

Host New Zealand Magazine - February 2009 Focus on The Mudcastle

This quirky, adaptable venue is literally built from the ground it stands on - all 20,000 adobe bricks of it - but its owners reckon it's been worth every drop of sweat and slipped disc.

By Rosemary Hepozden

In the eight years it had been on the market, nobody had spotted the potential of the triangular piece of gorse-covered land at the head of the Neudorf Valley just outside of Nelson and the property remained unsold - until Kevin Johnston and Glenys Harte chanced upon it in 1990, just six weeks after they had met. With its elevated position and rural views, they knew they'd found the perfect site for the large home they dreamed of. What they didn't know, however, was that when the gorse, ferns and pines were cleared from the site, they would be confronted with "a mountain of clay that was going to cost a fortune to truck off the site".

When a builder friend mentioned the possibility of using the clay to build and a library book on adobe houses appeared to back up his hunch, Johnston and Harte - with a multi-national army of Wwoofers (Willing Workers on Organic Farms) - undertook to make the 20,000 bricks needed to give shape to the dream. Harte says the physical work was "just so daunting", intensive labour that was completed in the evenings and weekends while the couple held on to their full-time jobs. But brick by brick, stage by stage, their home has become The Mudcastle, a multi-purpose venue with turrets and crenellated walls that in addition to bed and breakfast guests, hosts weddings, conferences, theme nights and murder

mystery weekends - a creation quirky enough to be featured in Extreme Homes of the World, a 26-part English television series made in 2005.

"Our original dream was just for a large home," says Harte, "but we built to fit the demand that was coming to us. People had been driving past watching this thing take shape and were dying to see inside so, when asked, we gave a group of local women lunch one day and everything started from there."

In addition to a habit of hard work, what Johnston and Harte brought to the venture was a background in hospitality and catering. Harte had been trained in the art of silver service in Des Britten's Wellington restaurant, The Coachman, had owned her own restaurant and had managed a hospital kitchen; Johnston had worked front-of-house in Nelson's legendary café, Chez Eelco. Also required was a certain naivete, says Harte, about how back breaking, literally, it would be: early on, she slipped a disc after carrying too many bricks, and Johnston became burnt out to the point that decision-making was proving impossible. They could only maintain momentum by reinventing themselves: "At that point, Kevin became my back and I became a list maker."



Holidays have proved an elusive respite from business - and, it seems, not something that the couple is very good at. "In 1994, we went to Fiji for our only holiday in 18 years. Within 12 hours, Kevin had got an ear infection and I'd come down with shingles. And even then, we were dying to get our toolkit out and repair a few things around the resort we were staying at."

In any case, holidays are a luxury denied to those whose home is their income. "People out on a Sunday drive will just drop in to have a look through as if it's a public venue. We can't be in our dressing gowns or have dirty dishes in the sink." Despite the on-call nature of the business, reward lies in their guests' admiration for all their creative effort and the success that has sprung from their early commitment to keeping ownership in their own hands rather than accepting involvement from overseas investors. Certainly, says Harte, it isn't because of any due diligence they put in at the start: "For two people who are usually cautious by nature, it was an outrageous thing to do!"