

Once upon a time IN THE WEST

STRAP ON YOUR SIX-SHOOTER
AND HANG ON TO YOUR STETSON,
YOU ARE ABOUT TO DISCOVER
NEW ZEALAND'S WILD WEST

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PHOTOGRAPHS TRACEY GRANT





The author and her husband, John (far left), mounted on their tamed Kaimanawa stallions. The forge is full of authentic tools shipped from the States. Detlef and Prue (left) celebrate their wedding anniversary decked out in Stetsons and rabbit skins.



One woman got off her horse, stripped to her bra and pants and jumped into a trough. 'You wouldn't see that in the city'

TUKI HAS A KIND EYE, but I'm still wary. Eighteen months ago he ran wild in the Kaimanawa Ranges, protecting his harem of mares. When roused, feral stallions bite, rear and lash out with their hooves. They can lift a person off the ground with their teeth or break their fingers with a snap. "Gentle as," says Tommy Waara, a man who has broken in more horses than he has had hot showers. "I'd trust him more than I'd trust some folk."

We're at Mellonsfolly Ranch in Ruatiti Valley, near Raetihi, the aptly named "Wild West" of the Central Plateau. This is no country for weaklings. The road in is rutted and narrow, more suited to hooves than hatchbacks. At night, it is peppered with slow hedgehogs out hunting, recent rock falls and the occasional rear end of a startled deer.

A sign appears, and so does a man with a shotgun. "Howdy pardners," he says, before firing off a blast fit to wake Doc Holliday. Apparently, two overseas visitors were so scared by the sight of a wild man welcoming them with a weapon, they turned tail and biked back the way they had come.

Mellonsfolly Ranch is a replica of a Wyoming frontier town nestled in a valley surrounded by 400-odd hectares of hills, deep canyons and slow-running streams. There are 14 buildings including a saloon, hotel, jail, courthouse, livery stables and single rooms for single ladies. It was built 10 years ago by Auckland businessman John Bedogni because he loved westerns and wanted a place where he could strap on a six-shooter, saddle up a horse and ride into the sunset. He sold it three years ago to the Bartley family of Wanganui. Sarah and Miguel Bartley-Leuzman live on site under the aliases, Rosita and Pancho.

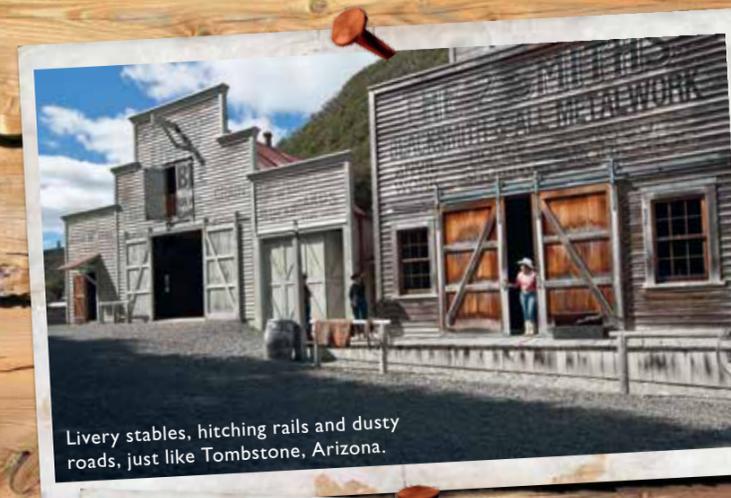
The town is impressively authentic and the construction, by 40 builders, immaculate. Floors are made from local matai, which was taken out to be treated and then brought back. The sweeping staircases are rimu, and much of the furniture is oak.

Bedogni and his wife Kenda, former head of Chanel in New Zealand, sourced and shipped container loads of furniture, antiques and memorabilia from the United States. A large moose head hangs from one wall, a black bearskin on another. There is a buffalo skin with a hide as thick as two fingers. The imported brass beds are high and wide and there are pioneering-style potbelly stoves – and under-floor heating – for when the chill sets in. The library is stacked with western novels and DVDs. The courthouse doubles as a cinema.

