

NZ

ROMANTIC THAILAND: WIN A \$12,000 DREAM

ISSUE 37

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Return of the COAST ROAD KID

IT'S BUSINESS AS USUAL FOR A TECHNO-SAVVY WEB DESIGNER WHO HAS EXCHANGED CORPORATE CITY LIFE FOR A SIMPLE EXISTENCE IN HIS ISOLATED CHILDHOOD HOME

WORDS YVONNE VAN DONGEN PHOTOGRAPHS DANIEL ALLEN



The house, nicknamed the "Motukiekie Hilton", dates back to coalmining days in the 1930s and '40s and was moved from Blackball to its current site to service the old coalmine in the valley behind the house. It was larger than most because it was the manager's house.





TRACES OF LEON DALZIEL'S former life lie like polished gems amongst the more commonplace detritus on his bathroom shelf. The sensuous torso-shaped bottle of Jean Paul Gaultier eau de toilette, the Sothys tubes and Karen Farley unguents are dead giveaways that this man hasn't always lived his life in a tiny house on the South Island's wild West Coast. If NZ Life & Leisure were the sort to go poking around bedroom cupboards, we suspect we might well find remnants of expensive-label metrosexual clothing items hanging lost and forlorn in the dark. Of course NZ Life & Leisure is not that sort so we can only imagine.

But that's not too hard actually, given Leon's hair still betrays a trendy salon dye job and Leon himself is a finely boned, well-constructed specimen. We're sure he would look good in a suit since he actually looks good in white freezing-worker gumboots, ripped cargo pants and a threadbare jumper. The thing is that Leon is the real deal. A genuine Coaster. Moreover, an original Coast Road kid. That's a subtribe that extends from Rapahoe in the south to Charleston in the north, some 50 kilometres. The kids are now spread far and wide but after years in cities, here and overseas, Leon has come home.

Home is a very small three-bedroomed house where he and his younger brother Evan grew up with their Thai mother and Kiwi father. It looks more like a bach now and is largely untouched. The school photos are still pinned to the original wallpaper, as are the certificates and old newspaper clippings. And although it wasn't so long ago that all this happened (Leon is, after all, only 38), the story of his childhood reads like something out of a 1930s or '40s story-book. His father and grandfather were jade prospectors with their own claims in the Arahura River, behind Hokitika. That's right; they made a living sussing out which boulders contained jade. There's even a photo of Leon's father Cliff in *National Geographic*, September 1987. He's looking up as a helicopter hoists a ruddy great greenstone rock overhead. Cliff Dalziel was also one of the first pakeha to carve jade; some of his pieces are on loan to the Left Bank Art Gallery in Greymouth.

Jade prospecting on the Coast offered an okay living but a fantastic childhood. The two boys climbed over hills, whacked their way through bush, burst through foamy white ocean waves, shot and skinned possums



ABOVE: Leon loves to cook and occasionally yearns for a nicer kitchen. But he can still whip up some splendid local mussels marinated in balsamic vinegar and brown sugar. TOP: The tiny rock outcrops not far from the shore and across the road from the house are the Motukiekie Islands – motu means island in Maori and kiekie is the native cutty grass.

The house with its original artefacts and clutter is a far cry from the modern, minimalist house Leon owns and rents out in Nelson.



THE STORY OF HIS CHILDHOOD READS LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF A 1930s OR '40s STORY-BOOK

for pocket money, went deerstalking with their dad, camped, caught fish and generally ran wild and free. Their father had a prospector's hut deep in the bush and they would stay with him for days at a time, cooking over an open fire and living simply. They often visited after a flood since heavy rainfall moved and exposed the jade boulders.

Boarding school in Nelson at age 12 came as something of a shock to a country boy but eventually he got the hang of things and loved it by the time he left. He even gained a house prefect's badge for good behaviour – not brilliance, according to Leon, who reckons he's always been an average student although his parents were smart. His dad was well read and his mother has been a teacher and a clinical nurse specialist, finished a PhD in psychology and now teaches nursing students at Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology.

But Leon was more of a right-time, right-place sort of guy. Without having a life plan as such, he stumbled into business computing at polytech in Greymouth. "It seemed the thing to do at the time, but I did a lot of surfing too." Once the course finished he flew to Sydney where his mother then lived. Leon had planned to start his OE there but instead scored a job in an ad agency. How? "It's all a bit blurry," he says ruefully. Although he'd failed School Cert art and computer studies, he was interested in both. The early days of Apple Macs were made for him and the heyday of advertising with its work hard, play hard, big money and long lunches ethics wasn't bad either. So he stayed. He started at the bottom and ended up as a computer graphic artist. "The computer is a wonderful tool with which to create something." ▶





LEON'S FORAGED FOOD
 ● Punakaiki Whitebait Patties

A beaten egg, a handful of sifted flour and mountains of freshly caught Punakaiki River whitebait. Mix together and instead of shallow frying, deep-fry the patties. Serve hot on home-made crusty bread with lashings of butter and salt and a generous squirt of Worcestershire sauce.

