



THE GOOD LIFE

Kicking back in a yurt

Going off-grid in the Waikato helps this English family live a healthier, wilder life.

Words Lindy Davis. Photography Marijke de Jong

Summer is finally here, and for many families the ideal holiday involves a tent in the great outdoors, alongside nature. But for one family from England, a huge call from the wild enticed them to completely abandon life in the city and live off-grid in rural New Zealand. Lucy AitkenRead and her husband Tim had, quite simply, had enough of living life on the treadmill. So with two young children in tow, they packed their belongings to take a walk on the wild side. “It sounds a bit of a cliché, to leave our comfortable Victorian terraced house in South London to go live in a yurt [circular Mongolian tent traditionally covered with skins or felt] in the middle of nowhere. Although we were already totally committed to loving the earth and treading gently, we felt we were missing a certain wildness in our life.” Lucy says there are vital parts of nature that can’t be experienced in a big city, where most of their time was spent either indoors or commuting to work. Having made the decision to live life more simply, they researched several places and settled on New Zealand. “We arrived full of dreams and certain that before long, we’d snap up our own perfect bit of land. We had a list of features it needed to have, like spring water, native bush, paddocks for farming and a vibrant local community.” To get a feel for the land, they worked as WWOOFers (Willing Workers on Organic Farms) and learned about large-scale gardening. They spent the next six months visiting various parts of the Coromandel that appeared to have what they wanted, but nothing particularly resonated. A fortuitous invite to a New Year’s Eve party paid off, thanks to a recommendation about a piece of land in Karangahake. “We walked on to this land at the foot of Mount Karangahake in Waikino, and it was like a choir of angels appeared in the sky and sang, ‘THIS IS THE ONE!’ We just knew deep inside that this was the spot.” The family is spoilt for choice when it comes to activities. Their farm is ideally located near the Karangahake Windows Walk through Waitawheta Gorge, and just



The family now lives a simpler life, more connected with nature and the seasons – it nurtures Lucy’s creativity, and teaches her daughters to be inquisitive and brave.



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15 minutes to the Hauraki Rail Trail. They decided ‘home’ would be in the form of a yurt; given the move from London to Waikato, Lucy felt it would suit their nomadic lifestyle. Their American-made Pacific Yurt, crafted from wood and canvas, arrived flat-packed and took almost two days for Tim to put together. Friends assisted with the foundations and cutting the canvas to install double-glazed windows. They also built additional

decking space to increase the lounge area. Lucy gradually transformed the interior, adding bunk beds for the kids and various floor and wall furnishings found in opportunity shops and homeware stores. Lucy and Tim love their yurt lifestyle, saying it offers them a simpler, healthier existence. Lucy adds the roundness of the structure makes it feel sacred, and she has a deeper sense of connectivity to nature. “It’s not so far from the hunter-gatherer >



An average day in this family's slice of paradise can involve foraging for a new breakfast ingredient, tending to the animals and going for walks.

life we once led a thousand years ago.”

Electricity is largely generated through solar power, making them much more attuned to seasonal changes. Summer is all about bush walks, swimming in the waterfalls, late-evening picnics and spontaneous music concerts by the river. The winter lends itself to daytime hikes, with evenings reading books by the fire and playing card games.

They built a wood-fired oven because Tim loves cooking and baking with their younger daughter Juno, 4.

“We also designed an amazing mud kitchen for her last birthday, complete with sink and running water tapped from the stream. Juno makes clay cakes if there aren’t any edible ones around.”

Older daughter Ramona is an adventurer and enjoys exploring the neighbouring Department of Conservation land. She collects interesting bones that



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she uncovers along the way, while Juno has a sharp eye for sparkling quartz crystals. They have nicknamed themselves Bone Finder and Crystal Hunter.

“I see yurts as being part of the tiny house movement, offering an important alternative to the exclusive world of the huge mortgage. It’s really tragic that owning a home these days is so prohibitive and in a sense, the tiny house movement is trying to address that issue,” Lucy adds.

She feels not having the responsibility of managing a house gives her more time with her children, affording them a more creative and adventurous lifestyle.

“Every morning I wake up and see the sun oozing in through the canvas and feel the fresh air on my face. I just think, ‘Wow!’ We are living a simple, magical way of life.”

An average day sees them looking after the newly planted orchard, tending to their ducks and chickens, collecting eggs, and moving the Highland cattle to different grazing pastures.

The children are ‘unschooled’, which means they are educated on important aspects of life outside the classroom. Tim is a teacher by trade, but prefers the concept of fostering their childrens’ creative urges through exposure to things in which they show an interest.

“Our girls were keen on the idea of planting flowers but didn’t understand the

process. We took them to the garden shop and bought some seeds. It involved them researching what would grow well in the area and understanding the whole process from scratch. It was such a joy to watch my six year old writing out the labels for the plants and doing something she really wanted to, rather than someone else telling her it was a good idea.”

Daily activities with the girls include painting, singing, gardening, sewing, baking or making their own fermented sauerkraut and kimchi. The couple will sometimes set a challenge to forage for one new ingredient for their breakfast smoothie, such as kopakopa, clover, gorse flowers or totara berries from their farm.

“I want to raise kids who trust themselves and have a deep connection to nature, who can work through conflict, understand all facets of wellbeing and who know they can do anything they put their mind to. I’m just not convinced the current school system is up to it.”

Being in touch with the natural surroundings helps keep Lucy’s creative juices bubbling. Her third book, *Thirty Days of Rewilding*, is designed to help families re-connect with nature.

The couple hope the addition of a smaller yurt, for Airbnb guests, will give other people an opportunity to fully embrace the wonder that nature brings. **g**