

# THE CONTENTED CASTAWAYS

TO COUNTERACT THEIR BUSY CITY EXISTENCE, AN AUCKLAND COUPLE CRAVES SECLUSION AND THE SIMPLE LIFE. THEY'VE FOUND BOTH ON THE HAURAKI GULF'S RAKINO ISLAND

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"The view back to Auckland is breathtaking," says Stacey. "Watching the bay full of boats is like having your own reality TV show in your front yard."





Simple furnishings and generous outdoor living spaces make this an ideal holiday house.

## RAKINO REVIEW

- Rakino is 2.4km long and 1.2km wide
- There are more than 76 houses on the island today but at last count a permanent population of only about 16
- It was briefly used in the 1860s to inter prisoners from the Waikato Wars
- Bought by governor Sir George Grey in 1862 who built a house at Home Bay but was diverted by the superior attractions of Kawau Island
- Albert Sanford founded his fishing company there in 1874
- In 1963 the United Peoples' Organisation Worldwide planned to set up a philanthropic community on the island that would include a clinic for the disturbed, an orphanage, a refuge for unmarried mothers and homes for the elderly but nothing eventuated



ON ESPECIALLY BUSY FRIDAY NIGHTS, Stephen Thomas quietly enjoys the sight of bumper-to-bumper traffic crawling along Auckland's motorways. Those winking tail-lights can look quite lovely, he says, when viewed from a small boat on the Waitemata Harbour. While other city dwellers battle snarled roads to reach their baches, Stephen crams his aluminium runabout with supplies and points the bow toward his Rakino Island holiday home.

The 146-hectare island lies beyond Rangitoto's distinctive cone, hidden north-east of Motutapu Island. Rakino sports little more than a dozen residents, a public hall and wharf, a solar-powered telephone box and a few unsealed tracks that pass as roads. There are no shops or cafés, no reticulated water or power, no street lighting and definitely no traffic jams.

"It's very underrated," Stephen says of his favourite weekend hide-out. "Most people don't know where Rakino is. If they are under the age of 30 they think it's a bar in High Street. It's an undiscovered gem sitting on Auckland's doorstep. It's like a step back in time ... New Zealand 30 years ago. You arrive at the wharf and the old cars are parked there nestled in overgrown grass. It's eclectic and non-commercial. To me, it's the place that time forgot."

It's also the place where he proposed to wife Stacey Wah last year. Not that he had any intention of buying a property on Rakino. Stephen was roped into the idea by a friend who bought the land