● Motukiekie Marinated Mussels

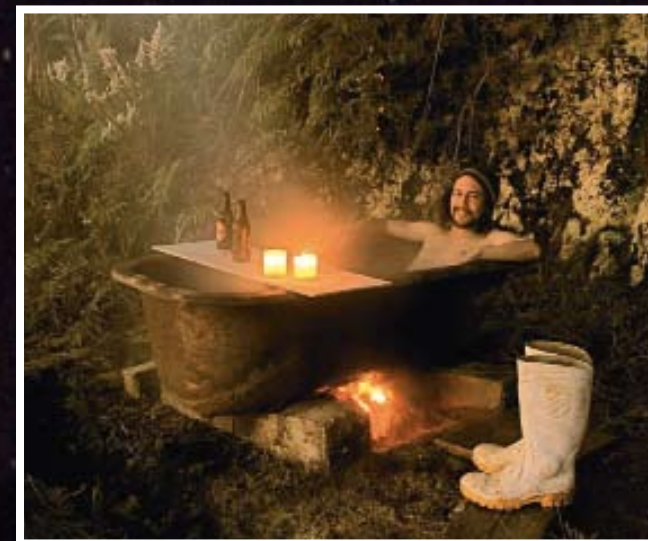
Pick only the biggest, fattest specimens from the local mussel beds at low tide. Lug them up the beach track and pop them straight into a pot to steam open. Cool, shell and marinate in balsamic vinegar, brown sugar and sesame oil, preferably overnight. Best served as a bribe, or to impress.

He stayed for five years, landing jobs, but eventually Sydney wore him down and he returned to New Zealand, working in Nelson and Wellington ad agencies and back again to Nelson where he embarked on the job he is doing now – web designing. In 1999 he set himself up as baby-e.co.nz and finally found his niche. He's been web designing for more than 10 years now and loves it still.

During this time his father died, leaving the house on the Coast Road to Leon and his brother who lives in Melbourne. Initially Leon popped down for the occasional tech-free weekend. With no cellphone coverage and only one television channel, his childhood home was the ideal bolt-hole. Then he found himself coming down more and more. Finally he had the phone put on, connected to the net and SKY, put away his designer gear and began to work here for a week at a time. Without realizing it, Leon was easing himself back into Coast life. From 2009 he began to live here full time although he still owns a house in Nelson. Being a man who doesn't like to plan too much, Leon says while he loves living here now he doesn't know how long he will stay. "Never say never."

Technology has enabled him to run baby-e from his childhood home. The jade claims have long since gone, returned to local iwi, but he can still go bush-walking, deerstalking, diving, fossicking for mussels, fishing, whitebaiting, surfing and rock-climbing. All with his dog Bud. Lonely? "Never. There's quite a social life here. A lot of dinner parties with people of all ages and bonfires on the beach." Twice a week Leon spars in kickboxing matches at the Barrytown Hall. He'd always wanted to try the sport and, as luck would have it, an instructor lives down the road.

This is definitely not retirement. "Too young for that," he says. He works a normal day, travels to Greymouth (20 minutes away) and Nelson regularly for work and supplies and is keen to expand his working base. But as for the OE, well, he reckons he's too old for that. Instead he'd rather visit the Pacific Islands and unexplored places on the Coast. In some ways he hasn't changed. Leon still loves dressing up, adores new toys (bit of a gadget man, to be honest) and enjoys a nice dinner in the city. The best thing about living here is that he doesn't have to give up these pleasures. They have just become treats in a life full of the joys of his childhood. 🐾



Leon's outdoor bath is set on a helipad. True. His father used to be picked up here by the Barrytown helicopter pilot and flown to his jade claim.

HOW LEON SURVIVES THE ISOLATION

The pup is great company. Everything we do is an adventure for him.

I try to stay on top of news and current events. I think it's important to remember there's a bigger world outside my own little one.

The Coast Road has a real feeling of community, with regular events and get-togethers to catch up with each other.

Transitioning from the wop wops to the city, "clothes maketh the man". Feeling comfortable and being able to blend into the environment, whether it's wearing white gumboots and tattered clothing in the bush, dressing up for a corporate meeting or heading out for a romantic dinner date, I'm always dressed for the occasion.

