



HOME ON THE RANGE: Joanna Hunkin goes country with horse Blacky during the annual cattle muster on Dome Hills Station, near Oamaru. Shepherds on horses move 300 Hereford cows through the tussock with their dogs. PICTURE / SARAH IVEY

Playing cowgirl

Nestled among the tussock clad hills of New Zealand's high country, Dome Hills Lodge offers visitors relaxed indulgence at the end of an action-packed day. Joanna Hunkin roamed the station on their annual cattle muster

AS the tyres locked and the ute began to fishtail down the narrow rain soaked track, the words of Sam the shepherd flashed through my mind: "Make sure you stand on the back in case you have to jump" he'd called out gruffly, with an indecipherable smirk on his face. Was he trying to scare us? Or was it legitimate advice?

We decided he must have been joking. But as the chained wheels continued to lose traction and the back end slid ever-closer to the cliff edge, we realised he wasn't.

Life on a high country station may seem idyllic — rolling ranges of sun-bleached tussock and snow-capped mountains — but there is a real danger that comes with the isolation. This is maverick

country, where your neighbours are up to an hour's drive away and horses are still used to negotiate the steep, shingled hillsides, inaccessible by modern vehicles.

With fewer than 400 individual stations, New Zealand's high country is a much fabled land that few have experienced — a landscape embraced by Hollywood film franchises and home to the infamous Southern Man of many a beer advertisement.

We were roaming the back blocks of Dome Hills station — not far from Duntroon's Elephant Rocks, where Andrew Adamson filmed part of the first *Narnia* instalment — on the annual cattle muster. Part of the Waitaki District, Dome Hills lies around 45-minute's drive northwest of

Oamaru, near Danseys Pass.

As it turned out, we didn't have to jump. But we did opt to hop off the flatdeck, choosing to walk down the greasy mud track behind the steaming herd of cattle, heading for a river crossing more than 300m below.

There, the 300 pregnant cows were to cross the icy waters of the Kakanui River before starting their final ascent to the back block, where they were to spend the rest of winter grazing. By the end of the day, the cattle had covered close to 25km and climbed more than 600m.

Our marathon trek had begun nearly seven hours earlier, on a crisp and clear May morning. With the weather reported to peak in later in the day, we were on a

tight schedule, running a calculated race against the darkening skies. We had until mid-afternoon to march the herd uphill to a peak of 1400m, before dropping down into the river valley and back up a second incline.

The time constraints and condition of the tracks meant we untacked the horses at the top of the first peak, leaving them to run home, while the cattle followed the steep, zig-zagging track down to the river as we trailed behind in the ute. It was a plan that soon changed as the tyres struggled to grip the rain-sodden track.

After six hours in the saddle, in brisk single digit temperatures, it was a rather welcome change of

Vanished World

Known for its breathtaking scenery, the Waitaki Valley is also a significant geological site, attracting visitors and history hunters from around the world.

Just 15-minutes drive from Dome Hills station, the Vanished World Centre is home to various prehistoric fossils, including whales, dolphins, penguins, sharks and shellfish.

It also marks the beginning of the Vanished World Trail, which shows visitors just how the landscape has changed over the past 26 million years, when the now rural area was still part of the ocean floor, 100m underwater.

The centre is located just a short drive from Duntroon's Elephant Rocks, where the first *Narnia* film was shot. The strange sculptures are remnants of Otekaikae Limestone, naturally weathered into curious shapes over hundreds of years.

The rocks sit on private land, which is occasionally closed to the public for farming purposes.

For more information on the centre and surrounding sites, visit www.vanishedworld.co.nz

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Playing cowgirl

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pace; the movement helping to restore feeling to our bums and toes.

Not that we hadn't enjoyed our morning's ride. As we set out on horseback, a little after 8am, we'd fallen into a comfortable silence, savouring the rugged beauty of the sprawling landscape. The only sound, the chirruping whistles and gruff shouts of the two shepherds — Sam and Al — as they sent their dogs off to keep the cattle in line.

Aiming for the distant snow-capped peak, we cut a steady pace alongside the stream of cattle, occasionally cantering up ahead to round off a wayward bovine. But for the most part, the dogs had it covered, leaving us to drink in the scenery.

Climbing ever higher, the mild autumn sun broke through the overcast sky, creating pools of warmth as we passed through the dappled light. Behind us, Dome Hills spread forth — a sea of earthen green, mottled with red and orange tufts of tussock. Splinters of shingle rock litter the hillside and in the distance, pine trees mark the station's boundary.

It's a sight you never get sick of, according to owner David Douglas, who falls silent in awe of the familiar view. Dome Hills has been in his family for close to 90 years, originally bought by his grandparents for their youngest son, Maxwell.

Today, David and his wife Cindy own and run the farm, with the help of two shepherds and fleeting visits from their adult children. The 6500 ha station is home to 1000 cattle and 12,000 sheep and has recently been opened to guests and tourists, seeking an authentic high country experience — or just a bit of R&R.

