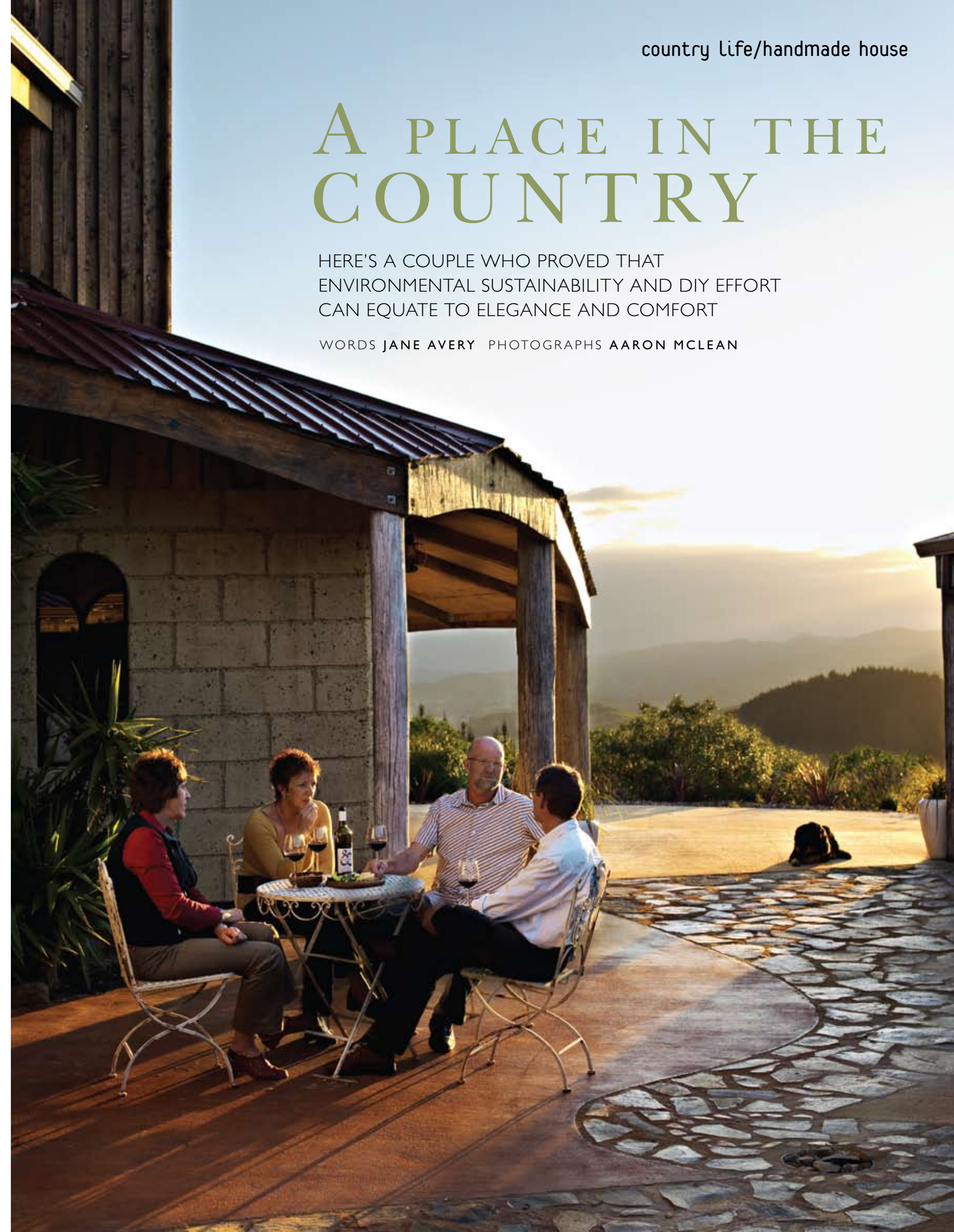


A PLACE IN THE COUNTRY

HERE'S A COUPLE WHO PROVED THAT ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND DIY EFFORT CAN EQUATE TO ELEGANCE AND COMFORT

WORDS JANE AVERY PHOTOGRAPHS AARON MCLEAN





The baskets hanging above the dining-table were props used in the TV series *Zena, Warrior Princess* while the brass shades in the kitchen came from an Auckland maritime-salvage store. Home baking and good coffee are lodge fundamentals.



FROM MANAWA RIDGE'S turret-like viewing room, the scene spans 360 degrees of dizzying hill-country and coastal vistas and visitors can feel like kings or queens of all they survey. To the north-west, the hamlet of Waihi sits quaintly at the foot of the rugged Kaimai Ranges and on the south-east horizon Mt Maunganui looks as if it could be plucked and added to a collection of notable landmarks. Tussock waves gracefully as the breeze zephyrs by. If there were a standard handy, visitors would plant it firmly and declare it all theirs.