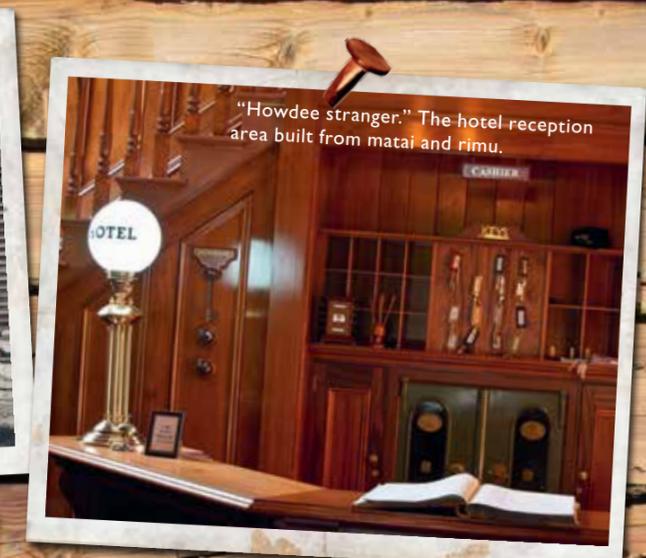
Guests are encouraged to wear western gear during their stay and there are costumes on hand to supplement their wardrobes. Stetsons and holsters are everywhere. To turn up at Mellonsfolly in anything other than jeans, boots and belts with trophy buckles would be like attending a nudist convention in a suit.

The guests this weekend are largely western devotees. Detlef and Prue from Wanganui are celebrating their 20th wedding anniversary and Detlef's arrival in New Zealand from Germany three decades ago. He was brought up on a diet of Wild West novels by the German writer, Karl May, featuring an Apache brave named Winnetou and his white-skinned blood brother, Old Shatterhand, named because he could floor a man with a single punch. The couple has several changes of costume for the weekend, including Detlef's own replica revolver. Prue has made a vest from rabbit skins sourced through Trade Me.

Another group of friends from Levin is here for a memorial to a man who loved westerns and visited Mellonsfolly regularly, the last time when he was dying of cancer. They have brought his ashes which they scatter in the paddock. When they leave, the horses move in to graze on the remains. "I think dad would have enjoyed that," says one of the women. Other guests include a 50-something horse fanatic, a 30-something librarian and a couple with two kids who prove to be sharper shooters than their parents.



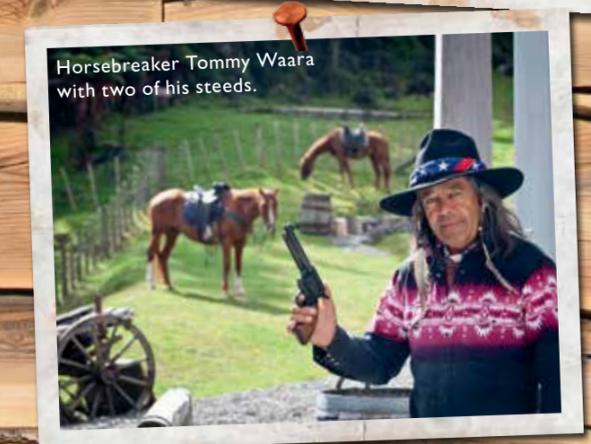
Livery stables, hitching rails and dusty roads, just like Tombstone, Arizona.



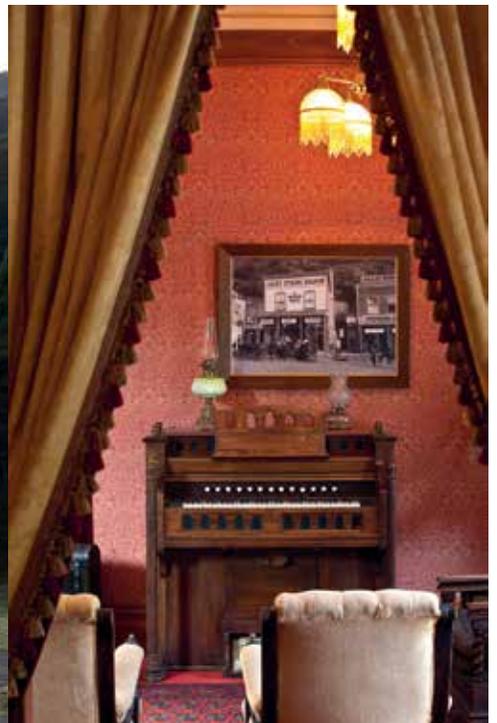
"Howdee stranger." The hotel reception area built from matai and rimu.



