

Couple offering luxury off the beaten track

Glamping and back-to-nature escapes are becoming increasingly popular on rural properties throughout the South. Business and rural editor Sally Rae talks to a Dunback couple who have diversified their farming operation to include on-farm tourism.

DUBAI, Dublin, Dusseldorf . . . Dunback? When you think of travel destinations, the small rural East Otago settlement does not immediately spring to mind.

But local couple Rob Hewett and Helena Robinson are endeavouring to change that through a boutique accommodation operation on the family sheep, beef and cropping farm.

Rocky Ridge Hut opened post-Covid while their second hut, The Wild Irishman — the name the early settlers gave matagouri — was recently completed.

“Dunback is beautiful but highly overlooked in New Zealand. Everyone drives through it, no-one stops to look. This is so beautiful, it’s worth sharing,” Ms Robinson said, indicating the expansive views from the lounge of The Wild Irishman. “It’s so great to showcase what small, rural New Zealand can have.”

Four generations of the Hewett family have added their stamp to the now 1400ha property since the original home block was bought by Rob’s great-grandfather in 1920. That block had been expanded over the years and the property is now run by Rob and his father Ian.

Having both spent a lot of time overseas and staying in various places, adding an accommodation venture to the mix was something that seemed “a bit natural”. “We just thought we’d have a crack at that and we never really looked back,” Mr Hewett said.

After leaving school, Mr Hewett completed a diploma of agriculture at Lincoln University and then headed overseas shearing.

He sheared in Wales and England, worked on a sheep farm in France for three seasons and spent a season in Italy. He incorporated travelling and ended up visiting more than 40 countries.

He was also back in New Zealand and shearing locally, before finally deciding to return permanently to the farm, recognising he could not keep shearing forever. He and his father get on well and work together well.

The farm was a good mix; they had got a lot bigger in cropping over the past 10-15 years, growing the likes of wheat, barley, sunflowers, peas and canola.

Mr Hewett enjoys the arable side — “I just like growing stuff” — but he also liked working with stock.

“They kind of all work together, you can’t just do one or the other,” he said. As Ms Robinson said, the operation “hits the nail on the head of diversifying”.

The family was not afraid of change — “if farmers don’t change, they disappear” — and while sometimes farming could be frustrating, they were “too busy to really worry about too much”, Mr Hewett said.

He recalled the stories his father talked about of the tough times in the 1980s and 1990s. The previous generation went through a war — “that’s just the way it is, there’s always been change”.

The past few years had also brought tremendous personal change for Mr Hewett and Ms Robinson, now parents to 2¹/₂-year-old Walter, and 5-month-old Ted.

Originally from Winchester, the cathedral city in the south of England, Ms Robinson is a doctor who will soon return to work.

Living on an East Otago farm is something that was “unexpected”, she laughs, while Mr Hewett visibly groans at the story behind their meeting that he reckons he will never live down. “I can’t get away from it.”

Keen to make some money for the local community, he organised several balls at the Dunback Hall, adding quickly that it was never a ploy to get a girlfriend.

At that time, Ms Robinson was working at Timaru Hospital alongside two of Mr Hewett’s school friends.

They invited her to the ball, saying it would be a “hilarious” night, and said they were going to set her up with a local farmer.

Romance blossomed and after initially travelling between Timaru and Dunback and then Tauranga and Dunback, she finally moved permanently to East Otago.

“I think all my friends back in the UK are like, ‘how on earth did you end up living in the middle of nowhere on a farm?’,” she laughed.

Ms Robinson has since worked at Dunedin and Dunstan Hospitals, as well as East Otago Health. She is training as a rural medicine consultant and decided to dual train in general practice as well.

Prior to meeting Rob, she was looking at heading into emergency medicine, saying she liked pressure and stress.

But, to train in that field, she would have to move around the country and that was not going to work with a young family.

Settling on rural medicine, it still had emergency elements along with general medicine and GP elements so it was “kind of like the best of everything”.

She particularly enjoyed working at her local health centre, saying the team there was “outstanding” and the work was rewarding.

