

## Stepping back in time...?

Perhaps the early settlers of the 1870s paused to enjoy vast uninterrupted views of the untamed countryside as they climbed aboard their rugged wagons, in the same way that I pause to take in the vista from the driver's platform of my 'Wagon Stays' accommodation. Tonight I will sleep under canvas as those pioneers did – or under duck cloth stretched over steel hoops mounted on a sturdy cedar wagon, to be more precise. The similarities between this and the 1870s experience, however, cannot be stretched much further.

A far cry from its drafty predecessors, this wagon has double-glazed end walls which allow an unobstructed view across Canterbury farmlands from the cosy interior. The inside of the wagon invites exploration. Immediately inside the door is the compact kitchen area constructed of oiled macrocarpa with a flitch bench top. What looks like an old black coal range is in fact a double gas cooktop set over an electric log fire, the warm amber glow of which colours the whole room. Pottery plates and bowls are arranged on a timber shelf above the bench, and less authentic additions to the kitchen (a refrigerator, microwave, and full complement of normal kitchenware) are discreetly hidden - even the rubbish bin is concealed in a neatly stacked log pile. All that's lacking is the gamey aroma of a wild hare stew.

The central part of the wagon is dominated by a queen size bed (it can be separated to provide two singles) and a large natural timber bedhead. The faux fur throw across the foot of the bed may be reminiscent of wild west bear hunts, but the power tilting system incorporated into the bed is a novelty even by modern standards; it allows the head to be raised so that I can enjoy a late night DVD or admire the sunrise in the morning. Next to the bed, and along the same wall as the kitchen, is a wooden trunk which contains extra bedding, a curious set of coat hangers made from small curved tree branches, and a large white enamel wash basin which sits on another polished macrocarpa flitch bench. The brass taps supply a luxury of which no pioneering soul would have dreamed: hot and cold water. A white enamel pitcher sitting alongside the basin completes the look.

Exploring behind the impressive bedhead, at the rear of the wagon, is the next curiosity. Here, it is reassuring to find a flush toilet housed in a neat cubicle, and a shower, complete with a computer controlled gas hot water heater concealed behind a corrugated iron panel. Glass shower walls are familiar enough, even if mounted between timber posts, but I take a second look at the upturned bucket which hangs from a tree branch above the shower and hides the shower rose! This, and the river-bed effect of natural stones on the shower floor, will no doubt make the usual morning ritual distinctly memorable.

The large double-glazed rear door provides another chance to glimpse the view, and doubles as an emergency exit. Also neatly concealed at the rear of the wagon, behind the toilet, is a heat pump which keeps the wagon a comfortable temperature all year round. Natural wool bats between the layers of duck cloth above me provide excellent insulation.

Heading back to the front of the wagon, I try out the two-seater couch upholstered in antique leather cow hide – the perfect spot to sip a coffee. The coffee table is a solid macrocarpa flitch, but, in a brilliant innovation for this compact space, it has a concealed switch under one end which allows the table to be raised from coffee table to dining table height once I'm ready to enjoy a home-cooked evening meal. Perhaps I'll lower it again after dinner, open the musket cupboard in the front corner of the wagon, and pick out one of the selection of dvds to view on the plasma screen television mounted inside the cupboard door. But then again, who needs television with such views? I'll opt instead for ambient music and a glass of local wine sipped as the kerosene lanterns cast their glow into the night. (Predictably, the authentic-looking lanterns have been modified to conceal halogen bulbs.)

As far as atmosphere goes, I've been transported back in time to the adventurous life of the early pioneers, but with all the luxuries of boutique tourist accommodation, this is hardly roughing it. Browsing through a book I find in the musket cupboard about the hardships of early settler life reaffirms my feeling that this is just about as authentic as a 21<sup>st</sup> century traveller wants to go.

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