

INSIDE NZ

The great escape

A place that inspires poetry, Magic Cottage is also a place of absolute, blessed, escape, writes **Catherine Woulfe**.

IN LATE November 2006 a little love story played out under a pohutukawa, beside a river, in a one-roomed cottage near Kerikeri. Nathan, from Oriental Bay and Cally, from Mairangi Bay, spent four days in the sun and three nights under the stars in this cottage. The tide came in and went out again, four times.

The guest book, leaving various things unsaid, records: "An

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extremely special place to hide for a little while."

Sharon and Steve, from Auckland, visited the cottage too — the couple left an initialled love heart in the book, and were clearly inspired: "It rained, it poured, but we weren't bored; We talked, we walked; To unwind, what a find; Back in the summer, it will be a hummer!"

Four weeks ago we too discovered this place, and wrote something terribly twee in the guest book — with a name like "Magic Cottage" we felt we had to leave our city cynicism at the gate.

Everything else about the place is pure class.

There is a bath on a deck that overhangs a river, and rain on the roof, and fish that jump in the evenings and early mornings. There is no cellphone reception. No landline, no laptop. Just a cow bell on the gate and tuis rollicking in the

flame trees overhead. It is a place of absolute, blessed, escape.

We begin the four-hour drive from Auckland after lunch on Sunday.

It is not a good trip; every second vehicle seems to be a logging truck and the others are all big black Holdens driven by middle-aged idiots who thrill in overtaking on blind corners.

Just as I'm about to crack we reach the turnoff.

Catching big cheery waves from neighbours gardening with their bums in the air, we follow the gravel road down the hill to the spot the Sizer family spent five years searching for.

Anna and Ian finally moved from England three years ago, to run beef cattle on the 60ha of farmland they fell in love with.

Their five acres of subtropical garden, once so overgrown the couple couldn't see the river, are now an organic Eden of hibiscus, ponds and native bush.

The Sizers have planted hundreds of natives up the riverbanks and are building a stunning new home on the hill overlooking the gardens and the river.

Solar-powered and made of untreated timber, it will be entirely off the electricity grid, Anna says proudly — for now, though, they live in the middle of the gardens, above a water-lily pond, with two boutique cottages tucked in beside them.

Anna's tour of Magic Cottage, a two-minute walk from the main house, is certainly grand but it doesn't take long.

The cottage is basically a bed



Dare to bare all in the delightful bath on the deck.

in a living room in a kitchen, with a shower and toilet behind a partition.

A huge pohutukawa leans overhead, ponga screens separate the cottage from the gardens and a deck that is bigger than the cottage wraps right around, giving 180-degree views of Takou River.

The cottage is like a luxury treehouse for grown-ups. Stocked with waffle robes, wine glasses, white towels, Living Nature toiletries, there might as well be a sign saying "no kids allowed".

Extras couldn't be squeezed in even if you were tempted to bring them along — there are no stretcher beds tucked into cupboards.

This is a place for two people and, as the bathroom wall doesn't go right to the ceiling, two people who know each other very well.

On no account are we to drive into Kerikeri for any groceries we have forgotten, Anna says — the family are only too happy to let us raid their pantry for what we need.

Equally, if we require "comms" of any kind — we recoil at the mention of broadband — we are to pop up to the house.

All well and good, but we've three boxes of food for two nights, no desire to make contact with the outside world ever again, and I'm eyeing up the bath.

Anna leaves us to it, promising "the Auckland" will be knocked out of us in no time.

That night we go to bed with the curtains open, staring at the stars through the pohutukawa branches. We hear kiwi, we think. We definitely hear morepork.

Morning breezes in bringing sun-showers and tui, we eat a lot of bacon and eggs and watch the tide

NEED TO KNOW

- Magic Cottage is located on the banks of the Takou River, about a four-hour drive from Auckland.
- It sleeps two (linen provided), and has an ensuite shower as well as the claw-foot bath.
- Fishing rods, canoes and kayaks, and mountain bikes are available.
- The cottage is self-catering, but gourmet meals are available on request. There's a gas BBQ on the deck, indoor and outdoor tables and

- chairs, a kitchen with fridge, oven and hob as well as cutlery, crockery and utensils, gas heater and additional bedding.
- The cottage is powered by a combination of solar energy (for lighting) and gas (for cooking, heating and hot water).
- Cost: \$190-\$220 per night (including GST) for two. Long stay and seasonal rates available.
- Visit www.takouriver.com

come in and cover the pukeko footprints in the mud.

We decide this could be the best Monday in the history of the world.

At some stage I wander up to the house and follow Anna and the kids around as they feed pigs, climb up to the rooftop lookout above the other two cottages and lean over the fence calling to the "moos".

Six-year-old Lucy is clutching a tattered copy of *The Secret Garden*.

I sigh and briefly consider nicking a shotgun and perching in a rocking chair on the deck of Magic

Cottage, taking potshots at anyone who tries to move us on.

As it turns out, that night, I've barely the motivation to run the bath. But there are stars again, and wine, and the night air up north is nothing like Auckland — I quite happily stand around in a towel for 10 minutes as the bath fills.

Shags flap past, low in the dark. Leaves fall into the water.

I've resigned myself to mosquitoes but incredibly there are none, and I go to bed clean, happy and soggy.



Away from the world, the setting is stunning.



The cottage is cosy, but for once the description "bijou" is apt.