She joked that living in a small community she had also been told all about the “most dodgy knees” in the district.

Their overseas experiences helped the couple recognise the beauty of their East Otago backyard. It was something Mr Hewett noticed when he returned home from trips, while Ms Robinson described it as “absolutely stunning”.

Their first build, Rocky Ridge Hut, was light and airy, with expansive views to the sea and Kakanui Mountains.

Building started in January 2020, a time when Covid “wasn’t really a thing”. Several months later, when the project was nearly completed, the pandemic hit. Ever philosophical, Mr Hewett said they were “in the same boat as everybody else” and once everything opened up, “it just went mental” as people were spending money “flat out”.

It had been a good couple of years, the majority of their bookings being from the domestic market, with a few overseas visitors.

The couple recalled the excitement of their first guests, who were not what they expected given they were university students.

They had thought the market would be people close to retirement, whose children had flown the nest and had spare cash, but they actually attracted the “Instagrammers”.

Initially thinking that if they sold the weekends, they would be happy — and figuring they would use it more themselves — that had proven not to be the case, on either count.

It was now booked solid through the week and they had spent only two nights there. While more used to cleaning the hut than relaxing in it, once they were in the hot tub their worries and stresses “washed away”, Ms Robinson said.

With The Wild Irishman, built by local builder Ryan Smith, they were aiming for a different vibe. It had more of a hygge feel, the Danish concept which encompassed a feeling of cosy contentment and wellbeing. It also had a sauna and outdoor cold-water shower.

While building huts on large properties sounded easy, there were limitations for sites as there had to be suitable access and water.

The couple endeavoured to be very eco-aware with their design.

The huts were solar-powered, they recycled as much as possible, and there was a worm farm at Rocky Ridge. Natural products, including sheepskins, were used in the interior.

Asked whether the accommodation offering would continue to expand, the couple were quick to answer "absolutely not". It had taken plenty of effort and, with a young family, expansion was not on the cards.

The two huts were part of the Canopy Camping Escapes catalogue, a collection of "special places of the glamping kind" throughout the country, all off the beaten track.

While their offering was luxury living, Mr Hewett and Ms Robinson said there was "still a bit of camping element", given the weather was outside their control and sometimes it could be "wild" — but that was part of the enjoyment.

Mr Hewett initially tried to greet every guest when they arrived but that proved difficult when they usually turned up late and he was busy farming.

But if people wanted to chat and find out more about the farm, then he was always happy to oblige. Guests were also welcome to go for walks on the farm.

One thing they had learned was the need to be very clear about what could and could not be done at the huts and they had some interesting stories to tell.

A complaint was received that they did not tell a guest to put some more wood on the fire to keep it going.

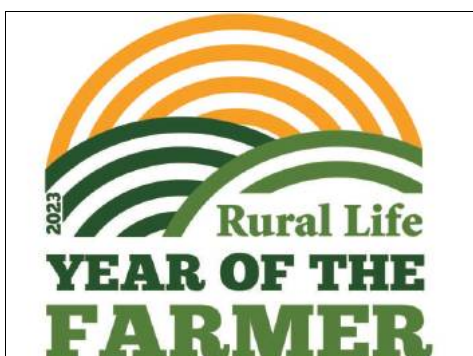
On another occasion, the solar power had run low due to the weather conditions but the guests did not tell Mr Hewett until the end of the stay; there was a generator at the hut that could have been flicked on.

One night, they got a call from guests staying at Rocky Ridge Hut, saying there was something outside, they were "freaked out" and going to leave.

When Mr Hewett arrived at the hut, the guests had the doors locked and were sitting with the wood-axe ready to defend themselves. It was believed a mouse had triggered the outdoor sensor light. sally.rae@odt.co.nz



Back to nature . . . Dunback is the location of a boutique accommodation operation located on a sheep, beef and cropping farm. PHOTOS: LIZZY JENKINS





Rob Hewett, holding son Walter, and Helena Robinson with baby Ted, on their Dunback farm.