

WINDY WONDERLAND

As they watch seals and ships go by, this farming couple say their Wairarapa bach is built for contemplation

STORY JANE HURLEY / PHOTOGRAPHS HAMISH TROUNSON

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When Ann and Noel Gray decided to build their new bach on the Wairarapa coastline, Ann's brief to the architects was simple. "I want to be able to lie in bed and see the sea," she told them.

The result is a simple concrete and glass "caravan", camped on a spectacular lookout point with views that go all the way to the South Island. It's a spot full of Maori history; the local iwi tended their kumara beds here and beside the bach rises a 30m-tall rock known as Kupe's Sail.

And, yes, Ann can lie in bed and watch seals diving in the surf and pods of dolphins and orcas crossing the reef. On a clear day she can see the Kaikouras, with the haze of the South Island beyond. "Some days you look out there and you feel you could just lick the snow off them." In summer, they stand out "beautifully" against the setting sun. Not bad, having the South Island's peaks backlit for your viewing pleasure.

Anne and Noel's home is in the southernmost housing division in the North Island. Halfway between the Cape Palliser lighthouse and the remote fishing village of Ngawi sits this little cluster of homes, clamped to the hillside. >

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The elements here are harsh and houses are battered by both the nor'westerly and the southerly winds. It's a site that Ann and Noel know well. Though their days are spent on their farm in Featherston, they built their first bach here in the 1970s, right next door – and discovered that, in a good blow, the whole house shook.

This time they wanted something low maintenance that wouldn't catch the wind. The rounded retro roofline does the job so well that when you're inside, Ann says, you don't even know about the wind. In Ngawi, that's a bit of a feat.

Disabled access was another must. “That was the other criterion we had. We're getting older. But we also have friends in wheelchairs so we're very aware of needing to have those facilities. In fact, as far as we're concerned, why doesn't every house?”

Looking around, it's clear that Studio Pacific Architecture and the tiny building team (King Tipoki and Vern Elliott from Lake Ferry) have done the couple proud. When lit up, the Gray bach seems to float above its surroundings and the roofline rises like a swelling wave. The walls are thick thermo-mass concrete, sandwiching a layer of polystyrene to trap the sun's warmth. All the concrete panels were made in Hastings and trucked to the site.

Ann was site foreman, which was, she says ruefully, “a big learning curve.” With all the walls pre-made, the electrician and plumber had to be on site before building even started, to make sure that all the right holes were going to be in exactly the right places, “because you had to put all that in the panels before they were made.” >



Ann did, however, rebel against the architect's suggestion of blonded ply for the ceilings and interior walls. Instead she opted for bold colours, which still showed the grain but added some much-needed warmth. The ceilings were coloured off-site but, feeling wanting a bigger choice of shades for the walls, Ann got an advisor in from Resene to achieve the same effect. "You can actually do the same thing with paint, as long as it's suitably watered down."

The elegant "terrazzo" benches in the kitchen/living area are actually polished concrete and they nearly didn't happen. "When I put the plans in front of the kitchen people," Ann says, "they quoted more for the benches than the rest of the kitchen." Luckily the Otaki business that had manufactured the concrete beams for their garage roof came to the rescue.

Just one of these benches weighs 700kg. Ann and Noel had visions of having to call on the local rugby team to help get them in but managed to slot it into the floor before the windows were in. "We trundled it in on pipes. We had these jacks and we cranked it up and slowly edged it in."

At the heart of everything, of course, is that amazing view. It's even visible from the sheltered courtyard behind the bach where Noel and Ann drink their morning coffee. "Often about six o'clock at night, you'll be looking out and there'll be a lovely big cruise liner going past because they've just left Wellington," says Ann. At night, the astonishing array of stars makes for great astro-gazing. And when you get lightning out to sea here, she says, "it's spectacular."

Says Noel: "We think we're going to do all sorts of things when we come out here but we actually end up just sitting and looking." ■



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