



That's Amore!

Sue Moody discovers la dolce vita on a Coromandel hillside PHOTOGRAPHS: JACKIE MEIRING

The romance begins on a night train from Pisa to Paris. Two young Italians, she from rural Tuscany and he from urban Turin, are destined to meet. They share a carriage, a conversation and ultimately a lifetime.

Enter Margherita and Giorgio Allemano, now enthusiastic residents of Whitianga, New Zealand. Thousands of kilometres from their native land and the place of their serendipitous encounter. The builders and owners of a large "Tuscan castle" high on the hillside overlooking Mercury Bay. Cast adrift from the customs, traditions, lifestyle – and weather – of Italy.

Isn't that hard to do? To come to a foreign land and make a new life?

Margherita, softly spoken and delightful, says: "I like New Zealand. It is like when you love someone slowly. It takes time to get used to the weather, to appreciate the colours and learn people's body language, especially for me because I come from a region where everything is always clear and straightforward. Here there is not the same

strong colour, passion and feeling. Everything is mild."

For Giorgio, the destination was very clear cut.

"Australia is full of poisonous things. Canada is too cold. New Zealand has a culture, the social environment and language from England. In past times the British Empire was the only good organizer in the world – you can observe that in the colonies it had and compare them with the colonies of other nations like Spain and Portugal.

"I said, 'Cancel all other options. New Zealand is the only alternative'."

Fortunately Margherita agreed. After that momentous train encounter the couple had married in Tuscany in 1985. With a small son to bring up they sold their home in Turin and set sail – not quite literally, though five months living in a camper van and cruising New Zealand's highways, followed by another couple of months berthed at the marina in Whitianga, seemed like a pretty big adventure. Especially as by then there was a new baby on the way.

Giorgio had already had a sneak preview down under in 1988 when he extended a business trip to Japan to include a New Zealand stopover.

"It was raining for ten days. That made a terrible impression."

Second time around though things were different.

"We were lucky to meet Leigh Hopper in Paunani and he suggested we look at Whitianga," explains Giorgio. "By three o'clock we were in Whitianga and by five o'clock we were in touch with the manager of the marina and checking out available land. In those two hours we found a berth for the boat we planned to buy. It took a few weeks to find the land!"

When Margherita and Giorgio located their plot of paradise, it was being newly subdivided and they were fortunate (again) to be able to choose a four acre bush-clad lookout point.

They parked the camper van at the base of the hill, clambered up on foot to check out the view – and liked what they saw. ▷