

# Hands-on farm experience top in tourism

Bird song fills the air and in every direction there are green hills and trees. The tranquil Rangitikei Farmstay won a top tourism award in the Enterprising Rural Women contest. **Jill Galloway** talks to Kylie Stewart about the initiative.



**Up close and personal:** Rangitikei Farmstay owner Kylie Stewart with horses that can be ridden by visitors.

Photos: WARWICK SMITH/FAIRFAX NZ

It's the quiet life that attracts New Zealand city dwellers and overseas people to the Rangitikei Farmstay. Just birds, green hills and trees dominate the rural homestay landscape and then there is a great starry night-sky with no city light pollution.

Kylie and Andrew Stewart run it and the homestay has 19 beds in mostly rustic accommodation. The buildings were an old farmhouse, hayshed, and washhouse before they were "made over" into accommodation.

Kylie Stewart won the New Zealand Enterprising Rural Women award for tourism at the body's national conference in May.

Andrew's family have been on the farm since 1901. The farm, Tyrone, has been in the Stewart family for over 110 years, making Rangitikei Farmstay an authentic New Zealand farm experience, says Kylie.

The couple moved to the farm in 2003 and soon after started work on the homestay side of the business.

They were the fourth generation of Stewarts to live on the farm.

"A plumber was here working in the old farm house/hayshed. He told us we were mad," says Kylie.

But that didn't put them off.

Both worked off-farm while they got the business up and running, Kylie as a

PE and health teacher in Whanganui and Andrew as a journalist and editor.

Rangitikei Farmstay is part of a working sheep and beef farm of 630 hectares and is in the heart of Rangitikei, about 28 kilometres north of Marton. It has 2000 sheep and 300 cattle.

It falls halfway between Wellington and Taupo and Kylie says they get visitors who are keen to stay and break that journey.

"The gap between urban and rural New Zealand has widened. There are kids who may never have experienced farm animals up close."

Rangitikei Farmstay helps fill that gap, Kylie says.

The farmstay means people can do a farm walk and see the animals, including

pigs horses, a rabbit, pet sheep and cows. There are also glow-worms on the farm.

Visitors can pay extra for mustering, shearing, a claybird shoot, riding horses, and playing hole-in-one golf.

And they can hunt sambar deer.

"There are plenty of deer here. In fact, people hit them on the road. They have come up from the forest, Santoft.

"We planted 40,000 pine trees and they were such a pest. I am over them."

They can be shot year-round.

"We like to give our visitors a taste of venison burger, now we know we can get the venison on the farm."

A lake is being developed and in the future there will be fishing and kayaking.

The thing that hooks many visitors is they get to have a go at some things.

It's a hands-on farm experience. They can get in among sheep in the yards; they can see dogs working; they can try their hand at shearing.

Kylie Stewart talks about what drove them to create the farmstay.

"A few years ago we travelled extensively. We went to Africa and patted lions, looked at giraffes and elephants. We thought wow, we could share what we think of as an ordinary life with others."

And the Rangitikei farmstay was born.

"There was also an Asian student who had been in New Zealand for 2½ years. She came here and said this was the best and most real farm experience she had had."

That helped drive the Stewarts to set



**Rustic charm:** Kylie Stewart inside the main bunk-house, which she and her husband Andrew have renovated.

up the farmstay. Many of the walls in the guest bunk-house are festooned with old wool stencils and cross-cut saws.

Another room, with a double bed and two singles, was built.

The Stewarts host people who can cook for themselves and may choose to pay for extra activities.

There are 19 beds in total, and they are mostly all taken in summer. The paddock was brought into the house gardens.

Trees were cut down to give a view of the Makuhou Valley. Totara battens line the edge of the garden.

There are day bus tours as well.

Sometimes 35-50 people arrive on a bus. They go for a farm walk, see the animals and often have a buffet lunch.

The International Pacific College (IPC) used to go to Rotorua's Agridome with its students. Now it goes to Rangitikei Farmstay. It's the hands-on approach they revel in.

"Some students were in the yards with a few sheep.

"So Andrew ran in 400.

"The students spent an hour in the pen with the sheep. Just bobbing around, catching some lambs and taking photos."

The rural homestay enables people to get up close and personal with a wide range of animals.

Kylie says she is supported and helped by people in the district, her mother and Andrew's parents.

Part of the rural womens tourist award was about community involvement.

"Andrew's father was thrilled as we kept so much of the history of the farm when we developed the farmstay."

She says they employ people if they have to feed the visitors.

"Farm staff sometimes help, and friends and family."

A lot of the extra work is done through WWOOF, where people do volunteer work on organic farms for food and a bed.

"We forget how extraordinary it is here. In many places in the world, people live on top of each other.

"They come here and can't believe we own all the paddocks they can see," says Kylie.

"This is not the first farmstay created in New Zealand, but patronage is growing. We also use Twitter and Facebook and it helps people know who we are. In New Zealand it is word of mouth.

"People at Marton [the closest town] say they haven't heard of us, but they are not our target audience."

The farmstay has been five months of solid work, and the Stewarts are going over to a Pacific island to have a break.

And although busy during parts of the year, the Stewarts would like to grow the business more.

"People see how we live on a farm.

"If you do the tourist thing you don't see that."

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