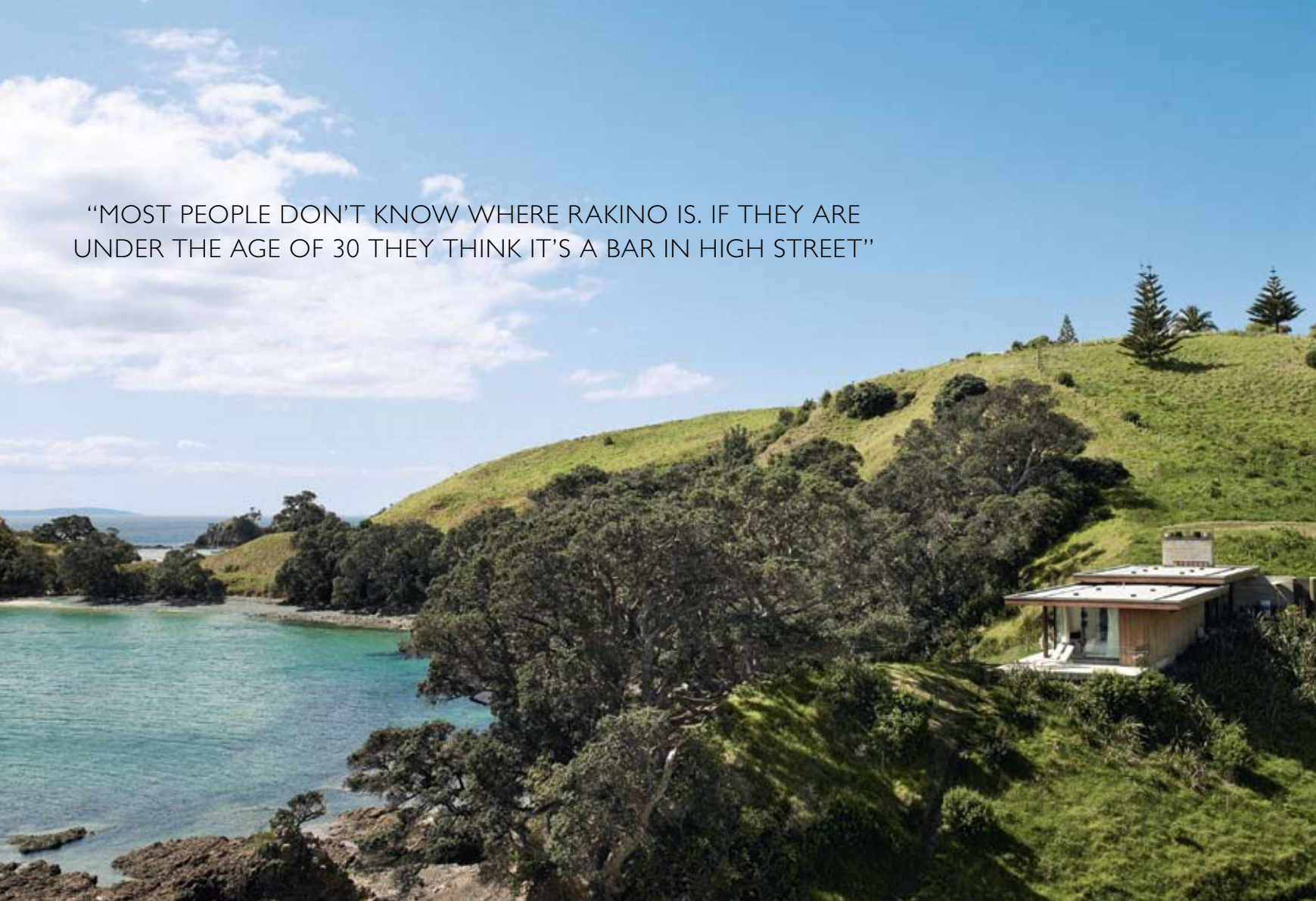
in 2001 but needed a partner to coordinate and oversee the house construction. The house was finished in 2007 and about a year later Stephen became its sole owner. "I'd been looking around Auckland and its environs, trying to find my own little bit of coastal paradise. I wanted something on the water, something on its own block of land with no neighbours. And I couldn't find anything unless I had an unlimited budget."

Initially, the little-known kikuyu-grass-smothered island did not interest him. "But once I ventured there, scrambled up and down the overgrown slopes and sat down to watch the sun setting, I realized it was pretty special." Stephen was immediately drawn to a knoll that hugged West Bay on the north-western side of the island. The site basks in afternoon sunshine, peeping through twisted old pohutukawa boughs to a pretty pebble beach. The back view is a rural idyll of green curves with the requisite ramshackle barn across the paddock. It is a world utterly removed from Stephen's city life which focuses on his inner-city home and social life and the Alaska Interiors commercial fit-out firm he owns in Freemans Bay.

On Rakino he plays farmer, donning gumboots and work clothes to plant native trees, cut paths, repair fishing gear or construct a new deck. He drives a beaten-up Hilux truck and relishes the ongoing challenges of a house that runs on a diesel generator, solar panels and rooftop water tanks.



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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:  
The house sits on the site of an old red shearers' shed in West Bay; Brian Hutton and Jack take a well-deserved break from property maintenance; Stephen and Stacey built the signpost from driftwood collected on the beach; the 1950s' caravan was lovingly refitted to make a spare bedroom.







ABOVE: Seen from the water, the house appears to merge into the landscape; an inflatable is used to ferry friends to their boats. OPPOSITE: Hundreds of newly planted flaxes are attracting tui to the property; the caravan's little deck is plenty big enough for entertaining friends; the comfortable interior of the caravan which is named Daisy.

