use) “all other drivers on the road are idiots” rule. And how right he was: before they get in a car, the lovely, down to earth, friendly people of this land take a pint of whatever it was that Dr Jekyll was drinking on that fateful night. We passed through Auckland, the weather going from stormy to glittering and clear, and we were heading north towards Whangarei. It occurred to me that I should probably phone Trevor, our first contact and potential employer, to announce our arrival and get some directions to find him. So we stopped at a cafe in the Dome Valley for a bite to eat and a coffee. And this highlights the powerful psychotropic effects of jet

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lag; we pronounced the food and drink “the best ever” and declared that this café would be our wayside stop to and from Auckland for evermore. Later that month we would pass through this cafe again, and see it for what it probably was the first time, weak coffee, floury milkshakes and white flaccid chips. We’ve never been back again! So we navigated our way north, seeing and marvelling at the novelty of it all, knowing that it wouldn’t be long before the newness of things, the shape of manuka trees, ponga ferns and nikau palms, the variety of wooden houses, the brightness of the sky over the Hauraki gulf, would all become familiar, domestic and nigh on invisible.

In truth, I should probably not have been driving. After two days of travel, lack of sleep, moving swiftly from summer to winter and confusing day lengths, I must have been a liability as my judgement would certainly have been impaired. Fortunately, and more by luck, my uselessness never achieved its full potential. Unwittingly we drove on and arrived without incident, despite the fact that I, the driver, probably slept for most of the journey! We met up with Trevor for the first time. He’s a granite man is Trevor, not really chatty (but he likes a good joke) and although he doesn’t say much, he’s very easy to read. Honestly, I remember little from those first few hours, but I am indebted to him for lending us his family bach which was about another forty minutes picturesque drive away, and

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right on the water. (A bach is a holiday beach house and is pronounced “batch”)

We arrived and, without even coming close to unpacking, we slept. We awoke to a sub-tropical winter morning. Cold, clear, bright and so beautiful I may even have shed a tear. Out at Whangarei Heads we were overlooked by closed up holiday houses and the lightest smattering of year-round residents. The tide was in, the water only a few metres away, glittering and dappled by the light through the branches of innumerable pohutukawa trees. Feeling cold, drowsy but excited we rushed about pretending to do things and gradually made some sense of our new surroundings.

“A few friends of ours are having supper tomorrow night, would you come and join us?” asked Trevor the next day; “we’ll meet at the restaurant at half past five, if that’s OK with you.”

I must have been feeling a little groggy from the sleep, because I could swear he said half past five. I phoned him back:

“Sorry to be a pest – what time was that again?”

“About half past five,” he confirmed.

Maybe they get together for drinks quite early first. So we arrived at the restaurant and a party of about eight of us sat down for supper quite promptly, half way through the afternoon. The conversation was lively and spirited,

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with a great deal of banter to which I felt I couldn't contribute, since I knew little of New Zealand's sport and politics. By eight o'clock it was dark, we were saying farewell, and we went home to bed. The food was excellent, the company very pleasant, but I realised, in an odd way, that this country was more foreign to me than I had expected – and I should have expected it to be very foreign. Was I, Mr Metropolitan, to be in bed by nine? Good lord, this might take more adaptation than I thought.

The first week in Northland passed in a bit of a blur, meeting the dentists of Whangarei and making inevitable snap judgements and comparisons. There was the enthusiastic dentist with his lovely young family, proudly Jewish, with a pet pig called "Kosher" and a brand new practice, still growing, to whom I could offer much advice (he knew me by small-world reputation before we met) but little prospect for work. And then there was a couple who, like us, were keen to make a break with the past, sell up and, in their case, travel around Australia in a luxury motor home. Keen as they were to find a buyer for their practice, they introduced us to their staff as the "Scottish couple who've come to buy our business". A fire the which I had no desire to re-ignite, having just jumped out of the frying pan. We were invited round for a meal on their beautiful rural property and they gave us a banquet from the barbecue. But, despite it being delicious, we were both

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consumed by an extraordinary attack of flatulence which, if suppressed, led to the most extreme stomach pain. We made bizarre excuses and left suddenly, giggling, and releasing huge magenta bubbles of gas into the poor hire car as soon as we were out of earshot. We could simply have said no to their kind sales pitch, but our guts were more eloquent than our mouths. “Alimentary, my dear Watson”.

At the end of the week we phoned the couple in Kerikeri who had offered us the possibility of work in their new practice, just opened, and who seemed very enthusiastic. They had very kindly suggested we come and stay with them and have a look. So, on yet another sunny morning, we found ourselves driving up the long straight main road, bordered for the most part by exceptionally tall hedges of bamboo and trimmed *Leylandii*. On our way we caught glimpses of houses with orchards beyond. Following the directions, we arrived for our first meeting with Wayne and Millie, the lovely couple who had talked of “winning” us.

