



Rural delivery: A Post Office van at The Grove, Marlborough, left, animal favourites near Wellsford, below, and an old radiator at Arthur's Point, near Queenstown, right.



Letters away: A popular pet, above, at Carterton, Wellington, and an old scuba tank, right, put to new use in Hahei, on the Coromandel.

# You've got mail

English journalist **Hugo Gladstone** and girlfriend Kate Carney spent a year in New Zealand during their recent 18-month round-the-world trip. Intrigued by the endless variety of New Zealand letterboxes, they decided to photograph them, capturing hundreds for posterity as they travelled the length of the country. Hugo explains the fascination.

**A**CCORDING to guidelines on New Zealand Post's website, personal letterboxes should be clearly numbered, at least 330 millimetres deep and with a mail slot about one metre off the ground. Comply with these and a few other basics they encourage, but otherwise go ahead and be as imaginative as you like. It appears that a lot of New Zealanders have.

Up and down the country, from Northland to Southland, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of examples of mail recipients getting creative at their gate posts. During several months of travel all around the country, my girlfriend, Kate, and I have seen mail boxes manifested as everything from sea creatures and farm machinery to intergalactic robots and architectural structures.

It struck us one day, shortly before embarking on our drive, that we should photograph these. I suppose if you want high-brow justification, these roadside creations could be classified as folk art. But what I like about these wonderful letterbox designs is that they're simply good fun. On one hand, you could go to a hardware store and buy a letterbox off the shelf. On the other, you could spend a Saturday afternoon in the garage creating something unique and



interesting. Maybe what you plonk at the end of your driveway says a little something about you?

The most commonly recurring themes we saw out on the road were the wooden depictions of animals and vehicles – cats, dogs, cattle, pigs, tigers, fire engines, campervans and tractors – you name it. There are also many abstract designs, from a mosaic of cracked crockery in Whangarei to a hot-pink cylinder near Gisborne. We also saw a lot of ingenious

recycling in people's letterboxes. Burnt-out microwaves, retired buoys, rusting milk churns and old wooden barrels seem to make for the most popular recommissions.

Of the more unusual, near Queenstown, we found a letterbox made from old truck radiator grille. On the Coromandel, things got distinctly nautical. There, an old scuba tank and outboard motor were enjoying a second life on land. Even more imaginatively, many



Post modern: A face carved in a stump near Blackmount, Fiordland, far left, and the Oamaru YHA's red kettle, left.

householders used discarded bits and bobs to create an altogether different letterbox feature. These include a tractor from dead spark plugs and bearing races in the Bay of Plenty, a pukeko of old machine parts in Tasman, and an industrial bumble bee constructed from propellers, cogs, spanners and whatever else its designer found in the shed. In some parts of New Zealand, customised mail boxes are sparsely distributed. Of course, there are many roads, areas and settlements we never

went near, but one particular week's travel through the central North Island yielded just one or two contraptions worth photographing. Other parts of the country are hot spots: the area around Granity on the West Coast, Murawai Beach near Auckland, and what feels like a golden mile or few along Queen Charlotte Drive in the Marlborough Sounds. Here it seems that every other address has a quirky letterbox at the roadside. Are these distribution patterns a reflection of



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demographics and lifestyle choice, or do neighbours just fall into competition with each other: a case of keeping up with the Joneses?

Along with the fun of designing and creating something unique for an otherwise everyday object, a distinctively designed letterbox can also serve a practical purpose. It can advertise a line of business, decorate a garden or be used as a landmark for visitors.

"When friends come to see us, we just tell them to look out for the tree-stump letterbox at the end of our drive," the rental tenant of a tucked-away house in Golden Bay told me. "We didn't make it. The letterbox was already here when we moved in. But I like it and it's by far the most recognisable thing to go on."

But I think that's about as far as any analysis of letterboxes needs to go. In 2006, the Royal Easter Show held

its inaugural Great New Zealand Letterbox Competition in which entries were judged against one another to decide a nationwide winner.

To me, having a formalised contest undermines their attraction. No longer are these functional items that just happen to be designed according to a personal whim. It means trying to design something better or more original than anyone else's.

I think the thing I like most about customised letterboxes is that their purpose is simple and modest, yet it remains their defining character. If it wasn't for the mail delivery, there would be no incentive for sticking a box at the end of the drive in the first place, let alone styling it in some unique, personalised fashion.

That this is so frequently and enthusiastically done across New Zealand shows me what an imaginative and fun-loving bunch Kiwis are.



Hobbit inspired? A cactus-topped creation at Mangonui, Northland. Photos: KATE CARNEY, HUGO GLADSTONE