

# FAR FROM THE

Isolated and idyllic, New Zealand is becoming the safe haven du jour



**W**e live in interesting times. Turbulence in the Middle East, terrorist attacks in Europe, military brinkmanship that spans hemispheres, plus hurricanes, earthquakes, urban

pollution and regular cyber-meltdowns – 2017 has been anything but quiet. Faced with these perceived existential threats, New Zealand is becoming a popular choice among those who can live part of their year anywhere in the world.

Julian Robertson, pioneering hedge fund legend, saw the light back in 1995. He bought first one New Zealand lodge and then another two. “What attracted me was the geography – it’s so beautiful,” he says. “And the



# MADDING CROWD

in this age of uncertainty. **PETER SWAIN** explains why there, and why now



people are great, so down-to-earth. Then, of course, there are the golf courses, sailing, skiing and vineyards.”

Of late, fellow masters of the universe have been following Robertson’s example. In 2015,

billionaire founder of PayPal, Peter Thiel, paid a reported \$10m for a 193ha estate on Lake Wanaka in South Island to go with his futuristic home in the Bay of Islands. He’ll be a near-neighbour of American TV presenter Matt

Lauer who confirmed earlier this year that he’d bought the 6,468ha Hunter Valley Station also on Lake Wanaka. “My wife, Annette, and I have been coming to New Zealand for several years, and every time we visit, we →

# "POTENTIAL BUYERS STEP OFF THE PLANE AND JUST BREATHE – THEY LOVE OUR CLEAN AIR AND GREEN LANDSCAPE. HIGH-NET-WORTH INDIVIDUALS USED TO COME JUST FOR A HOLIDAY, BUT NOW THEY WANT TO SEE THE BEST PROPERTY"

feel lucky to be in a place of such endless beauty, inspiration and adventure."

Film director James Cameron has an organic farm east of Wellington, and LA financier Ric Kayne is building the most expensive golf club in the country at Tara Iti, north of Auckland. Meanwhile, financial titan William P Foley II is another to have succumbed to Kiwi charisma: "I fell in love with New Zealand when I first visited Wharekauhau in 2001. I said to myself that if the Lodge ever came available I would do my best to purchase it. We did and it's been everything I hoped for."

It isn't only Americans buying. Private jets carrying Russian, Chinese, Korean, British, Australian and Indian potential buyers are landing daily at Queenstown

and Auckland airports to be met by the likes of personal travel concierge Jacqui Spice. "They step off the plane and just breathe – they love our clean air and green landscape. High-net-worth individuals used to come just for a holiday, but now they want to see the best property on the market."

Slightly larger than the UK in terms of area, New Zealand has a population of only 4.7m against the former's 66m. In this bucolic arcadia, sheep outnumber people by seven to one, and the most dangerous predator is the possum.

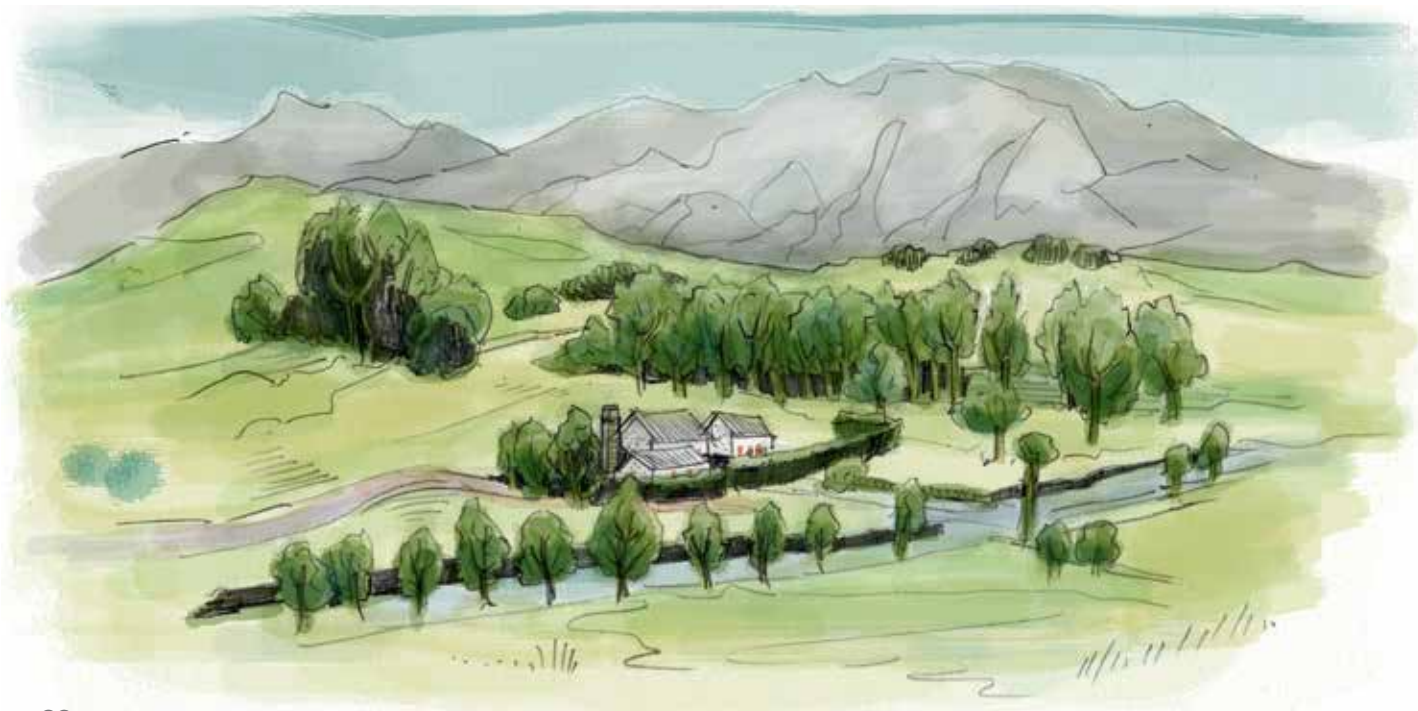
Getting about isn't a problem. "We have more helicopters per capita than anywhere in the world," says Spice. "People cruise around all the time. Buyers I meet are looking for privacy and acreage away from everything. Lakeside,