It was clear from the start that Kerikeri was going to appeal to us. Millie, Wayne and their family of three young girls were so welcoming, so accommodating and helpful, and so much like long-lost friends that we were powerless to resist. They seemed to feel the same way, and their enthusiasm about their home was so contagious and

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charming that we instantly fell in love with the place. Kerikeri is a fast-growing town, making the transition from sleepy orchard town and haven for retirees, to a young, fashionable and modern centre with smart cafés, designer shops and (since we've been here) a beautiful new cinema. We didn't take long to realise that we would rather be here than Whangarei, and it only took a day or two more to discover that we'd rather be here than anywhere else in the world. Once that decision was made, we had to negotiate an employment contract with our new friends. It went something like this:

“I'd like to work three days a week, and I'm happy to be paid fifty percent of my gross” says I.

“Arr” says Millie, (who, for sake of this made-up dialogue, is training to be a pirate) “that be the terms, then. Sign here in ye blood and we be ownin' ye”.

And so the job was won. And we were won. And we were completely won over. It all happened really fast. Sometimes everything clicks into place, and the clockwork was so well oiled that we were suddenly in Kerikeri, with friends, with time on our hands, and all our plans for the reconnaissance to Northland settled well ahead of time. So to occupy ourselves, especially as Wayne and Millie were very experienced in the world of real estate, we thought we might do what we had promised ourselves we wouldn't do, and look at houses for sale. The whole point of that

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promise to each other was so that we wouldn't fall in love with an area before we were certain that it was the part of New Zealand that was going to be our new home. Our vague plan had been to rent somewhere for a few months and then, if the area didn't fulfill its initial appeal, we could cut our ties and move on. And yet, just as I saw that aerial photo of the Bay and knew I was looking at our future, we both felt, in an entirely emotional way, that we had arrived at our new home.

Laura had a good idea of the kind of house she wanted. Back in Glasgow, our flat was entirely my design, planned before we'd even met. It was grand, spacious, extravagant, and architecturally exciting. But despite being beautiful and exotic, it wasn't Laura's idea of heaven. I was very happy for our new home to be somewhere Laura and I could both love, and her tastes are simple, pastoral, and very "country cottage", which perhaps is surprising for a lass who grew up and always lived in cities. Our brief to the billions of real estate agents in Kerikeri was straightforward: we want a small house, preferably wooden, preferably old, preferably painted white! It has to have a garden big enough for a dog to run around, "...and it must be less than this price", we said, self-consciously revealing a figure to the agent..

"Well!" said Rolf, a migrant from Germany, a

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windsurfing expert and our favourite estate agent of the seemingly countless ones, “I think that might be impossible! I will show you some places we have on our books, my dear (I think he meant Laura), but these villas that you are wanting are not so common in Kerikeri and we don’t see many of them on the market. Also, the price is very low.”

He took us on a “tiki-tour” of the area (this is a New Zealand expression meaning a drive around the place – at breakneck speed, in his case) showing us what was on the books, and pointing out places of interest as he went. We started out responding with typical British politeness, murmuring words like “interesting” and “mm!” and making rude faces to each other when his back was turned. In time (and Rolf was happy to devote plenty of it to us, with no sense of pressure or hard-sell) we took to scanning the house from the outside, looking at each other, and then simply saying no to Rolf’s latest offering. We saw perfect houses in entirely the wrong location, we saw awful houses in perfect locations, and we saw at least one house that was smelly, ugly and just wrong. That’s when we dumped the polite facade. After two days of fruitless tiki-ing, we were out of options, and we’d seen nothing that we really liked. This came as a total surprise to us all, as there had seemed to be so many potential places available within our price range when we looked at the real estate websites. But

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we hadn't reckoned with the distances here; places that looked local to us from our Glasgow vantage point were about forty five minutes drive away, and whilst that didn't seem unreasonable to our rush hour hardened sensibilities, it didn't take into account the Northland roads, the Kiwi drivers and the cultural notions of distance that assumes that, with so much land and so few people, you'd be mad to drive more than a few minutes to work. But that was fine with us, we'd only just started looking, and we'd have plenty of time to search for our perfect home once we were settled in a rental property on our return, whenever that was going to be.

Two days before we were due to leave Kerikeri we were in Rolf's office when the receptionist walked in, saw us and said:

"I've just seen the perfect place for you two!"

