

KIWI CHRISTMAS



# Polar opposites

The festive season brings deeply mixed emotions for migrants to New Zealand from the other side of the world.

by COLLEEN BROWN • photograph by KEN DOWNIE





Kristen Jones, centre, with from left, Raegan, Ryleigh, Rory, husband Brett, Grandma Marcia, Granddad Chris and Rhys.

**I**t's the festive season. Whether you embrace it or not, it's hard to escape the sound of carols everywhere you go. For those who come from colder northern hemisphere climes with traditional wintry celebrations, a summery Christmas can take some adjusting to. And it's often a time when homesickness is most acute for migrants as they reflect on the sacrifices and compromises they have made.

For much of American-born Kristen Jones' childhood, Christmases were white. She was living with her parents in Michigan in the US Midwest, saving for her first home,

when Brett, a New Zealand pastor, came to stay. She knew immediately she would not be buying a house in Michigan, and they got married within a year.

Before they wed, Jones spent six weeks in New Zealand. But after they married, they stayed in the US for another six months. She recalls "crying solidly for half an hour" when they left in 2004.

"My parents are three flights away from me here in New Zealand. In the States, people knew where New Zealand was, thanks to the *Lord of the Rings* movies. But they still asked me if it was a developed country."

She wondered that herself when she noticed locals walking barefoot. But she now revels in the slower Kiwi lifestyle, and the less-frequent use of processed and imported ingredients in New Zealand cooking.

"We do celebrate all things festive – Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. It's about a balance of both cultures, really. I'm an Ameri-Kiwi at heart."



When Jones reflects on how living in New Zealand has changed her, she touches on how she has adapted to, and in many ways adopted, this country's comparatively socialist attitude in how to treat people. She recognises this is quite a distance away from how she was brought up, but it still feels right.

"It fits me. As a pastor myself now, I can see the need to do things differently. I'm proud of where I came from, but I came to this country to add to it, not lose myself. I've grown and changed and Kiwis have impacted on my life. I don't comment on American politics, as I no longer live there and I can't see all the different sides of any discussion from here."

Her parents were in New Zealand when the first wave of Covid hit, and stayed for another four months. Not knowing how the pandemic was going to unfold was hard on them all. When her parents finally left the country, she didn't know if she would ever see them again. But this year, they have returned to New Zealand, reconnecting and joining in the family's Christmas festivities.

She reflects: "When I left the States for good in 2004, I was still sad about leaving all the people I loved behind. I prayed on that flight that God would give me family and friends just as precious to me as those I was leaving. I'd say that prayer has been answered."

### ONE-DAY WONDER

In 1997, teacher Elizabeth Barrowman boarded a plane in Toronto bound for Auckland, and for what she saw as a working holiday funded by New Zealand taxpayers. She didn't realise that she was flying towards the rest of her life.

There were very few jobs for teachers in Canada; she didn't have a Green Card to work in the US; and she felt tied to a particular academic path in her home country. So she "broke free and New Zealand got me".

Barrowman arrived here around Easter and rolled up to a local bank in Papatoetoe in South Auckland. "I said, 'I have money. I need a car.' So, they phoned up an honest car dealer and asked him to bring me a car.

"The staff said to me, 'He'll bring you the right car.' And he did. He came to the bank, he sold me the car, and then proceeded to teach me how to drive a stick-shift car on the 'wrong side' of the road. That was my introduction to New Zealand."

It wasn't all smooth sailing. "There were times when I thought, 'Wow, what the hell have I done?' I'd only ever been to the States, so coming on a 20-hour flight via Hawaii to New Zealand was a major for me."

Barrowman is a pragmatist. While coming here allowed her to create her own path, she has retained her networks in Canada.

She met her now-husband Grant in August of the year she arrived. "I thought he was a bit of all right and then I met his family. It was like being absorbed into this massive 'hive.'" She was astonished when she attended her first Barrowman family gathering, to celebrate the 85th birthday of a great-aunt, and was surrounded by more than 100 people.

The couple had two wedding ceremonies, so both their families could celebrate with them. "We thought of living in Canada but I wanted my children to have a relationship with their grandparents. I saw the relationship they had with their other grandchildren and I was an orphan – I had no parents. This was more important than living in Canada."

Barrowman deliberately prioritised

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her children's needs over her own. "Their grandparents are wonderful. It was the right thing to do." But she naturally misses friends and family back in Canada.

At Christmas, what makes her most nostalgic is the sound of the *Huron Carol*, written in about 1642 by Jesuit missionary Jean de Brébeuf, with its pulsating combination of soaring singing, drumbeats and lyrics in the indigenous Huron-Wendat language. Singing carols outside in the dark, the ritual of cutting down your own Christmas tree, snow and sleigh rides are also things of the past.

The seasonal differences have also taken some getting used to. "I liked to shop in the cold winter weather at Christmas in Canada, but here, the heat is exhausting. Festivities in Canada are drawn out and go on for days. Here, it lasts a day and then everyone is off on their holidays. I tried to do the whole Canadian 'cut the Christmas tree down and take it home to decorate' experience, but frankly, doing that in your shorts in 25-degree heat – it just wasn't the same."