mountains and shoreline are always desirable." This is, after all, the magical landscape used by Peter Jackson in the *Lord of the Rings* films. "Lake Wanaka, close to the Treble Cone ski area, is right up there, so is the Bay of Islands in Northland." Nelson, Marlborough and Waiheke Island are also popular.

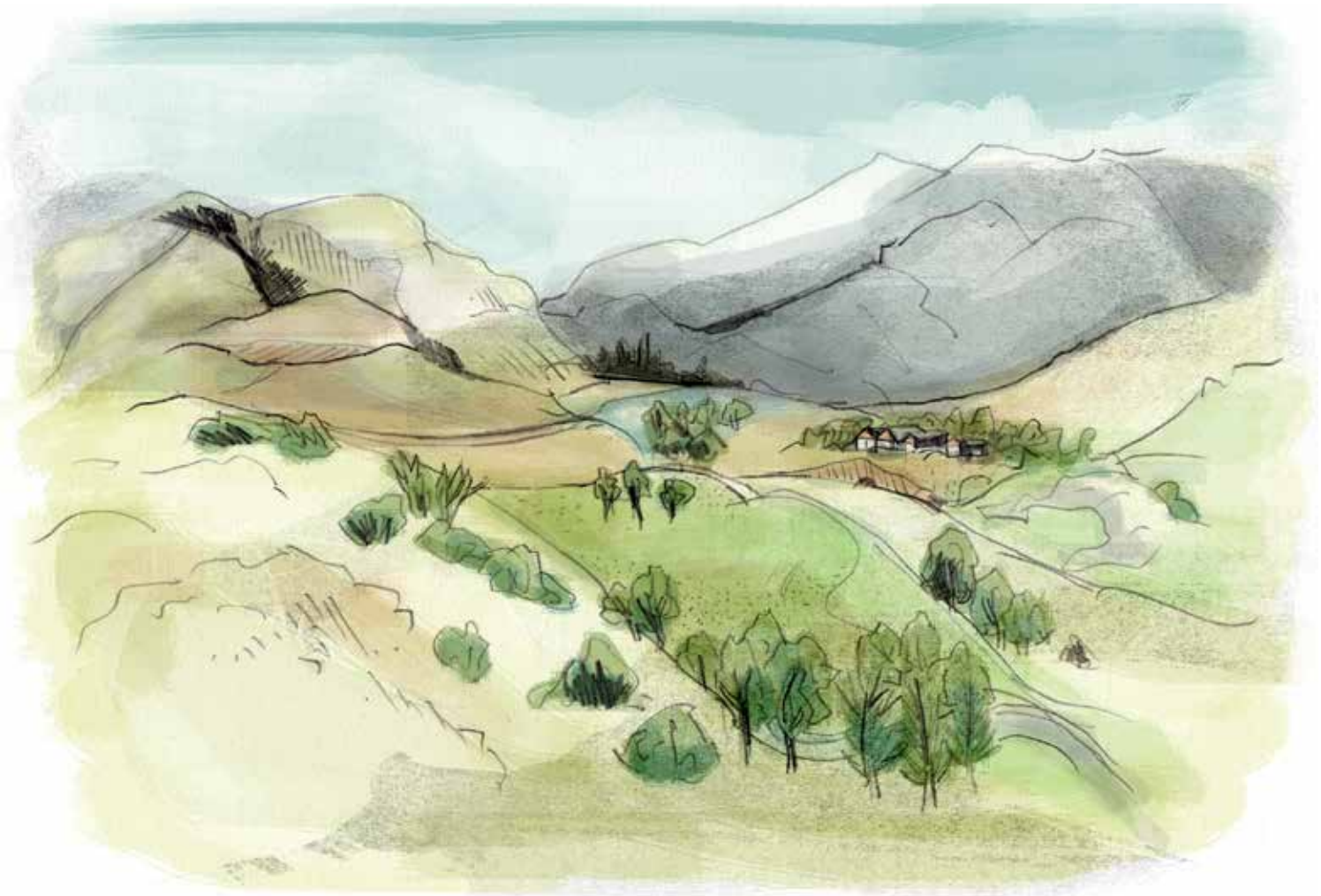
David Gubb of estate agent Bayleys in Queenstown reports that "of the big-number buyers coming through, eight out of 10 are off-shore people. I've got several NZ\$10m [US\$7.3m] buyers floating around right now." In 2016, foreigners – mainly Australians and Americans – were granted approval by the government to buy 465,863 hectares of land in New Zealand, almost six times more than the year before. Foreign buyers of sensitive land are subject to approval by the Overseas Investment Office, but on planning matters, reasonable requests from upstanding citizens are sympathetically viewed.