Though the muster comes but once a year, there is always something to do on the farm and guests can head out with David and the shepherds to get a taste of rural life



Shepherding glossary

Wayleggo — command to call the dog off the sheep or cattle. Thought to have originated from "come away, let them go".

Go on — command to send the dog out (up the hill or towards the sheep)

Come by or Where — go left

Out or Come here — go right

Hey hey — makes the dog back up

Stand or Sit down — stop moving

Right oh — behave yourself

Get in behind — come back and get behind the shepherd

That'll do — that's enough

Pack up — sit in a small group behind the shepherd and stay there

any time of year. Easy, even-tempered horses are available for the equine inclined, or you can hop in the ute and enjoy the roller coaster-like climbs and dips of the sometimes perilous country highways.

The truly adventurous may chose to stay overnight in one of the stations two huts — Middle Hut and Crumb Hut. Built before the Second World War, the huts are still used by hunters today and equipped with only the most basic of necessities, as we discovered during an afternoon tea break in Middle Hut.

Six adjoining bunk beds with frayed mattresses fill the small wooden shack, which is devoid of

such modern luxuries as a toilet. But then, we were told, it just wouldn't be a true high country experience without having to "cop a squat" in a paddock, with an audience of sheep for company.

The sensible, however, will return to the warm confines of the newly renovated lodge — where a roaring open fire and well-stocked pantry will greet you, thanks to Cindy. Formerly home to David's parents, the four-bedroom lodge has a landscaped, private garden and two separate living areas, both of which offer expansive views of the surrounding alpine ranges.

Just minutes up the drive from the Douglas family home, the lodge gives guests as much or as little privacy as they want. Those seeking a private retreat can be left to their own devices, but if you're after a more pampered affair you'll be treated to Cindy's expert culinary skills, combined with the best of the region's produce.

Wine from the neighbouring Waitaki Valley, award-winning Whitestone cheese and Dome Hills' own beef and lamb were just some of the delicacies we sampled during our three-day stay.

Indeed, our gluttony would have been sinful had it not been for our hard day's mustering. As it was, we felt quite justified in opening a second bottle of pinot noir as we sank into the sofa's deep cushions and basked in the warmth of the crackling fire.

Too many holidays leave you riddled with guilt at your lack of activity and excess consumption. Or exhausted from an overly strenuous schedule. This one offered the perfect balance of action and indulgence, leaving our conscience clear and contented.

Joanna Hunkin travelled courtesy of Tourism Waitaki and stayed as a guest of Dome Hills.