But of course the reason they're positioned high above this often-windswept hill is because someone else got here first and claimed it as their own. It's a blessing that caring and sharing is a central part of the mantra of Manawa Ridge's owners, Carla and Willem van de Veen. And never fear if the wind blows viciously during the night – this home won't budge an inch. Its construction reassuringly conveys the feel of "I'll be here forever" ... the sort of forever that more than a thousand 90kg mud bricks, 600 solid straw-bale blocks and 80 jarrah telephone poles and railway bridge beams can convey. This has all the durability of a hilltop fortress ... and a handsome one at that.

Manawa Ridge Luxury Retreat is the fulfilment of a long-held dream for its Dutch creators. Nineteen years ago this part of the country spoke to them as they campervanned around New Zealand with their three children. Willem and Carla remember standing above the Waihi coastline watching the sunset and imagining a life there. More than 11 years later, upon discovering and purchasing the 101-hectare block of farmland, they were struck with the realization that this was indeed a wish come true. "By crikey, we thought, this is the place, with the hills, the bush and so much beauty," says Willem. ▶





The only thing was that 101 hectares were far bigger and more expensive than they'd ever anticipated buying. The ex-dairy farmers had been looking for somewhere to establish a lodge on perhaps 12-odd hectares. But upon spying a small advertisement in the *The New Zealand Herald* they forged ahead. They offered all their savings and as cash buyers secured the land for a lot less than the asking price. Happy but broke, the couple moved into the only building on the property, the woolshed. Says Willem, "We were very poor, but very rich."

They were no strangers to starting over. Having emigrated to New Zealand from Holland in 1990 Willem, an ex-mounted policeman and armed-defenders officer, returned to doing what he'd been brought up with, dairying. Carla, a sculptor, rolled up her sleeves too and the job of building a new life began. After 18 months managing a Waikato unit, the couple bought their own dairy farm at Te Aroha. Faced with New Zealand banks' reluctance to lend to migrants, they were yoked with an 80 percent Dutch mortgage transferred to New Zealand (complete with a 30 percent difference in exchange rate).

Eleven years later, after selling the farm, travelling around the USA and Canada gathering ideas for their dream lodge and then spending all their savings on the land, they got down to the business of building from broke again. They rented their paddocks for grazing and Willem returned to the dairying industry, this time as an artificial inseminator. ▶



The lodge turret allows 360° views, including those north-west over the Coromandel. The turret's original plan was altered during construction to accommodate its rimu staircase access. Carla's Oamaru stone hand basin in one of the guest suites is carved to represent water.





A tapestry once used to decorate a nomadic tribe's tent frames the bathroom entrance from the bedroom. The farm's six Friesian horses are a calm and relaxed breed, chosen for inexperienced riders.



“BY CRIKEY, WE THOUGHT, THIS IS THE PLACE, WITH THE HILLS, THE BUSH AND SO MUCH BEAUTY”



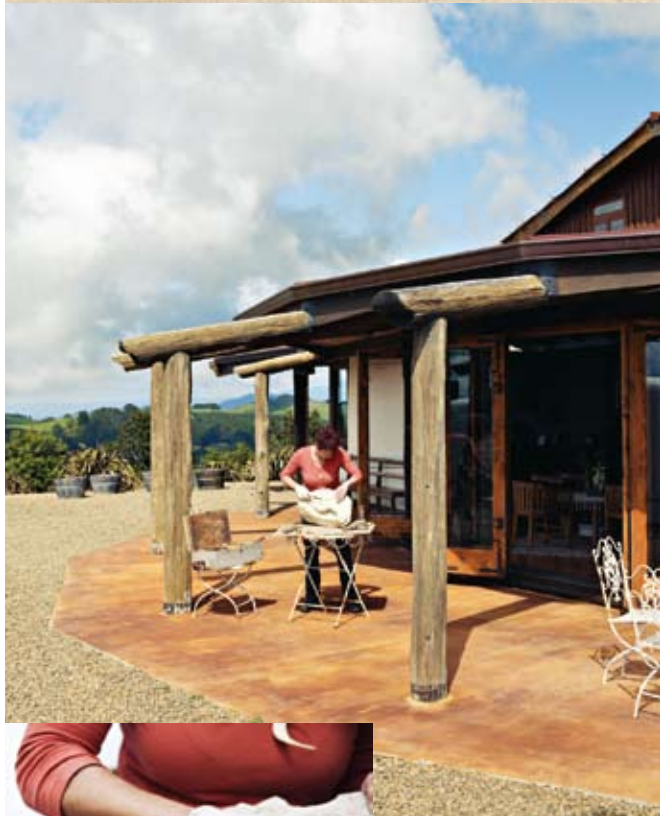
Months of travelling and hard work kick-started the building, beginning with the solid jarrah beams. A crate of beer was exchanged for each of the first ones – “24 stubbies a pole which increased to \$150 a pole later on.” Willem sourced 50-odd round jarrah poles from the Power Board in Tokoroa and another 20 square railway beams from Transrail. The couple stockpiled their beams and eventually had enough to spread out in a paddock and measure up with construction in mind. They actually designed the layout of the house with specific beams in mind. With a philosophy of creating as little waste as possible, they positioned them to get the most out of each one's length. Some friends thought they were crazy to take on such a massive building project. “But we don't mind jumping in at the deep end and learning how to swim ... we love giving new things a go.”

