

Coming Home to Kamahi

By Amelia Norman

The sun is thinking about setting behind the rolling King Country hills as I wind my way through verdant farmland to Kamahi Cottage. As I drive, speckled cows glance up indifferently from their grazing. Two plump pheasants skitter across the road.

At the top of the driveway my host Liz magically appears from a fragrant garden, “Welcome Amelia!” she calls. Although we have never met, her greeting is so warm and her manner so welcoming that I feel like I’ve come home for the holidays.

If Kamahi Cottage *were* my home, I doubt I would ever have left. The cottage is New Zealand’s only five-star farmstay and was built with the express purpose of enveloping exclusive guests in utmost comfort amongst the serenity of the King Country farmland.

From the waffled slippers that I slide on at the door, to the sumptuous possum fur blanket on the upstairs bed, everything about Kamahi whispers elegant luxury.

“Whenever you’re ready, just pop on over to the house and we’ll have a drink before dinner,” says Liz once she’s shown me the ins and outs of the cottage. When she leaves I flop onto the comfy couch, snuggling up to a fluffy cushion and gaze out to the rolling, endless farmland beyond. I exhale loudly. I could get used to this...

Over a sumptuous three course dinner in their stunning home, Liz and her husband Evan ply me with warm hospitality, homemade schnapps and the fairytale of how they ended up here, atop a hill in rural New Zealand.

The 450ha sheep and beef farm on which Kamahi and the Cowan family homestead perch belongs to Evan’s family. After World War II, Evan’s father returned to New Zealand as an ex-prisoner of war and developed the farm, clearing brush and sowing seed by hand.

After a childhood on the farm, Evan left to study organic chemistry at nearby Waikato University. There he met Swiss-born Liz, whose family had emigrated to New Zealand when she was a young girl, and who was studying literature and language. After completing their studies, the couple returned to Evan’s home with the intention of staying for a year. “But we never left!” exclaims Liz.

“Why would you?” I ask rhetorically, as we stroll through their perfectly manicured garden, gazing out to Mt Pirongia in the dusky distance. The air smells of roses and the only sound is the trickling of a brilliant water feature.

Back in the warm cottage, I draw the heavy drapes and turn on the soft lighting. Nibbling on Liz’s exquisite homemade chocolate brownies I contemplate what to do next. Shall I listen to the stereo? Or watch a DVD from the ample selection? Maybe I could read the magazines or books on offer and kick back with a bottle of local wine. I could make a cup of tea – but which one to choose!

Worn out and sated I opt, instead, to snuggle into the plush double bed where the soft trill of moreporks lulls me to sleep.

I awake to silence. Lying still I absorb its unfamiliarity. Slowly, as I strain to hear, sounds become apparent: the light ticking of a clock, the distant baa of a sheep and the happy twitter of early morning birds. Padding across the thick carpet I pull back the curtains to reveal a vista of endless undulating green. This is farming country. Located just one hour's drive from the agricultural hub of Hamilton, the land around Kamahi Cottage is dotted with sheep and cows and is criss-crossed with wire fences. It rolls on continuously, in every direction, eventually disappearing beneath the low-lying steely cloud.

The urge to get back into bed and spend the day lolling about the cottage is almost magnetic. But I've got places to be. And besides, Liz is delivering my breakfast in an hour. By the time she taps gently on the cottage door, I'm showered, dressed and smelling suspiciously like the entire collection of Linden Leaves products on offer in the bathroom.

"Good morning! How did you sleep?" enquires Liz with such warmth that I know she is sincerely interested in my answer. As I gush about the comfy bed and the silent morning, she presents me with the most gourmet of continental breakfasts.

On the tray sits a glass of orange juice, a jar of homemade muesli, a vibrant fruit salad, yoghurt, milk, a choice of three types of toast, two enormous croissants, a range of homemade jams, locally made honey and curls of yellow butter. I can only imagine what delights I would have received had I taken Liz up on her offer of a cooked breakfast: "pancakes?" she offered the night before. "I can do an omelette?" "What about some baked eggs? Or waffles?"

Given the calibre of Liz's cooking, I could easily devour all of these twice over— but I am about to launch myself through caves at nearby Waitomo and figure a bursting stomach may not be conducive to a good rafting trip.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay another night?" says Liz as I prepare to leave. If it was really a matter of what I wanted, Liz would never get rid of me. But the Waitomo Caves are calling.

After dispensing driving directions, Liz bids me a hearty farewell, waving from the driveway as the sun starts to splinter through the clouds. Although it's been less than 24 hours since I arrived, I feel like I'm saying goodbye to an old friend.

"Do come back for another visit, Amelia!" calls Liz.

I'm already planning it.

Amelia stayed at Kamahi Cottage courtesy of Liz and Evan Cowan.