Occasionally Stephen finds time to dip into the great fishing grounds offshore. "I find it hard to relax," he admits. "I'm always tinkering around doing something – top up the diesel, check on the water, chop firewood, make sure the sewer is running alright. Oh, look, that tree needs staking. I'm a man who has to have a project."

Building a 150sqm house a half-hour barge ride from the mainland was certainly a project. Ferrying tradesmen to and from the site sometimes required three trips a day. Stephen says he underestimated the logistical problems, the costs and the work involved. "It's a real education building on an island with limited access. I had no idea how difficult it was. You're building through winter when it's all slippery and muddy. You deliver materials with a barge on the beach but how do you get them up to the house? The real problem is with tradesmen. They're really enthusiastic the first week; it's all exciting, it's an adventure. The second week they settle in and it's just work. By the third week, they don't want to be there."

Initially, Stephen was not even convinced he liked the house plan. He was doubtful such a thoroughly contemporary home was right for the site. "Now I love it. It's not a large house but it has the feeling of space," he says, praising architect Darren Jessop. "It's so simple and uncomplicated and it nestles in so well. Even yachties, who'd normally be critical of man-made additions to a previously deserted site, make an effort to say what a gorgeous house it is."

Still, he could not resist adding his own old-fashioned touch alongside; a magnificently restored bubble caravan sits just below the house and commands its own sea views. "I've always wanted a classic, curved baby caravan," he says, remembering the envy he felt for holiday-makers parked near Mount Maunganui beach. "I never did caravan holidays as a kid and there's something quintessentially New Zealand about caravans. It harks back to a simpler life." ▶







Utilizing his impressive collection of tools and ready supply of timber, Stephen puts the finishing touches to the sign for wife Stacey's greenhouse.



An employee spotted the dilapidated wee caravan on a lawn in West Auckland. Stephen bought it and had it refurbished, lined with plywood and fitted with a large, comfortable bed. With help from “adopted son” Brian Hutton and nephew Jono Twyman, he built a deck out front and, at Christmas, the tiny spare room is festooned with fairy lights.

He explains that this corner of the island, with its gently sloping water access, was previously used to unload cattle for summer grazing. The beasts were traditionally brought over from neighbouring Motutapu Island when its pastures dried off and Rakino's hardy kikuyu grass still thrived. Stephen is embroiled in an ongoing battle with the grass, hacking and digging at it to establish the first 2000 mostly native trees and shrubs. “If we can, in some small way, compensate for our city lives then the least we can do is replant and nurture some trees. It's a long, long-term project.”

He hopes his nephews – or perhaps children of his own – will one day inherit a fledgling forest. In the meantime, both Jono and Brian are frequent visitors who have helped to build, plant and maintain the property. “I'm really close to my sister's boys. Whenever they come back from Europe they, along with Brian, are sent out to stay and weed and paint and mow the lawns. They also get to use the boat and the house and go fishing and impress their girlfriends.”

Stephen likes to share his second home, rarely visiting without Stacey and friends or family in tow. In summer, the couple visits most weekends. On warm days all doors slide open and the 20-seat table is hauled on to the deck for lunch and late-night gatherings. The former builder constructed the table himself, using timber left over from the caravan deck and a small selection of his vast tool collection. “On an island, it pays not to be without anything,” he says, laughing at his over-stocked tool-shed and claiming the kitchen bench is equally crammed. “We start off wanting to live more simply and to get away from the cosseted city life. Then, human nature being what it is, we are determined to have more and more creature comforts every time we go out there. We want isolation and a complete wilderness experience. It's an oxymoron; we like to get away from it all as long as we can have everything with us.”

The castaway has had to work for his creature comforts. “It really felt like pioneering, the first year or two. Everywhere you looked there was stuff to do. There was always so much to organize and, logistically, everything was a drama. It was a bit overwhelming. But we've got the systems down pat and the property is finally feeling ... more established and settled. Every time we come we appreciate it more. Now, we relish the solitude, rather than fear the isolation.”