



In the clouds

Caroline Crick walks inland from the Kaikoura coast



FOR SIX HOURS we walk through totara and ti tree, over ridges and across boulder-strewn streams. Our guide, Lance, embroiders the day with his knowledge of the flora and fauna and history of the valley. We spot deer and hare, and the higher we climb, the smaller the plants, so we tiptoe across alpine country trying not to crush those smidgeons of plant life underfoot. We spot the lodge from far off, and work our way through gullies and close-growing natives until we find ourselves, suddenly, there.

We step out of the trees onto the deck of Shearwater Lodge, where owner Nicky McArthur is waiting with freshly squeezed juice, home-made scones and copious cups of tea.

Shearwater Lodge is unique in many ways. At 1000m, it's New Zealand's highest lodge. It looks like it's been dropped off by a passing airship and landed, catlike, on its feet in the bush. The valley at its back follows a creek up to Surveyor's Peak and the mountain tops beyond. The view from the verandah and from the six guest bedrooms is of bush and mountains. The nearest neighbours are Hutton's shearwaters.

One of only two remaining Hutton's

shearwater colonies is in Nicky McArthur's backyard, the 2000 acre Puhī Peaks Stations. Among many things, Nicky is a founding member and trustee of the Hutton's Shearwater Charitable Trust, which has been instrumental in establishing the Puhī Peaks Nature Reserve, now protected by a QEII National Trust Protection Covenant.

Nicky is also an artist, tourist operator and gourmet cook. The excellent scones, after our long walk, are testament to that. And excellent food keeps coming.

Supplies (and guest bags) are carried in on the back of two Rhino four-wheel drives but, despite the isolation, we dine on gourmet food and sleep in king size beds with crisp linen.

Nicky's philosophy is embedded in the place. Her environmental art adorns the walls, with a clear message – this place is as precious as a pearl your grandmother gave you. Hold it in your hand, keep it safe.

"I think we are extremely privileged to live in this land," Nicky says. "One of the great things about having my children working with me is knowing they think carefully about what we are doing here."





“My vision is that our guests leave inspired by the possibility that each of us can make a difference.”

The lodge’s eco-credentials are impressive. It has hydro-power, near zero waste and an Enviro-Gold Qualmark rating. The staff voluntarily helps with the Hutton’s shearwater work. The wine and food are local.

Nicky’s sons, Sam and Harry, help with the guiding and Harry provides free guest entertainment by jumping unexpectedly into waterfalls.

Kea sit on the deck handrail and laugh with kea delight at our antics.

On our second day, we stride through fields of yellow wild onion up onto alpine plateau, where we share the lunch Lance and Harry have carried for us. We lounge on sun-baked rocks and search for edelweiss in the nooks and crannies of rock faces. Harry takes the more daring up to a higher peak. The rest of us lie back and watch. I know I am safe in this wild place and yet, being in a very small group, experience the joy of feeling alone in a very big landscape.

Walking back down through the alpine fields with the sun warm on my face, we come to where the valley opens out to a green meadow. Nicky and cook Jude are waiting, under a wide-canopied tree, with more food. For the newly-married couple and the 40th anniversary celebrants, there are shortbread people holding hands. It is picnic heaven.

That night, after crayfish and venison and very good Pinot Noir, I lie in my bed and look out through the back country night to the surrounding ridges and plateau. It’s bush quiet; I can just hear rocks rolling in the riverbeds below. Tomorrow we’ll visit a waterfall, enjoy more wonderful food, and walk our way quietly out to rejoin that other world. 📍

www.kaikourawilderness.co.nz

www.huttonsshearwater.org.nz to support our endangered bird.

