

An Italian love affair



PICTURES © Justine Tyerman

Justine Tyerman falls in love with a classy Italian . . . and so does her husband.

Lucy was highly offended when she overheard us discussing whether to take the mountain route over the Crown Range from Wanaka to Queenstown Airport or the low road via Cromwell.

She assumed we were doubting her ability to scale the 1076m-high pass with a dusting of fresh snow, and the seven hairpin bends on the descent into the Wakatipu Basin.

After a week on the road, my driver-husband Chris and I had bonded with Lucy,

who despite her English-sounding name, was of Italian extraction, her middle name being Fiat and her surname Ducato . . . which may account for her emotional outburst on our last day together.

"After carrying you safely from Christchurch to Queenstown, over Arthur's Pass and all the way down the West Coast, sheltering you from wild weather at Jackson Bay, keeping you cosy in the sleet and the sub-zero temperatures in Wanaka, and waiting patiently while you went for your interminable walks, you doubt my grunt to climb a trifling 1076 metres and negotiate a few wussy corners. I am from the distinguished Fiat Ducato family, raised on mountain roads three times this height, I'll have you know," she said haughtily.

Apologising for ever doubting her horsepower, we packed away our cooking gear and locked Lucy's ample storage cupboards into travel mode for the last time and reluctantly trundled away from our idyllic overnight stop at Glendhu Bay on the shores of Lake Wanaka.

We had spent a blissful week on a 'slowcation' roadie down the West Coast of the South Island exploring places we had whizzed through on former trips and finding obscure out-of-the-way places to camp.

Being fully self-contained in our 6-berth JUCY Casa Plus, nicknamed Lucy Class, we had the luxury of stopping wherever we pleased for as long as we wished, which gave us a heady sense of freedom.

It took a while to reprogramme ourselves to the fact we had no deadlines to meet, no check-in, check-out times to worry about and were totally free agents. The sole focus of

every day was to find stunning spots to stop for lunch, dinner, hiking and overnighting.

We drove a maximum of about three hours a day, exploring spectacular places like the astonishing limestone rock formations at Castle Hill on SH73, the exquisite Devil's Punch Bowl waterfall at Arthur's Pass and the silvery lagoon at Okarito, the nesting ground of the rare and sacred white heron or kotuku.

But Lucy's favourite time of day was when we returned from our expeditions for showers and beer as the sun went down in kaleidoscope of fire on a deserted West Coast beach. She turned on her heaters and lights, relishing the opportunity to show off the facilities that allow her to snootily rank at the top of JUCY's campervan and motorhome range. With her fridge full of food and her three gas hobs and stove humming, dinner was only ever 15 minutes away.

Showering in a confined space was quite an art and required a high degree of organisation, ensuring one had everything needed before enclosing oneself in a cubicle about a quarter the size of a regular shower. The gas-heated hot water cylinder allowed for two 3-4 minute hot showers, or longer when we were plugged into mains power at a camping ground.

The convenience of an onboard shower and loo was immeasurable. It sure beat traipsing to a cold, dark facilities block on a freezing night.

We purchased two brand new hot water bottles before leaving home thinking we would need them at night but they got the biff after five minutes in our cosy beds which were amply supplied with winter duvets and pillows.

A stunning sunset at Okarito Beach on the West Coast of the South Island.

When we pulled the blinds and stuck the insulated covers to the windscreen and cabin windows with suction pads, we were so snug we had to open one of the two skylights . . . even in the snow.

The excitement of waking with the dawn and looking out the window at a different Aotearoa gem every day was priceless — the desolate storm-blasted beach and angry grey seas of Jackson Bay, the pink peaks of the Southern Alps at Franz Josef, the black mirror of Lake Matheson, the necklace of snowy mountains surrounding us at Glendhu . . . every new day was remarkable.

I hugged Lucy and we both shed a tear or two (Lucy and I that is) as we handed over the keys to Megan at Queenstown Airport. She had safely carried us 1000km over mountain



Justine kissing Lucy goodbye.

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