

A bright IDEA

INSPIRED BY THE ENDLESS SKIES AND
TUSsocks OF MACKENZIE COUNTRY,
THIS COUPLE LEFT THEIR HEARTS
WIDE OPEN TO BUILDING A LIFE (AND
TINY CABIN) IN THE NATION'S NIGHT-
SKY CAPITAL

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Skylark Cabin, a 50-square-metre bach on the outskirts of Twizel, sits among tussocks atop a plinth of natural stone boulders reclaimed during the site excavation.



THESE PAGES:

Christchurch couple Liz Harpelton and Garry Wilson had squirreled away their life savings in anticipation of building a rural bach for retirement. In 2020 Garry and airedale terrier Ted (short for Dr Ted) spent months living in their campervan while Skylark Cabin was built. On the coldest of nights, poor Ted's water bowl would be frozen solid by morning; Christchurch architect Barry Connor selected the rough-sawn, dark-stained rain screen cladding to represent a skylark nest, for which the cabin is named. The transparent ClearVue roofing system extends from the house to hidden pockets of storage used for wood and bike racks; the hallway was designed to put maximum distance between the bedroom and living room. Subtle details, such as offset lighting, help visually distinguish the two spaces.





PUFFS OF TAWNY feathers shoot up from knee-high tussocks, claiming both the sky and the concealed burrows at the Ben Ōhau foothills. Such aerial acrobatics are observed with amusement from a nearby bach, named after the birds that roost outside. It's worth a chuckle because here at Skylark Cabin, life isn't quite so hasty.

"Time goes out the window," says co-owner Liz Harpelton. "There are no rules — we just do what feels right. And usually, it's a whole lot of nothing."

That must have been what the four-hectare plot near Twizel looked like when Liz and partner Garry Wilson first spotted its "For Sale" sign back in 2018. A whole lotta nothing. But for this Christchurch-based couple on the brink of redefining their "why" and what lay beyond the nine-to-five grind, this chunk of the Mackenzie Basin looked like a whole lotta everything.

It was a stellar spot, with a 180-degree view of the Ben Ōhau Range and a sky that glittered by nightfall. Having lived in the Wairarapa for most of their lives, with fond memories of the knobbly outline of the Tararua Range outside their window, the land looked like a South Island-ish version of home. They had been cruising the country roads in the days after the funeral for Liz's biological father, George Harris, a real Twizel local who had been the town's pharmacist for decades. No matter that they were emotionally exhausted when making the financial leap of faith — as far as gut feelings went, these were their strongest yet. Within 24 hours, they signed the papers, and the land was theirs.

"We are just ordinary people who took a punt," says Garry. Average or not, this is a pair well-practised in the art of punt-taking. For decades, the court-savvy duo — she a court registrar and he a police prosecutor (yes, they met in court) — had been entirely comfortable with their life in Masterton. Until one day, after returning from a nine-month court stint in Christchurch, Liz announced she wished to move to the Garden City.

It did take a bit of persuading (or "dragging," depending on who you ask), but the prospect of a charming new life in the South Island eventually won over the born-and-bred Masterton boy. ▶





REACH FOR THE STARS

"The stars appear closer here," says Liz, who didn't have to go far with her outdoor bathtub to get a panoramic view of the night sky. Skylark Cabin, 11 kilometres west of Twizel, is within the confines of the 4300-square-kilometre area deemed the Aoraki Mackenzie International Dark Sky Reserve. One of eight globally, the dark-sky reserve celebrates and protects the region's exceptional starry nights through outdoor lighting controls. Liz distinctly recalls when she and a friend witnessed dozens of bright lights moving like a train over the Ben Ōhau Range. "It turned out to be 35 Starlink satellites just rolling overhead. They looked so close you could almost touch them," she says. Adds Garry: "You have to experience the night sky for yourself. We took it for granted until speaking to more city folk and people from overseas, some of whom had never seen the Milky Way. Gosh, we are so lucky." skylarkcabin.co.nz



Garry and Barry selected the largest circular skylight they could find as the hero feature for the cabin's one-and-only bedroom. The 1.8-metre Adlux skylight is angled just so, making the larger-than-life galaxies and stars of the Aoraki Mackenzie International Dark Sky Reserve centre stage. Though that's not to say it was easy to pull off. "The builders and I were standing around for days trying to figure out the angles and logistics," says Garry. One would think clear nights are where it's at. Not necessarily, says Garry. "When snow settles onto the skylight, it slides down and creates a rainbow effect. It's just spectacular."

The deal was sealed with a promise to wait three years until their teenage sons Matt and Keith (from Garry and Liz's past relationships, respectively) had finished high school. (Liz's eldest son Sam, an IT systems architect in Brisbane, had already flown the coop.) In 2015, after both sons had left for university, Garry and Liz settled into the seaside suburb of South New Brighton in Christchurch.

Years later, the couple nearly lost a dear friend to critical injuries after a bad car accident. The unforeseen event had a way of putting things in perspective. This was not-so-coincidentally around the time they had snapped up the block of land near Twizel. "We realized you never know what's around the corner. That, and you get to an age where you start asking yourself: 'What is life really about?'" says Garry.

For he and Liz, this meant steering their life towards a calm, starlit corner of the country. Garry took a giant step back from his 33-year-long career in the New Zealand Police to focus on building their little piece of paradise. Liz — always one to offer her colleagues a quick shoulder rub — decided to leave the Ministry of Justice to pursue a degree in massage therapy. "If it weren't for Garry's drive to be in control of his destiny, I would have sat it out until retirement. But you must start planning years before that point — and take that jump as soon as you can," says Liz.

