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TRUE TO LIFE: At the Villa Toscana Lodge you could be forgiven for thinking you were really in Tuscany.

Tuscany comes to Whitianga's hills

Colin Moore finds a warm welcome at a little Italy flourishing at Mercurv Bay in the Coromandel.

ITALIANS are generous with their emotions. It is one reason why Margherita Allemano misses her native Tuscany. Throwing your arms around each other in greeting accompanied by loud expressions of joy is just not the done thing in downtown Whitianga. Nor, as nine-year-old Giorma Allemano soon learns, is giving your mates a kiss on the cheek when you meet them at school in the morning.

So when his father, Giorgio, describes the Coromandel peninsula town and Mercury Bay as "paradise," you have to wonder whether he is being just a tad expansive.

You wonder, that is, until you walk through the portals of Villa Toscana Lodge and look out over its broad, tiled terraces.

"The Italian place on top of the hill," as the local from whom I asked directions described it, is a touch of Tuscany on the Coromandel coast and paradise is a quite inadequate description.

It is exquisite and expansive, warm and imposing, tasteful in every detail and huge in its vision — and its view of Mercury Bay.

Why, you ask as you drive to the heights of Ohuka Park above Whitianga. Why has a young Italian family built this huge — and undoubtedly expensive — Tuscan villa here?

Giorgio laughs, as if the answer is obvious. In case the stunning view is not answer enough he points to his only neighbour,

whose house is a fraction higher in the clouds than the Villa Toscana.

"I'm from Turin," he says. "My neighbour is from Turin and I never met him before until I came here. He always wanted to retire in New Zealand, to this place.

"I wanted to get away from the crowds, the noise of Europe. America is too, well, American. Canada is too cold. Australia already has too many Italians. There really is only New Zealand. I have dreamed of coming here for a long time.

"We looked at a lot of places but Coromandel has the best combination of native bush and coastline."

The sea is important to Giorgio. On his office wall is his framed degree in marine biology. He worked at it for a while, including stints on research trawlers, until deciding that there was far less smelly and more profitable work to be had in the family instrument-making business.

When a Japanese competitor made the Italian company an offer it couldn't refuse, Giorgio was free to pursue his dream of paradise in the South Pacific. The family have been at it for three years, but at times it's been closer to a nightmare.

The Tuscan-styled villa, which welcomed its first guest 10 months ago, was designed without knowledge of New Zealand planning requirements or weather.

"No one told us not to have inward opening doors and windows," Giorgio laments.

Finding suitable tradespeople and materials proved difficult at times too. But no effort was spared in bringing Tuscany to the Coromandel. Thirteen tonnes of terracotta tiles, more than 12 sq m of granite and marble slabs, antique furniture and paintings, and even a genuine terracotta pizza oven were shipped from Tuscany to the 2ha site on the Whitianga hills.

The dining room table is a huge slab of blood-red Indian granite, polished in Turin and sent to Whitianga in a crate that took eight men to lift.

Margherita doesn't quite share her husband's

bursting enthusiasm for paradise on the Coromandel. She misses everything he has escaped — the hustle and bustle, noise and expansive gestures — and has returned every year for a fix of the real Tuscany.

But the Villa Toscana owes much of its charm, including its name, to her artistic touch and taste in interior decoration.

She is an accomplished watercolourist and her painter's eye is evident in the thoughtful details in the fully self-contained 100 sq m guest suite.

The decor and furnishings say Tuscany but the view and use of puaa and other shells say Coromandel coast.

The suite has its own private entrance, deck, garden and parking, two double bedrooms and a huge lounge.

An unusual feature of the suite and the Allemano's own kitchen, is the way the refrigerator is hidden behind a cupboard door which opens the fridge door when it is opened.

"I had a lot of difficulty explaining to a builder what I wanted," says Margherita, "and then I found that Fisher and Paykel make kits for doors that do the same thing."

Though she is homesick, Whitianga people are beginning to ensnare her. She has one commission for interior decoration, and is following a childhood fantasy and learning to tap-dance.

"I always used to love the old movies of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, but no one teaches tap-dancing in Italy. And then I find you can get tap dancing lessons in Whitianga."

Giorgio is president of the Bridge Club and a keen fisherman from the lodge's Mamma Mia, a 9.75m Bertram luxury launch.

Yet what may well make this lodge paradise for its guests is not the fishing, or the view, or the decor, but the epicurian delights served by the Allemanos.

I join them in their kitchen for a family meal, where I learn that the essence of a taste of Tuscany is in simplicity.

We start with bruschetta. This is slices of bread, both sides rubbed with garlic, brushed with olive oil and grilled with the addition of a spoonful of chopped tomatoes with salt, pepper and basil.

Next is gnocchi, a favourite with Giorma and his three-year-old sister, Fiama, who helps her mother prepare the dish by rolling a dough of potato and flour and moulding it into dumpling-like shapes which when cooked will absorb a sauce made from ricotta, mozzarella, tomato and basil.

To follow is vitello tonnato. This is tender beef, boiled, thinly sliced and covered with a sauce made from a mayonaisse of egg, olive oil and lemon, with capers, tuna, anchovies and vinegar. The dish is left for 24 hours in the fridge to allow the meat to absorb the flavour.

Desert is macedonia, which starts as a standard fruit salad but has red berryfruit added for colour and tartness.

We drink fine red Italian wine from the lodge's large cellar and finish with grappa.

Giorgio insists I try three of the several varieties he has imported. I sleep well, dreaming of Tuscany.

● In the low season, a night in Villa Toscana costs \$390 for two, including breakfast. From December to January it costs \$490. The suite sleeps four and extra people are \$50 each.

The villa has a gymnasium, a helicopter pad and its fishing launch, which is set up for big-game fishing, is available for charter.