

home scene

peace of paradise

STEVE CHALLIS discovers Ara Roa, an upmarket home and accommodation venture 30km east of the city.



Paul and Susanne Olsen spent eleven years working in the highly charged, surreal world of the 'Superyacht Set' – a career that took them to many exotic and hidden corners of the globe. A glamorous and exciting lifestyle one might think – but according to Paul, the glamour part accounted for "perhaps 10% of the time, the other 90% could be damn hard work".

Paul says working for demanding billionaires certainly keeps you on your toes.

"But as a career it's brilliant. We recommend starting young – as this gives you time to think about the next step in life, a family."

Despite receiving fantastic job offers the Olsens eventually found the desire to start a family too strong. So they literally stepped off the boat (with a three-month-old baby girl!) – and back into the real world.

What now? How could they apply the skills acquired from running superyachts to a life on land? Well, if there was anything Paul and Susanne knew how to do, it was taking care of people, and a superyacht is the ultimate training ground in quality and service.

So the idea of creating some form of quality accommodation on land where these skills could be applied.

A few months before leaving the yachting career behind, the couple had purchased Ara Roa, a 60-acre block of land at Harambee Road, on a peninsula 30 kilometres east of Whangarei – and this is where they planned to build their home and accommodation venture.

Initially their thoughts leaned towards a boutique lodge or hotel, but with two young children in tow at the time the Olsens realised that this would not be feasible.

So they decided to go 'self-contained'. Market trends were showing that FITs (Free Independent Travellers) were heading more in this direction; being self-contained gave them the freedom to prepare and eat meals as they liked. And, surprising as it may sound, a lot of people actually like to cook, even on holiday!



With this in mind, Susanne made sure that the kitchen in the guest house at Ara Roa was better equipped than most. This has produced very positive feedback from guests, who say they actually enjoy working in the kitchen – and the view of a rural/coastal paradise is a bonus!

Quality materials and fittings have been applied throughout the free-standing guest house; special touches like heated floors, original artworks and an array of 'mood lighting'.

Although Ara Roa can accommodate a family of six, Paul finds that at least 50% of clients are couples "looking for something unique, off the beaten track, private, and with a bit of the 'X' factor. In just over four years here we've had zero complaints".

In fact, Ara Roa has formed quite a reputation among those who have visited, especially the couples and families who have stayed long enough to fully appreciate the local environment

fresco' as the sun set in the west and the waves of the blue Pacific rolled in to the east!

It is not Paul and Susanne's style to charge people for any of these experiences; if an activity is part of the Olsens' regular lifestyle, they are most happy to share it with their guests.

In most cases this is actually what visitors really want – to experience 'living' in the local environment and community. Paul also points out that this interaction extends to "a rather diverse and social group of neighbours".

Recently they had visitors accompany them on a 6km walk from Ocean Beach to Kauri Mountain. Where else, Paul asks, can you walk a 6km stretch of magnificent beach and scenery, in a sub-tropical climate, and not see another person and virtually no commercial development?

"People from more populous parts of the planet are just stunned at what locals and some New Zealanders take for granted."



The Olsens find it difficult to put Ara Roa into a category, or to define exactly what's on offer. Every visitor is different. Some are happy just to be left to their own devices, really appreciating the privacy and discretion "but they always know you are on hand, should they require anything".

Because high levels of service and privacy are paramount there are no great plans for expansion at Ara Roa. But in 2003 an Auckland couple from an adjoining property approached them about

managing their spectacular cliff-top home in the Ara Roa style.

As 'The Cliffhouse' fitted their criteria for quality, location and privacy, Paul and Susanne took on the job. The Cliffhouse is considerably larger than the 2-bedroom guest house at Ara Roa, so it has proved popular with larger groups – and with the stunning views, most people are just happy to sit on the deck with a glass of wine!

By late 2006 Paul and Susanne will have a third facility up and running, a self-contained studio that forms part of their home. But it will still be very private with a separate entrance and private deck areas, plus being constructed of solid masonry, the studio is well insulated from the Olsen family. The word studio might imply small, but at 70 m2 it is equal in size to the guest house, just in an open-plan format.

With over 50% of their clientele from overseas, there is never a shortage of interesting people, from a variety of cultures, to be met and entertained.

But the other 50% are New Zealanders. And nothing gives Paul and Susanne more pleasure than opening the eyes of fellow Kiwis to what is in their own back yard, especially in Whangarei.

The Olsens may have seen a lot of the world, yet they are still amazed by the peace they find in their piece of paradise. Being able to share it with others is "simply a pleasure".

IMAGES

FACING PAGE :

Hosts and visitors enjoy sundowners.

A French family with 6kms of beach to themselves.

THIS PAGE:

A coastal hike.

A very happy fisherman from Denmark.

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and what it has to offer. Many of these families have integrated into the Olsen family lifestyle, forming long-term friendships. Many families have returned more than once, including some who have to travel half way around the world.

And what exactly do these people find so compellingly attractive?

Take the case of a visiting Australian couple who were taken kayaking on Taiharuru estuary. Within three minutes of leaving shore they were

surrounded by a group of frolicking dolphins more or less jumping over the kayaks – and this went on for a couple of hours.

Another recent guest, the daughter of a Hollywood legend, professed she was keen on fishing. So Paul took her and her husband out fishing in a typical Kiwi 'tinnie'. They landed some decent snapper and kahawai, much to the visitors' delight. That evening the largest snapper was baked whole on the BBQ and enjoyed 'al

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