

Eco and people friendly

UK immigrants Ian and Anna Sizer have developed an environmental strategy for running their Bay of Islands farm and boutique tourism accommodation. By **Fiona Rotherham**

THERE'S AMPLE evidence as we drive north of the big storm that has battered Northland and further south. Flooded paddocks line either side of State Highway One along with trees and other vegetation uprooted by the fury of the wind. Our hosts Ian and Anna Sizer, the owner/operators of Magic Cottages at Takou River, had checked the day before to see if we were still coming on our two-day Bay of Islands trip.

They had already had one cancellation but I, with four teenagers in tow, remain undeterred.

We miss the turn off to Takou Bay, just north of Kerikeri, as the wind has blown down the sign. But after retracing our steps, we easily find the Sizer's new house, sited on a gravel road that winds down to the river's end of their 55ha organically-certified beef farm.

And what a house. The 420 square metre two-story cedar mansion is built on a windy ridge with magnificent views over Takou Bay. Directly across the next hill is Kauri Cliffs with its world-renowned golfcourse and beyond that Matauri Bay, home to the submerged wreck of the Rainbow Warrior and a magnet for divers.

The Sizer's house has taken 26 months to build, but then it's not your normal Kiwi home. It is completely grid free – the only external service is the telephone connection. Electrical power is generated by 10 175W photovoltaic panels and, to supplement these, the couple is installing a simple hydro system on the Takou River that meanders along the boundary line. Using a Kaplan turbine, the system will produce 48W each day, enough to power the house on cloudy days, and the accommodation for guests and farm workers.

There are low energy lights to minimise power consumption and intelligent sensors that turn off the lights when the room is not in use. Ian is particularly fond of a little gadget – a Klick on Klick off remote that turns off multiple standby mode machines at the flick of one switch to further save power. Some electrical appliances have been modified to reduce power consumption: for example, the dishwasher uses water heated by the wetback and solar hot water tubes, rather than electricity. When they first looked at the economics of an alternative power system it was a 25-year payback. Higher oil and electricity prices have shortened that to 10 years, Ian says.

There's also double glazing, recycled timber, wool insulation, rainwater collection



for drinking water, an onsite septic system for reusing black and grey water in irrigation... the list goes on.

If you haven't already surmised, the Sizers are committed environmentalists, ironically so, given both worked for many years in the oil industry. Ian, a qualified engineer, still works for one of the big oil companies in Papua New Guinea, flying home after each four-week stint. It seems an odd fit; a couple who've built careers in a fossil-fuel intensive industry being committed to organic farming and sustainable tourism practices.

But Anna was raised in a family that operated a successful organic and natural food business, Down to Earth, for over 20 years in the UK. She gained a degree in



The original kauri homestead burned down, but the new version makes a perfect site for weddings

environmental biology and ecology, and travelled extensively before working as an environmental advisor in the oil industry.

The couple met in Algeria in 1996. Crammed into the back of a Land Cruiser for three weeks while conducting an ecological baseline survey of the central Sahara Desert. Anna jokes it was always going to end up a love or hate relationship. Romance won out. But they also discovered a shared belief about how the oil industry should minimise the impact of extraction on communities and the environment, and have jointly been involved in global projects where they tried to put those beliefs into practice.

Reluctant to return to the UK, they spent six years searching for the right property

in New Zealand to settle down and raise a family. They found it at Takou Bay in 2003 and decided eco-friendly boutique accommodation would be a perfect fit on the organic farm.

Three self-catering cottages, voted one of the Top Ten Luxury Lodges in New Zealand by XtraMSN, sit amid five acres of sub-tropical gardens. We stay in one of the two-bedroom cottages and due to the storm-related cancellation by another guest, the Sizars also offer us Magic Cottage, an intimate studio cottage perched on the riverbank. It's an idyllic secluded spot for honeymooners. It's not bad for mothers wanting time out either.

You're left in no doubt from the get go

about the owners' environmental views. Even the toilet paper is eco-friendly. Toiletries are sourced from local company Living Nature (see box), which specialises in natural skincare products.

The two-bedroom cottages have been converted from a former barn. Reclaimed timber is used throughout and ours features an awesome kauri staircase.

On arrival we find a complimentary gourmet organic hamper (provided to all guests) comprising locally grown and organic foods. It attracts the teenagers who consume a fair portion of it with the skill of locusts. I grab the locally produced wine out of their ditches for my own consumption later.