Having researched dwellings made from sustainable materials, Willem says it's rare to see a house that uses both straw bales and mud bricks. Their architect was experienced in both traditions. Add the recycled beams, a doorway from an old church, another from a bank in Gore, stripped and remodelled windows, doors from a backpackers' lodge and the old rimu staircase from the Paeroa Skate and Leisure Centre for a unique vision in sustainable building. Copper from old hot-water cylinders has been used as spouting and as enhancement on the fascia joints. One of the guest-room basins is modelled from the burr of a macrocarpa tree while another is a gorgeous piece of Oamaru stone sculpted by Carla. And from the fittings to the Thai teak furniture, everything in the house is big and

bulky, creating a sense of balance and proportion with the solid construction.

It took the van de Veens seven weeks of full days to complete the mud-brick walls, with the raw material being trucked in from a local quarry. The vital statistics are burned into Carla's memory. “We made around 40 bricks per day ... 1173 to be exact.” The process involved pouring mud into frames already in position on the wall, letting them set overnight, then removing the frames and cleaning up the bricks ready for the next layer. They went for it single-mindedly, completing a layer a day. So enthused were they by their progress, they forgot to leave space for a window on one wall. Says Willem, “Five layers high we were. I couldn't believe it; it was an extra day's work putting it right. It's amazing how hard those bricks are once they've set.” They admit to learning from more than a few mistakes. “But I never throw mud at Carla,” says Willem. “We built from our hearts and we're a great team.”

Building the lodge was an organic process with the finished structure differing significantly from the original plans. “It's been for the good of the building. It's a lot stronger and a bigger construction. One change involved adding a balcony on the east side to protect the straw-bale wall from wet easterly winds.” Most of the straw bales are set on the western and southern aspects of the lodge, protected from the elements by age-old lime plastering that allows the walls to breathe. The mud bricks mostly face east and north, soaking up morning and afternoon sun and retaining heat to insulate the house. ▶



Idyllic Homunga Bay is a half-hour hike from the lodge through surrounding farmland. Carla offers her tools and time to guests who want to try their hands at sculpting.

For suggestions on what else to see and do in Waihi and for more photos of Manawa Ridge, go to our website.

Along with using eco-friendly construction, Carla and Willem have endeavoured to stay true to environmentally compatible concepts in the day-to-day operation of the lodge. Their first wish was for composting toilets but the thought of first-class tourists paying top dollars to scoop manuka shavings down the toilet soon put that idea to bed. But practicality and environmental sensitivity have won the day. A septic tank has been installed, the contents of which feed the grass over part of the property by means of a six-line drainage system. The waste aerates and evaporates leaving the essential minerals to be utilized by the ground. The lodge is fed by natural spring water and wind power is on the horizon as soon as the budget will allow.

Although the van de Veen's farm isn't officially certified, organic meat is reared, killed and processed on site. Willem's talents extend to making his own salami, smoked ham and sausages. Together with the farm's organically grown veges and a specially built underground wine cellar, guests are in for a sustaining and sustainable visit. As for farm activities, Willem's years as a mounted policeman in Holland ignited a passion for horses. The couple owns six black Friesians which are available for guests to ride.

Much of Carla's sculpture is incorporated around the lodge. She carves mostly in limestone and sandstone, including the local 1.3-million-year-old volcanic Hinuera rock. "Some of it I won't part with," she says, "but some other works ... I'm definitely open to offers!" Of their hard-working years together, Willem and Carla say they are just thankful their tastes are similar. "We both love dancing and music and horses. Our vision for this lodge was compatible and it's been built with pretty single-minded dedication and love."

Visitors can choose to stay in a suite and be looked after by Willem and Carla, who have their own apartment on the second level, or the entire lodge can be booked for larger groups. "We'll just shift down the road to our woolshed. We lived in it for five years and it's really cosy," says Carla. Manawa Ridge, which translates from Maori as "heartwarming", was effectively christened in January 2007 with the wedding of youngest daughter Tessa and is indeed New Zealand's answer to a castle on the hill.

www.manawaridge.co.nz