And jump they did. Not long after buying the land in 2018, the couple enlisted the help of Christchurch architect Barry Connor to dream up an honest, small-space design that would sing in harmony with the dramatic landscape. ▶



Walls lined in beech plywood, punctuated by black-edged ply rib detailing, were chosen to make the space feel warm, inviting, and reflect the earthy tones of the Mackenzie Country surrounds. Garry built the kitchen almost entirely and credits his construction skills to sheer curiosity at previous home builds. "You just have to have confidence in yourself and, thankfully, there's YouTube out there," he says. For a standard-sized fridge not to appear overbearing in the small space, the cabinetry was sprayed to match the matte black fridge — making it essentially invisible. Furnishings in the living room and bedroom (as pictured) were staged for award entries. Barry Connor Design scooped up several accolades, among them the 2021 TIDA Homes Awards, ADNZ Resene Architectural Design Awards, and Resene Total Colour Awards. Garry and Liz haven't strayed far from the overall feel with their own décor, which they've kept simple and Scandi-inspired.





GARRY AND LIZ'S TWIZEL SIGHTSEEING TIPS

Though not permanently living at Skylark Cabin (yet), Garry and Liz spend as much time as they can enjoying the many charms of the Mackenzie Basin. Here are their top picks for visitors:

Go swimming at Loch Cameron, six kilometres from Twizel. The popular watering hole, warmer than the larger lakes nearby, also has a tree-topped island that is well worth the cooling swim to reach.

Cycle part of the Alps 2 Ocean Cycle Trail that runs along the southern shores of Lake Ōhau. Don't forget to pack a picnic — take a lunch break under a tree at the lakefront to enjoy the peaceful alpine views.

Go fishing in the canals for some of the best spots for catching salmon and trout in the country. Fun fact: The world's largest trout (19.1 kilogrammes) was caught a five-minute drive away.

Skydive Mt Cook (located at Pūkaki Airport) rewards adventurers with a 10-minute scenic flight. The freefall captures some of the best the area has to offer — lakes, snow-capped mountains, glaciers, and Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park.

Don't miss the smoked salmon at Razza Bar in Twizel, made by owner and salmon-smoking legend Mike Darling.

WIN Be in to win a two-night stay at Skylark Cabin, valued at \$900. For details, visit thisnzlife.co.nz

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THESE PAGES: Newly trained massage therapist Liz doesn't ask for much except for her two non-negotiables — an outdoor tub and television in the kitchen. "I've always had an outside bath since my early 20s. We used to light a fire underneath the old cast-iron bath. Ever since then, everyone knows I need an outside bath." Garry laughs: "It's true." The stainless-steel tub from Stoked Stainless in Wānaka is positioned for soaking up the view of the Ben Ōhau Range. "At night, I can sit in the tub and hear frogs — they must be more than a kilometre away — just loudly frogging away," says Liz; windows in a punchy Resene shade called Vesuvius may seem randomly placed, but they are positioned to perfectly capture the scenery throughout the day in various parts of the bach.

Hunkered down it would be, with the exterior cloaked in a rough-sawn larch rain screen to mimic a textured bird's nest and beech interiors to reflect the fields of gold outside. The biggest star of all was the behemoth of a 1.8-metre skylight, positioned above the bed to capture the world's largest dark-sky reserve at its finest.

Design-wise, everything was looking spectacular. But here's the thing about building near a town of scant 1700 residents — builders, raw materials and just about everything must be transported inland from the larger coastal cities. And in winter, there are the cold snaps and bouts of hoar frost with which to contend. "That's where the domino effect begins. One person can't make it, and then suddenly the people lined up after them can't do their jobs," says Garry.

At 50 square metres, just a smidgeon larger than what's generally considered tiny (less than 37.16 square metres), the cabin should have taken four months to complete. But in typical high-country fashion, unexpected gale-force events eroded such plans. First, a level-four lockdown in March 2020 delayed the build. Then the building company went belly-up. Thankfully, after Wānaka builder Jason Bint and his team stepped in to save the day, they got the bach to a point where Garry could finish it off himself. Instead of four months, this pint-sized cabin took 18. "The process would have made a whole season of *Grand Designs*," says Garry.

Perhaps it's no surprise that the hard yards paid off. This year, the design was given the nod in the 2021 ADNZ Resene

Architectural Design Awards, getting highly commended regionally in its category.

Would they do it again? "Yes," Garry and Liz chirp in unison, though the irony of their serene escape turning into a nail-biting nightmare is not lost on them. "We were making a huge financial leap of faith. You must trust yourself sometimes — and trust that it will all work out. That's been a bit of the philosophy behind the Skylark Cabin," says Garry.

Today, they count their blessings daily. When Skylark Cabin isn't booked out by Airbnb guests who are dazzled by its natural surroundings, it's where the couple disappears for days or weeks at a time. In many ways, this pint-sized abode represents a dream that has grown infinitely larger in recent years. "This isn't the end project. This is just part of the five-year plan for us," says Garry.

Good thing they have four beautifully bare hectares to play with. An on-site massage room and sauna are next on the list so Liz (who finished her degree in November) can start a clinic. Building their own house will leave Skylark Cabin entirely free for bookings. The final tier of their master plan for life remains top secret, but Garry hints that it will be a non-traditional type of lodging that he'd like to call "The Burrows".

Garry and Liz wear their metaphorical South Islander badges of honour proudly — though they do visit Masterton once or twice a year. "We just want to have a nice, quiet life and enjoy the things we have in New Zealand," says Garry. "There's nowhere else we'd want to be."