Here, she finds the warmth, the beach and long summer holidays have pushed her into creating and embracing new "traditions" for

her family – a blend of Canadian and Kiwi.

"But at night when I dream, I'm always driving on the right-hand side of the road." So, while new customs are forged, the past will bustle its way in, intruding on the here and now, saying, "You can kid yourself that you've changed – but at the heart of it, you're still a Canadian."

### TOO HOT FOR TURKEY

For Emily Walker (not her real name), there is no fooling herself that she isn't English. She sounds English, looks it, and has retained many of her native country's customs. Christmas is a time of very mixed emotions.

Arriving here more than 20 years ago with her then-partner, now husband, she anticipated a short stint enjoying what this country had to offer. She had been here before, so knew what to expect. Two decades on, she isn't too sure when the actual agreement to stay permanently was pledged. She found she could cope with leaving behind a lucrative, senior position for anonymity in New Zealand, but leaving family and friends in the UK was a different story.

"I think it really hit home when I had our first child," Walker says. "I had no family support. My mother was in the UK. I was on my own."

She realises now she was probably suffering from post-natal depression.

"I did go back and forth to the UK for a number of years with the children, but every time, it was so hard to get back on that plane to return to New Zealand. I grieved for what I was leaving behind; for my friends and family. It's knowing that you can just be with people and they truly know who you are. There's no need to explain anything. That is priceless. In a way, I still grieve for that, despite having wonderful friends here in New Zealand."

Even though Britons and Kiwis speak the same language, they are very different people, she says. "Here in New Zealand, people just seem to 'get' sport. I remember going to a sports day event. It was an eye-opener for me. Everyone knew what to do and everyone got involved – staff, the children and the parents. Kiwis just get stuck in; they have this amazing 'gung-ho' attitude to life."

She had a miscarriage and then another child and felt utterly alone throughout that period. "It broke my heart on grandparents' day at school. My children had no one. I had no one ... Certainly, the grief of being away from family has taken its toll. There is a





Suzanne Jeffels: took up long-distance running to help deal with homesickness. "I'm much more accepting," she says.

personal cost, that is for sure."

That sense of loss is heightened during the festive season. She sees other friends having their extended family around them at Christmas and during other important occasions.

Instead of doing a traditional Christmas, her family prefers to pack up and go to the beach these days. "I can't deal with the thought of just the few of us around the table, when at home, there would be all the extended family, presents and food."

Walker emphasises that she highly values what she has here and never takes it for granted. Her children are Kiwis and love the life, she says, so she sometimes feels guilty that she has a sense of grief and longing for home.

"My ties are here now. There is no point trying to replicate what I had before. And

really, cooking a turkey in the middle of the day here in New Zealand – it's not going to work, is it?"

### THE "MAGIC FORMULA"

Suzanne Jeffels also juggles grief, compromise and a yearning for home with gratitude for what she has here. New Zealand became home after she and her husband spent years mulling their options about alternatives to the UK. They finally moved here with two young children in 2006, having never visited the country.

"New Zealand seemed quaint and safe to us, and essentially, we did it for the boys. We wanted them to have an outdoor life, not a city one."

Jeffels was a partner in a law firm. She knew she didn't want to stay in the same job for the rest of her life but was still "only 30%

convinced about the move". Her husband, Stephen, was more of a risk-taker, she says.

"When we got here, we lived in a rental property in Titirangi before our container arrived. The boys went to a rural school. I was shocked that there wasn't a school uniform. The school had a pig-feeding bin, which was an eye-opener, along with a flying fox. The boys were hooked, instantly."

Again, it was helpful staff at a local bank who suggested they try living in east Auckland. The family ended up renting "an old bach" on the waterfront in Bucklands Beach. While they enjoyed the "jaw-dropping" views and the boys settled into a good school, Jeffels found herself badly missing her career. "I experienced a double loss; both my home and my career had gone ... I remember, prophetically, thinking, 'What if the planes stop flying – how will I get back home?'"

The reality was that the rest of the family were thriving in their new country, so she tried to figure out how she could get the same "fix" and find the "new Suzanne".

"The homesickness and feeling of loss were debilitating. I asked my expat friends, 'How do you cope?' They were fine. I wasn't. In the end, someone took me aside and told me that I had to find my own answers to my situation, which I later realised was grief."

Jeffels did eventually find her feet. "I started running in my mid-50s. I do ultramarathons. I've developed other skill sets. I'm much more relaxed, more accepting. I have goals and a deep sense of achievement. Initially, I went to the UK every year, but I haven't been back since 2019."

Her birthday is in December, so this time of the year is doubly important to her. "In the UK, I used to decorate the entire house with differently themed Christmas trees each year. It was a lengthy celebration lasting at least two weeks. Here, once Christmas Day is over, people pack up and go to the beach. For me in New Zealand, Christmas is a non-event."

Although she is managing the "what am I doing here?" and "who am I?" questions, the sense of loss is still tangible. She knows she has so much to be grateful for – happy sons, a beautiful home, good jobs and a more relaxed way of living. It is about learning to live with the grief of what might have been, while simultaneously acknowledging that it is an investment she is making for the next generation. ■

KEN DOWNIE