"Line 'em up." Lucky Strike saloon and dining room.



Horsebreaker Tommy Waara with two of his steeds.



CLOCKWISE There's a hush in the mist-capped valley; after a musical soir ee, guests are guaranteed deep sleep in the imported brass beds.



NOTEBOOK

How to get there: By car or bike: turn off SH4 between the Ohakune turnoff and Raetihi. There is no cellphone coverage in the valley. By helicopter: There are two helicopter sites at Mellonsfolly Ranch.

Accommodation: The rooms are all Victorian-style and themed after characters from the Wild West. Rooms range from standard, with king single bunks or beds, to premium rooms with luxury queen-size brass beds. There is also the Old Mine Building, which sleeps up to six. Parties of up to 20 can rent the whole town and ranch exclusively. Overnight stays include all meals and complementary activities, and range from \$325pp to

\$1000pp for the Proprietor's Suite Package. Day-tripper packages are \$120pp. All packages and experiences are by reservation-only entry.

What to do: Trail-riding on horseback, hiking, biking, clay-bird shooting, pistol shooting and archery, horseshoe pitching and cannon-firing (at sunset).

Other activities: Mellonsfolly is close to the Mountain-to-Sea Cycle Trail, the Mangapurua Track (hiking, biking and riding), Tongariro National Park, Whanganui River jet-boat rides and ski fields.

When to go: The ranch is open on Share the Town weekends throughout the year. Check the website for available dates. oldwesttown.co.nz

The hosts this weekend are Dusty and Ruby, a couple in their late 50s (in their other lives they are Stu and Vicky from Wanganui). Stu is a former digger contractor and farmer; Vicky a former hairdresser, with ruby hair. Vicky says it's hard to shake off their persona when they leave the ranch. "I keep going to call him Dusty." She gets a kick out of seeing city folk transformed. "One woman got off her horse, stripped to her bra and pants and jumped into a trough. You wouldn't see that in the city."

It's tough work running a frontier town. Before guests arrive, Dusty keeps watch from a fence post up the hill. When he spots the car, he and Ruby sprint to form a welcoming party, complete with shotgun salute. Dusty wears a sheriff's badge, gives guided tours and shows folk how to target shoot and fire a bow and arrow. In between he might build a tombstone or cut trails through the scrub. Ruby, who doubles as barmaid and cook, says he's like a pig in muck on the ranch. On the last day, he emerges in long johns with a bottle of whisky in hand and a black eye. "She was a bad 'un," is all he says.

Two things prevent Mellonsfolly Ranch from being a tacky theme park. One is the attention to authentic detail. You could spend days reading the documentation on outlaws and lawmen alone. The second is the location. The valley feels like a frontier land. Mobiles don't work here. Story-telling takes the place of texting; camaraderie builds up around the campfire. Some tales involve past times when real outlaws holed up in the hills.

Wrangler Tommy Waara spins stories as we ride the trails beneath a *Simpsons'* sky with fluffy clouds. Tommy is a local but he looks like a Native American Indian. He has grey hair to his shoulders, often sleeps in a teepee and carries an unsheathed machete when he rides. He leads the way expertly through the manuka, where the honey bees drown out the cicadas. A kereru flies past and a long-tailed cuckoo calls to its mate. Kiwi are abundant in the bush.

On the three-hour trail ride, my mount Tuki is as quiet as his master promised. He was one of two stallions Tommy broke in during last year's Kaimanawa Challenge, in which trainers are randomly assigned wild horses to train within six months. "All I did for the first fortnight was sit on the fence and watch him," he says. "Couldn't get near him."

We approach a steep downhill stretch. A wild stallion would take this at full gallop. Tuki braces his powerful hindquarters and carefully picks his way down the slope. He may not have a harem any more. But he seems mighty content.