The cottages are sheltered within the



Lapping water provides a peaceful haven for ducks – and visitors

gardens which feature a beautiful mix of native and exotic plants. It's all very peaceful. The only sounds are the water lapping against the riverbank and birdsong.

"What do we do now? There's no TV," the teenagers whine in unison.

"Amuse yourselves." I reply lazily from the depths of the sofa.

My son, exploring the great outdoors, is chased by a friendly fantail seeking the bugs thrown up from the grass as he walks. You don't get that in the city.

A tour of the garden reveals the Summer House, on the site of the farm's original homestead that burned down some years ago. Europeans first settled in the area in 1860 and all that remains of the original kauri cottage is the hearth and a flame-scorched outdoor shed. The Sizers have tiled the Summer House, putting in a potbelly and outdoor furniture along with a clawfoot outdoor bath for guest use. It's a popular spot for local weddings.

Bright and early next morning, I haul the teenagers out of bed to kayak down the river to the beach. Maori-owned land adjacent to the bay restricts guests' access to it except by boat or kayak. I've checked the tide charts and the timing seems right for a morning paddle. Wetsuit-clad, the children begrudgingly trudge off to the nearby boathouse while I visit the Sizers for a personal tour of the house and property.

The paddocks are sodden and muddy following the storm. Ian's facing heavy work manoeuvring their youngest child in the pushchair. The toddler is oblivious to the effort

involved, singing happily away in the fresh air. As we traverse the boundary line, the Sizers point out the extensive native tree planting programme they're undertaking.

Over 10,000 trees have been planted to date and, once the natives have grown to sufficient size, they plan to remove a pine belt above the cottages. They also have a native tree seedling propagation scheme in their shadehouse and a pest control programme to give the native flora and fauna a stronger chance of survival.

It's calving time and Ian is keeping an anxious eye on the cows, checking for signs any have started labour. As we pass a wetland area on the low-lying part of the farm, they talk about creating a fenced dam here to further enhance the habitat. It's a haven for ducks. They show me a stone monument erected just upstream from the cottages to commemorate the Waka Mataatua, the seventh waka to come to New Zealand. The waka taua (war canoe) was, the story goes, deliberately sunk in the river to prevent it falling into enemy hands during a long ago tribal battle.

A heavy shower curtails our tour and I head to the boathouse. The teenagers arrive back breathing heavily. They're incensed I wrongly advised them on the tide. They were forced to paddle back against a strong current with an outgoing tide; they're exhausted; they're freezing cold; they want McDonald's. An escape to the solitude of Magic Cottage seems timely right now.

They sleep well that night, as do I, lulled by the absence of sound.

All natural

I'M CHAMPING at the bit. Having a facial is one of life's great pleasures. You simply lie back, relax and enjoy your journey. This particular facial is taking place at Kerikeri-based Living Nature, one of the world's first companies to produce skincare without the use of synthetic preservatives or parabens.

There is a small beauty clinic above the factory, mainly due to demand from visitors hankering to try out the products on the spot. We start my facial with an exfoliating mask, the main ingredients of which I'm told are manuka honey, echanacia and lactic acid. The honey smell is strong but not off-putting. And, hey, it's obviously natural.

Once the invigorating mask is done, we move on to an ultra-nourishing mask and massage. The beauty therapist has a feather-like touch on my temples. I'm almost purring and it's over all too soon.

Back in the real world, Jason Vokes, Living Nature's general manager sales, takes us on a tour of the factory where all its products, apart from the cosmetic range and soaps, are made. Some 42 of its 70 staff are based here and Vokes says it has bought adjoining land for a planned factory expansion, possibly three years away.

Vokes tells me the private company expects a reversal this financial year of its fairly static growth in the last couple of years. He's forecasting revenue growth of 20% to 25%.

Exports to ten countries now account for 75% of revenue and the big change in the business model has been a switch from selling predominantly into health stores to hawking the products through department stores and online.

But the environmental commitment remains. Ecology and sustainability are part of the company's mission statement and that extends beyond the product itself. Living Nature uses 100% recyclable product containers made from polypropylene and chalk, magnets to attach powders to reusable metal casing instead of glue, non-toxic inks in packaging dyes, and biodegradable and recyclable cardboard packaging. It also collects rainwater from the factory roof, treats effluent for onsite irrigation and uses a carbon neutral electricity supplier.