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Making Mount Taranaki Home

Since the end of January this year, we, Markus and Sera with our two daughters Kaylen and Alena, have been making Dawson Falls Mountain Lodge, on the south-eastern slopes of Mt Taranaki, our home. Once you drive through the Taranaki farmland via Upper Manaia Road, you reach the gateway to Egmont National Park. "Our driveway" is a beautiful 10 minute drive through a canopy of native New Zealand bush. Situated at 904 meters above sea level at the Dawson Falls Road end is the DoC (Department of Conservation) information centre, a viewing platform and our Swiss style Lodge and Cafe.

The tourism potential of this beautiful part of Egmont National Park was realised in the late 1800s, after the Falls were discovered by Thomas Dawson, a Manaia telegraphist, in March 1885. A small house was erected in 1894-95 for tourists by the South Egmont Board of Conservators. Then, a hut was opened in 1896 - the beginnings of the Dawson Falls Mountain Lodge. It was a popular visitor attraction and a caretaker was appointed to take care of all of the visitors - from touring motorists, to adventurous climbers and holiday makers seeking health, rest and relaxation. Many lovely scenic walks were right at the Lodge's doorstep and the fresh mountain air ensured a good night's sleep.

In the 1960s, the Egmont National Park Board sold the Lodge to a private couple, the land still remaining under a DoC lease. In 1973, the then owner, Keith Anderson, began renovating the Lodge into its unique Swiss/Austrian style. Keith had never been to Switzerland until later with his Swiss wife Berta, but gained ideas from books, calendars and Swiss people who worked at the Lodge. A great deal of natural materials were used, especially wood and stone, along with hand carved furniture. Douglas fir was mainly used due to its outstanding grain. A very unique and homely atmosphere was achieved, inviting guests to mingle and make new friends.

It was this touch of Switzerland in a beautiful New Zealand alpine setting that captured our attention when we first saw the Lodge was for sale. We had always dreamed of our own family accommodation business, but had not until then found our "perfect fit".



Markus, a Swiss Austrian, yearned for the mountains and snow, but Sera still wanted to be close to family in the Manawatu – and this piece of paradise was it. Having first met in 1993 in Lake Dive Hut, just a four hour tramp from the Lodge, we thought it may have been in our destiny to end up here. Markus was doing a world trip with a friend and Sera the round the mountain track with her sister and Dad. When the two Swiss started playing Swiss cards in the hut that night, Sera and her sister asked if they could join in. Markus and his friend were not ready for a hammering from these two Kiwi girls - little did they know their Dad from Rapperswil had taught them to Jass well!

Sera was only home on holiday as she was doing her nursing training in Westerstede, a small town in north west Germany where she had experienced a Rotary exchange earlier. Markus attended a five year Swiss Hotel Management School training course in Lucerne. Between these places we travelled, often using the night train across Germany to see each other. We married in Markus's home town of St Gallen before we came to New Zealand in 1999. Markus spent five years working for the Pacific International Hotel Management school in Bell Block near New Plymouth, before we moved to Feilding to be near family.

But the Taranaki has drawn us back again. We were very fortunate to have Markus's parents staying with us from Switzerland. Their holiday soon turned into a working one, as there was a lot to be done when we took over the Lodge. Markus's Dad finished replacing the decking and there is plenty lined up for his next visit! A front facelift was desperately required with painting, signage and a new driveway. We would like to

maintain the Lodge for future generations, as being here since 1896, it has a lot of history and many people have a connection with the place. The walks from the doorstep are beautiful - the short walk to Dawson Falls, the popular Wilkies Pools loop track that passes through the goblin forest with its twisted trees draped in lichen and moss, right up to challenging climbs to Fanthams Peak and the Summit. It's a botanists' paradise, from bush to alpine scrub, to alpine tussock meadow and then up to the rocky slopes.

The Lodge is a perfect base to explore the park and surrounding area, as being so accessible, we are not far from the Taranaki coast, its small towns and beautiful parks and gardens. Mt Taranaki, at 2518 meters, is one of the world's most symmetrical volcanic cones with unusually complex vegetation patterns. The Lodge's heating and lights are still powered by a hydrogenerator which was installed in 1934. It is believed to be one of the oldest in the world in continual operation. We check it and have it maintained, also clear the leaves from the dam inlet to ensure the Lodge stays light and warm. The Lodge has not been owner operated for some time and this definitely has had its challenges, especially during the first couple of months. However, we only have to look out and see the mountain or take a stroll through the goblin forest to revitalise our energy and visions for this special place.

We hope to be good caretakers of the Lodge for our time, and enjoy the privilege of being able to live in a National Park and meet so many lovely people from all around the world. We were recently honoured to have our first wedding right here in our Lodge lounge. A lovely couple chose to commit to one another and we could play a part in their celebration. When they left a couple of days later, I couldn't help but have a tear come to my eyes and I noticed the same for the bride, as we gave each other a good bye hug. This place, Dawson Falls Mountain Lodge, will be forever more in her memories. Our beautiful mountain now will hold a fond place in her heart, as it does in mine. That is a special blessing we share and what this is really all about; and why we are here.

By Sera and Markus Hojdelewicz