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## The Dominion Post – *Nikki MacDonald* Right at home on the road

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We're on the road and into the first few corners when there's an almighty crash as the grocery box lurches off its perch on the bed, scattering food everywhere. Then another bang, and cursing from the driver's seat, as a drawer we forgot to secure slides open. I'm starting to think maybe we're just not cut out for campervanning.

But it's exactly people like us – young(ish), outdoorsy couple – that Auckland-based campervan manufacturer RoadCraft is appealing to with its swanky Base Jumper vans. Their theory: twentysomethings do it (think baked-bean and Vegemite-fuelled VW Combi tours of Europe), oldies do it (think lace doily curtains and 10-car tailback), so what happens in between?

The answer is: we go a bit mushy and demand comfort and warmth.

So what would happen, the designers pondered, if you teamed comfort and convenience, even in the middle of a bone-chilling winter?

Our first test is negotiating the curling ribbons of road on a sodden Coromandel Peninsula, on our way to Hahei. Built on a Fiat Ducato chassis, the Base Jumper has plenty of grunt, and easy steering that feels more like a car than a truck. But I still feel like a nana, perched on high, with the house on the back.

There's just time to duck out to Hot Water Beach. The last time I was here, busloads of tourists destroyed my childhood memories of deserted natural spas dug into the sand. This time our luck's coming in with the tide – there's nothing quite as satisfying as passing a Kiwi Experience bus travelling in the opposite direction. Like shining cuckoos we swoop on the hard-dug pools, soaking in the abandoned craters till the cold tide wins out.

The first of many "no overnight stays" signs in the car park forces us on to Hahei Beach, where we park, and convert couch and table to double bed for the first and last time.

No expense has been spared setting up the Base Jumper – there's a fridge, gas stove and grill, coffee plunger, teapot, entertainment system with TV and DVD player for nights in, and a BBQ and outdoor furniture for summer evenings.

The drawers are like a Fisher Price Shape Sorter toy – each utensil has to be slotted into its right hole. But it's full of well thought-out little touches – the tap extends on a hose, so you can rinse your feet before climbing on board; an air vent converts the bathroom to a drying room when the diesel heating is on; and you don't need to be hooked up to a power source to fire up electricity and warmth.

That's no surprise when you learn of RoadCraft founder and engineer John Managh's background. First there was Gloria – Managh's first cargo van-turned-camper, fitted out to travel the Alaskan highway with some Kiwi mates. When Gloria ended up over a bank with an Aussie at the wheel, Managh turned his sights to Africa, building an overlander that accommodated eight people, five mountain bikes and 15 spare wheels.

The Base Jumper is set up to carry kayaks, but we're cheating – hiring boats from Hahei for a half-day tour of Cathedral Cove and the offshore islands.

It's easy to see the attraction of a portable house when you wake up to morning light on the water just metres away. A leisurely paddle around the islands, cappuccino on the beach, and I'm definitely getting used to this idea.

There's less need for Houdini-changing manoeuvres than in your average car, but getting around in the back of the van is like pacing out a dance routine – forward and forward and side-to-pass and forward. But at least we can dry out our kayak gear instead of sealing it in containers and hoping the stench doesn't seep out.

Speaking of stench, next stop is Rotorua.

It's a long drive on poor roads to Lake Tarawera, but the van manages okay. It's just on dusk when we find a lakeside reserve and settle in with a beer. Damn. Should have brought the kayaks. The lake is flat-calm and deserted and there's a map tantalisingly marking hot springs on the opposite shore.

There's no loo where we're parked, so we have to use the van's, which means, somewhere down the line, we'll have to empty it.

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That wasn't the drama I expected – a simple slosh into a council waste dump sorted it.

As the winter evening chill hovers, we appreciate the benefits of inside cooking. While a tent can be toasty year-round, whoever is on dinner has to brave frostbitten fingers to cook outside.

It's Wednesday. It must be biking – at Whakarewarewa Forest. The poor Planet Bike hire guy is apprehensive: one self-confessed biking weed and the other still nursing the painful memory of two broken ribs. We take the non-guided option to minimise embarrassment.

I'm about ready to give up after skidding out on the kids' loop, but it's pretty country, and, thankfully, most trails are safely out of sight of the gnarly jumps course. A quick time trial on the kids' loop to finish and both bikes and riders are returned in one piece, and not too hellishly sore.

We were supposed to overnight at the gorgeous Waikite Valley hot springs, where steam from a boiling river veils the valley. But, not fancying such a long morning drive to the slopes, we stay beside Lake Taupo instead.

The van easily manages the climb to Turoa skifield, though four-wheel-drive would be useful and reassuring.

Having a warm and dry shelter at altitude is also handy.

But the campervan concept comes into its own on the Friday when filthy weather cancels our outdoor plans. We detour to Raglan, where neither of us have ever been, to watch surfers paddle out through the rainbows, like little black spiders crawling through the surf.

It's that flexibility that appeals in a campervan, the ability to make spontaneous decisions without having to book or cancel accommodation, and to sleep in stunning remote spots. But it's not a budget holiday, especially with rising fuel costs. And if the campervan is to replace the increasingly unaffordable bach, New Zealand will have to shed its officious campervan-phobia.

Raglan's council must have spent thousands putting up signs at every conceivable stopping spot. And the attitude seemed to be reinforced when a random driver gave us the fingers salute for no apparent reason other than the fact we were driving a van.

*\* Nikki Macdonald's trip was courtesy of RoadCraft.*

### **FACT FILE**

**A fully kitted-out Base Jumper sells for \$129,000. RoadCraft's rental arm, Wilderness Motorhomes, hires the vans in winter and spring at a base rate of \$125 a day.**

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