

TRAVEL



Down Jerusalem way

Hidden on the bank of the Whanganui River, a pair of simple cottages are an escape as well as a reminder of times gone by.

by JEFF KAVANAGH

A swing of the mallet and a plaintive “gong” sounds across the valley, hanging above the swollen river like unseen mist. The sound is barely a memory when it’s answered by a faint but cheery “Hello”, our signal to load the flying fox for the trip over to the cottages hidden among the native bush on the other side. Dropping bags with wine, cheese, beer and eggs onto the floor of the little Ferris wheel-like gondola, which sinks further under our weight and that of our luggage, my girlfriend and I wonder if we might have overdone the supplies.

We’re too excited for the thought to remain more than fleeting, however, so latch the gate shut and call out “okay”. With a soft whirr, the cable car slips gently down the wire, out over the muddied waters of the Whanganui River towards a red turret poking from the ferns and kanuka on the opposite bank.

The day is bright and warm; the late summer storm that tore off verandahs and roofs an hour

and a half down the road in Whanganui a few days earlier has left the sky wiped clean. It’s also brought down trees along the riverside road and on our drive through the Whanganui National Park from the old timber town of Raetihi in the north we pass thick, limbless trunks and a lone forestry worker with a chainsaw, and sawdust in his beard.

We break our wending journey with a stop in the tiny community of Jerusalem, where in the 60s Dunedin poet James K Baxter went because of a dream, became part of a commune and, after dying in Auckland, was returned to be buried.

Not much more than a few houses

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and an elegant mustard and red Catholic church gathered on a gentle bend in the river, the settlement feels cloaked in an air of near-abandonment. A few jittery cows bolt away from the car as we pull up outside St Joseph’s, and the only people we encounter are an old woman and a young boy sitting outside the church’s convent. They nod quiet hellos.

Inside the church, simple wooden pews face an altar carved with Maori designs and flanked by panels of red, white and black kowhaiwhai. It’s gloriously peaceful and calm, the building’s orderliness a deliberate contrast to the unpredictability of the nature beyond its doors.

An hour later, and 20km downstream from Jerusalem, our cable car nears its destination and we spy a man with a dog, cranking a large flywheel. The man’s name is John and he draws us from above the river into the coolness of the bush, welcoming us to the “Flying Fox Cottages” with a generous smile and an introduction to Billy, a fox terrier/jack russell cross and our almost-constant

Left, hosts John and Annette's house; right, the cable-car trip to the cottages; the James K Baxter Cottage.

companion for the next few days.

After a chat about the weather and our drive, John leads us through a garden full of heavily laden apple and lemon trees to a walnut grove and one of two cottages that he and his wife, Annette – who unfortunately we don't meet because she's busy during the week being the mayor of Whanganui – fashioned out of old wood and second-hand fittings.

Ours, the Brewer's Cottage, is the smaller of the pair and resembles from the outside a large musterer's hut, albeit a cool one built from red corrugated iron, macrocarpa and recycled bricks, and with an upstairs bedroom overlooking the river.

John opens the doors to a small living room and kitchen with an old copper cylinder for a sink, a wood-burner and a record player with a stack of LPs. Out the back we're shown the self-composting toilet that sits at the top of a spiral of steps like a throne, and, magically, an outdoor wood-fired bath.



Happily liberated by the river from the rest of the world and its responsibilities, we spend our waking hours eating beneath the walnut trees, reading, taking walks with Billy up to the ridge behind the cottage, playing games of Monopoly and petanque, and soaking in steaming baths under the night sky.

The James K Baxter Cottage next door stays empty for the first couple of days we're here and John and Annette's own place is far enough removed for us to be able to leave the doors of our cottage flung open, the Talking Heads, Muddy Waters and

Kiri Te Kanawa live in concert crackling from the speakers inside.

We've brought enough food to feed us for a week, but John also has a small "shop" – a pantry with bottles of beer and wine, a freezer full of chilli con carne and stewed fruit, and a little notebook for recording purchases.

One lunchtime, we pack a bag with chicken sandwiches, a bottle of chardonnay and some of John's freshly baked brownies and climb a short distance up the ridge. There, on a bed of moss beneath a canopy of kanuka, we lay down a blanket. The sun flickers through the trees and, once Billy bounds out of the ferns and flops down beside us, we hear nothing but the call of a tui and the flow of the river below. ■

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