

A Unique Look at Rural Life

For rural postie-cum-tour guides Jeff and Suzi Crawford, who operate the Eastern Bays Scenic Mail Run on Banks Peninsula, it's the people that make the job.

WORDS & IMAGES Annie Studholme



FROM MONDAY TO SATURDAY, JEFF AND WIFE SUZI provide a much-needed lifeline for locals, delivering mail, supplies, repairs and spare parts, animal health remedies, medicines and courier parcels to about 140 households on Banks Peninsula's isolated Eastern Bays.

Alongside their traditional postal run, the couple run a successful tourism venture, taking a vanload of tourists with them off the beaten track on their 120 km route to witness the unparalleled beauty and amazing scenery while getting a unique look at rural life, local landmarks and history of the area.

Originally from Northland, Jeff and Suzi had previously holidayed in Akaroa and were so taken with the place that five years ago they ventured down, and decided to stay. With youngest child, Josh, about to start middle school, the timing was perfect. 'People were so warm and friendly. We wanted to do something completely different, and were after a change of scene and pace of life,' says Suzi.

It took a massive leap of faith for the Crawfords to move away from everything they had known in Northland, leaving friends and family behind, but 'it just felt like we were in the right place'. Within a few weeks of moving to Banks Peninsula, their new life started to fall into place.

Taking on a rural post run had never crossed the Crawfords' minds prior to moving to Akaroa. Jeff is a qualified mechanic and Suzi a school and ESL teacher, but

when they joined the previous postman on one of his daily runs delivering mail to the tiny hamlets throughout the peninsula to get their bearings, there was something about the job that appealed.

Jeff worked as a relief driver for eight months. He took up the position full-time about three and a half years ago, after long-time driver Robin Burleigh decided to call it a day following 11 years on the job.

It's been a steep learning curve, says Jeff. Stepping into the role was not as easy as many people thought. It took him a few months to learn the mail run properly, even though he'd been a relief driver. 'It was hard because I was only doing it once a week, and by the next week I'd practically forgotten it.'

He says it would be near impossible for someone off the street just to step in and do it. With approximately 140 mailboxes along the run and sometimes many people living at each address, there were quite a lot of names and families to memorise. It was a team effort though, with Suzi there every step of the way.

Six days a week through rain or shine, sleet or snow, the mail always gets delivered. Jeff's only had one day since he took over that he couldn't deliver the mail. If his unmistakable red post van can't make it, he resorts to their own four-wheel drive.

The responsibility of getting the mail delivered is not lost on the Crawfords. 'People are relying on you. We know that,'

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LEFT Jeff and Suzi's first job each morning is sorting the mail and loading the van.

OPPOSITE For Jeff and Suzi Crawford being a rural postie-come-tour guide is all about the people they meet.

For many of his customers, Jeff is the only person they talk to some days. People are genuinely pleased to see him, and he's always got time to stop and chat along the way.

says Suzi. They've come to realise that being a rural postie is so much more than a mail delivery service, it's part of the fabric that holds a rural community together.

As a New Zealand Rural Post Contractor, the Crawfords' day usually starts around 7.30 am. Before setting off at 9 am, they sort the mail and parcels having being brought from Christchurch to Akaroa with the daily delivery truck.

Then they navigate their way along the 120 km route of gravel and sealed roads, weaving in and out of 10 bays from sea level to the crater rim, stopping here and there, popping letters and packages into a variety of mailboxes, collecting outgoing mail if required. They usually finish after 2.30pm in time to meet the outward-going post delivery van to Christchurch.

Jeff has got to know almost all of his 140 or so customers along the route. He knows who lives there permanently or just has a holiday house. People often wait by their letterboxes to greet him, some presenting him with baking or eggs.

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to some days. People are genuinely pleased to see him, and he's always got time to stop and chat along the way. 'There is no time pressure hanging over you,' says Jeff. 'As long as people get their mail they're pretty happy. It makes for a laid-back, stress-free environment in which to work in and I like that side of things.'

While it's not like the old days when rural posties regularly delivered the milk, groceries and bread in addition to the day's post and newspapers, Jeff's happy to go the extra mile for people, picking up and dropping off things in Akaroa as required.

But for the Crawfords, delivering the mail is only one facet of their operation. Since the first cruise ships started visiting Akaroa Harbour in the 1960s, the Akaroa's Eastern Bays Scenic Mail Run has also operated as a tour service, taking up to eight passengers with them on their five-hour journey.

'It's a great way for people to see the amazing scenery; when you drive you tend to miss things,' says Suzi. 'This is a relaxing way people can admire the scenery while learning a bit about the history and social history of the area, and get a unique perspective on rural life in New Zealand.'

Armed with delicious homemade snacks packed by Suzi, tourists get the chance to stop and enjoy breathtaking views of the bays, valleys and hills from numerous vantage points. There are plenty of opportunities for photos and comfort stops.

Jeff stops at various landmarks along the way including old post offices, community halls, beaches and the St Luke's church in Little Akaloa. Built in 1906 by local farmer and craftsman John Menzies, on a wooded knoll high above the bay, it features beautiful timber and Mt Somers stone carvings, depicting Māori/Celtic designs. It underwent extensive





renovations in 2014 to repair minor earthquake damage.

A favourite stop is also the Okains Bay general store which was established in 1873 and is thought to be one of the oldest continually operating stores in New Zealand (it closed during lockdown and is hoping to reopen for summer).

There are also many quirky mailboxes to spot on the route, from a letterbox in a tree trunk, to one made out of a microwave, complete with plug in the post, and another made from a copper hot water cylinder.

A big part of the tour's success is Jeff's friendly nature coupled with his broad knowledge of local history, flora and fauna, something he's built up over time. Not being a local, Jeff admits he had to go through a bit of a crash course to bring him up to speed at the start. Luckily though, son Josh is a bit of a history and geography buff and has spent some time volunteering at the Akaroa Museum.

Sharing the amazing scenery and history with people from all walks of life, doing different things, from all over New Zealand and the world, is what makes it, though, says Suzi. 'We really enjoy that side of it. We have met some interesting people.'

'I enjoy just how unique it is to any other job; I'm part tour operator, part postman,' says Jeff. 'It's a combo of doing lots of different things that I hadn't done before. I enjoy the driving, loving every twist and turn. It is a really interesting job; I never get sick of the beautiful views as the weather can

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make everything look so different. We often get four seasons in one day, keeping me on my toes.'

On the days when he doesn't have passengers, Jeff revels in the quiet, listening to podcasts and music to keep him company.

Suzi's on hand when things get busy, especially around Christmas. When she's not helping Jeff, she also works in the office at the local medical centre, and picks up relief teacher work to help make ends meet. Suzi is postie for the day while Jeff happily fills in at the local garage when they need an extra pair of hands. ●



OPPOSITE One of the favourite stops on the route is the Okains Bay general store.

ABOVE RIGHT Jeff stops at a number of local landmarks including St Luke's church in Little Akaloa.

TOP LEFT The little quirky post box in Le Bons Bay.

BELOW No matter the weather, the journey always throws out some incredible views.