There's an enthusiasm for adventure in Queenstown. In one day, you can complete the modern Kiwi triathlon: a round of golf at the incomparable Jack's Point, a skydive over the Remarkables mountain range, rounded out by a wine tasting at Amisfield vineyard in the Gibbston Valley.

Forty-six-year-old Greg Tusher, who runs a San Francisco investment partnership, is typical of the West Coast entrepreneurs attracted to the area. "The







country looks spectacular, and it's great for the outdoor life – it's the perfect antidote to the sedentary, digital lives so many of us lead. People here work hard and play harder." His family owns and runs Blanket Bay, a luxe alpine lodge near Glenorchy offering the likes of heli-skiing, trips down to Milford Sound, and fly-fishing – his father's passion.

"The geography's similar to California, and so is the entrepreneurial spirit. There's an embryonic venture-capital industry, and software firms like Xero are making a global splash," Tusher suggests. The country inspires a fierce loyalty. "It's so pristine, it really encourages a sense of civic and environmental responsibility." As in so much of life, it's the simple things, like watching the sunset, that often appeal most.

Justin Murray, chairman of investment banking firm Murray & Co in Christchurch, has seen a definite uptick in American interest recently. "It's a simple flight over from the West Coast, and when these Silicon Valley guys get here they find a country that's westernised, with a good rule of law and open-minded people. So it's really a seamless transition from the States."

Murray identifies other recent changes. "The country has become significantly more international and sophisticated over the past few years – all the professional skills are here. And technology has been a massive enabler: with superfast fibre broadband, I can sit here in my study and access the world. I've got my *FT* subscription on one screen, email on another. It's just easy."

Is there a rarefied herd element at work here? "Definitely. These guys are uncertain who to trust, so when a friend or well-known associate tells them NZ is the place to visit, that's a gilt-edged recommendation." But Murray is more sceptical about the concept of hedging against apocalypse. "New Zealand is a long way away from where people think bad things could happen, but that's only one small part of the equation."

Julian Robertson agrees. "Some people think that way – I don't share their views. But I would say that people feel safe and secure in New Zealand, and that's important." So confident is he about the country's future, he's about to launch a new project. "We have 12,500 beautiful acres [5,059ha] between my two golf courses and lodges at Kauri Cliffs and Cape Kidnappers, and we're about

## "THE COUNTRY LOOKS SPECTACULAR, AND IT'S GREAT FOR THE OUTDOOR LIFE"

to start selling a little piece of heaven to people who want it. Five- to six-acre lots for individual buyers seems about right." It's likely to prove an attractive proposition.

The new Jacinda Ardern-led government has recently said it plans to ban overseas buyers from purchasing existing homes, but exactly how such a change, which is unlikely to be implemented till next year, would affect the purchase by non-NZ citizens of larger holdings already subject to strict regulation is currently unclear.

The future may be uncertain, but as St Barth's recovers from Hurricane Irma and the South of France chokes on too much traffic and too many taxes, New Zealand is fast establishing itself as an alternative Pacific Ocean paradise. ●