It was an old, small farm that had been subdivided into two parts, but had been, until today, on the market as a single title. After seeing no buyers interested in the whole property, the owners had decided to remarket the place as two small farms, each with its own house. The receptionist had a picture of the house she thought we'd like. It was a tiny, hundred year old weatherboard house, with a corrugated iron roof, two windows eye-like on either side of the nose of a door. Just like the one in so many children's drawings. It looked cute, it looked run down and

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it looked possible. But the land – it stood in twenty two acres of farmland, about twenty two times more than we wanted. Perhaps we could sell the land? Apparently not.

“So when can we go and see it?” Laura exclaimed.

Rolf had seen that expression before:

“Now is a good time for me, my dear, I’ll phone the owners and see if that’s ok with them”.

It was, and we followed Rolf out of the office and said we’d follow him in our car if he led the way.

“Are you all right driving on gravel roads?” he asked.

“No problem!”

And within moments we’d reached the gravel, at which point Rolf Gelb, estate agent and Teutonic rally driver, shot ahead, taking the corners with opposite lock as appropriate. Only three kinds of car can go that fast on dirt roads. Four wheel drive cars, rally cars and rental cars. He was in the former and, fortunately, we were in the latter. Fifteen minutes later and covered in dust, we reached the highway, heart pumping, and completely lost. We looked around and we were in a different landscape entirely. The tall hedges and orchards had gone, and instead there were old European trees, poplars, elms and oaks, grey and crumbly dry stone walls and, in every direction on the near horizon, volcanic cones whose smoothness spoke of years of extinction. And all so green!

We crunched up a drive with grass growing down the

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middle of the track, through a wisteria-choked gate, and into a gravel yard bounded by cute but shabby buildings. As soon as we staggered out of the cars we were greeted, not only by two little dogs, but also by a sense of serenity and gentle calm. Alex, the owner, came out of the cottage in traditional New Zealand winter farmer's garb of shorts, teeshirt and gumboots. He welcomed us and we started to wander round the farm, he and Rolf chatting amiably, the dogs zooming around the paddocks in some kind of "find the smelly cow pat" game and we, lagging a few steps behind and grinning uncontrollably.

"Whatever you do, don't make it too obvious if we do want to buy this place" I cautioned my foolishly beaming wife. "I have no idea how we could manage twenty two acres, and we don't know much about gardening, never mind farming" I added, before I noticed that I too was smiling like an eighties dance badge (the yellow smiley face.) Back in the real world, and five steps ahead of us, Rolf and Alex were discussing things like the cost of fencing, what building repairs might be needed, and how well the ground had coped with the recent heavy rainfall. So prosaic. It took us about forty minutes to wander around the property and get back to the house. It took us about a thousandth of that time to fall in love with it. We had conveniently inserted ourselves into the picture, with dogs running around, cattle in the paddocks, and the huge

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and graceful oak tree dappling the shade for a garden picnic. And before we'd even seen inside the house, it had to be ours.

In fact, the house was a little unprepossessing. Crowded with heavy, dark antique furniture, it seemed impossibly small for a family of four and if we'd seen it first, it might have made us a little more trepid. But the farm had worked some kind of voodoo on us, and the cottage was far more beautiful in our mind's eye than reality. It just didn't seem to matter. This is what they call 'falling in love' with a property, and wisdom counsels against it. Despite my stern admonition, Laura blurted:

"I love it! Please can we buy it?"

Alex was delighted, and such a gentleman that he showed no sign of the glint in the eye that suggests a rapidly inflating price tag. We drove away, this time, and at my request, on the sealed road, and arrived back to the office. The conversation in the car had been predictably enthusiastic, no second view was necessary, we should put in a conditional offer. I tried to get cold feet and imagine what we might do with such a large acreage, how we could improve the cottage with limited funds, what we would use all the outbuildings for, and generally attempted to feel intimidated by the scale and suddenness of the decision. But to no avail, no matter how hard I tried, the feeling of tranquillity that pervaded the place overcame any

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pessimism. I smiled and knew we'd found the right spot.

Rolf drew up preliminary documents for the sale and Millie helped us find a solicitor who wouldn't cost a fortune to do the conveyancing. And the next day, it was time for us to head south to Auckland. Before we left the area, we thought we'd drive past the house, just for another brief look. It's crazy how we can commit to spending so much money without too much of a second thought. Sometimes, I swear I've spent more time buying a present than it took to choose the house. So we drove along the highway and stopped on the verge next to the tumbledown volcanic stone wall. There was the farm, partially hidden by young trees, and beckoning us back. And just as Laura started to cry, partly because she didn't want to leave it, but also for the sheer overwhelming emotional high we'd developed in the last few days, Alex saw us, waved and came over to invite us in for a cup of tea. Laura sucked the tears back in and we took a last, lingering visit to the cottage before we left Northland and then New Zealand.

And damn it, we left all the presents we had bought for our friends and family in the boot of the rental car.