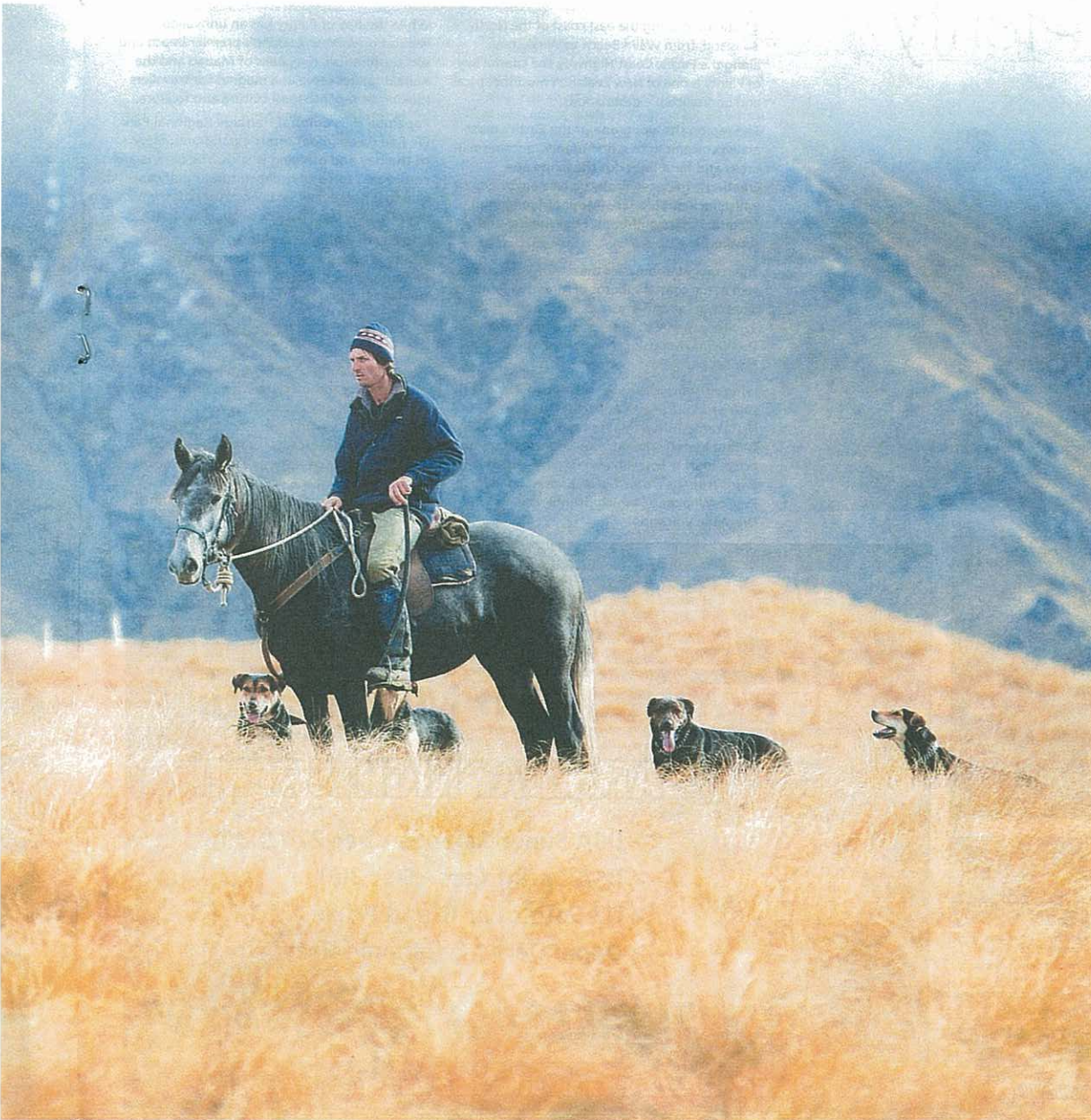
■ FURTHER INFORMATION

For details of what Dome Hills has to offer see www.domehills.co.nz



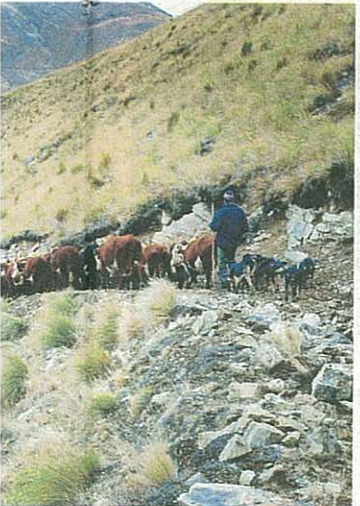
COUNTRY AIR: (Top left) A huntaway dog holds the mob in the snow at the ridge to Pisgah/Managers of Domes Hills mustering (below left); Dome Hills Lodge offers a much-needed retreat after a hard day's work (below right).





Pisgah, Manager of Domes Hills Lodge and typical 'Southern Man' Sam Jamieson strikes an iconic pose on his steed (above); Sam and his dogs walk behind the mob as they head down a steep track during cattle day's work (below right).

PICTURES / SARAH IVEY



CLOSE TO HOME

One with nature and sculpture

The idyllic gardens of Waitakaruru Arboretum near Hamilton are enhanced by its sculpture park, an exhibition of sculptures set along a 2km trail. Exhibitions change regularly, with the next one scheduled for November 22 to February 28.
Contact: (07) 824 0733
On the web: www.sculpturepark.co.nz



SCULPTURE PARK: Steel Muse.

Rosy treasures
 Treasure is the theme for Timaru's Festival of Roses which will feature roses blooming in gardens, being praised in poetry, depicted in artwork or up for sale. The festival runs November 26-30.
Contact: (03) 688 5531
On the web: www.festivalofroses.co.nz

Birds on bikes
 The Moa Beer Moa Hunt on November 29 is a bike ride through the hinterland of the Kaikoura region. There are categories for Chicks, Hens and Roosters over a 21km or a 42km course, a section for endurance riders and a 3km fun ride. Bluebridge Ferry has special deals for North Islanders crossing Cook Strait to compete.
Contact: 027 466 9671
On the web: www.moahunt.co.nz

Great Barrier gardens
 In the guided Great Barrier Island Garden Tour on November 29, charming cottage gardens, coastal panoramas and native flora and birdlife will go well with morning and afternoon tea. Tickets cost \$50 and discounts on flights are available for those spending the weekend.
Contact: (09) 429 0356
On the web: www.thebarrier.co.nz/gardentour.htm

Gathering of the clans
 Scottish Week runs in Dunedin November 22-30. Events include Caledonian Games, a ceilidh, concerts, the Queen o' the Heather contest, clan lunch and exhibitions at the Otago Settlers' Museum.
On the web: www.otagocalledonian.org.nz

Haven in Hawke's bay
 As well as hosted lodge accommodation, Greenhill Retreats now has two grand homesteads available for those who prefer a self-contained option. They can cater for parties of up to 12.
Contact: (06) 879 9944
On the web: www.greenhillretreats.com
 Heather Ramsay