

Kristen Curragh is used to partner Drew's job in the film industry taking him away for weeks on end. To help, they have a rule: Any more than a month and either he comes home or she and children Hattie, six, and Will, four, visit him.



From a distance

Imagine if your partner lived away from home half the week. Would you get lonely? Would you trust them? And what about the kids? Monique Balvert-O'Connor asks couples in commuter relationships how they make it work

SIX-YEAR-OLD HARRIET FRASER grabs her schoolbook and settles down to read to her father.

It's pretty much a nightly practice, but it's far from routine. Harriet's dad may be as many as 1500km away but, thanks to Skype software, he can talk to, and see, his daughter over the internet and help with homework.

It's a big deal when Daddy isn't home daily.

Drew Fraser's work in the art department of the New Zealand film industry can take him away from his Mt Maunganui family for weeks on end. But the Fraser family's situation is no longer that unusual; Drew, his wife Kristen Curragh and their children Harriet and Will, four, are among a growing number of New Zealanders living in a commuter relationship.

The lure of better pay and work opportunities in the big city, but a reluctance to give up the lifestyle that comes with living in the provinces, is leading many couples to opt for an arrangement which allows the best of both worlds. Plus, an increasing number of short-term job contracts means more commuting. Because distances from work make returning home daily unfeasible, it's not unusual for one partner to be away at least two nights a week. Sometimes international travel is involved.

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While Drew works within New Zealand, it's sometimes at remote locations, so getting to an airport for a quick break home can be difficult. But Drew and Kristen have a set rule: One month is the longest period apart. Drew either comes home, or Kristen and the children visit him.

Kristen says constant change is one of the hardest things about Drew working away. Things rarely run to schedule in the film world so planning ahead to suit the school holidays, for example, is almost impossible. Some film jobs run as long as five months, but he can have big stints off between films. Some contracts enable him to be home most weekends.

Drew is an arborist and helps head the art department's green team – the creative force behind such features as forests and waterfalls inside studios. When not on location he works in Wellington, where his young family used to live. While Kristen saw more of her husband then, she was keen to move to the Bay of Plenty to be closer to family support and to raise her children in a beach environment.

She believes having Drew away has made her stronger:

"I used to hate being on my own. But you learn, you cope, and that's a good thing. Having said that I don't know how long we can do this. At times we think 'this is just so dumb'. Then we brainstorm for something cool that will keep Drew here."

In the meantime, the two focus on making it work. Both trust each other implicitly.

"We're very tight," Drew says, "so that makes it a lot easier. You wouldn't want to have to worry about infidelity; that'd make the situation hopeless. You need to have a good relationship for this to work."

As for their many reunions...

"There used to be that huge expectation... he is coming home. We have to have the world's best weekend.

You have to fit so much into often only two days, and of course others need his attention. There is so much excitement but there can be a real transition getting back in sync with each other," Kristen says.

"When he's away I am so into routine. When he's back I have to re-slot, re-adjust and get back into the groove."

Drew misses the day-to-day company of Kristen and their children – "but we depend on this work and I love the job so much."

Kristen believes the separation is getting harder on the children as they get older. "Hattie has started asking 'How many more sleeps till Daddy gets home?'"

Sixteen-year-old James Woolner also knows what it's like not to have Dad around all the time.

Both his parents – Margaret Relph and David Woolner – work in the pharmaceutical industry. David's position as a medical director for an Australian and New Zealand subsidiary takes him to Sydney. He bases his working life around two working weeks in Sydney and one in Auckland and arranges it so two weekends out of three are home in Auckland.

He's been commuting for four years and before that worked in Auckland only, so it's been a "very dramatic" change. Margaret says while it has its challenges, it has become easier.

"At first we treated David as different and special and made a big fuss every time he came back. Now it has become normal and that's much easier. He just goes to work. Otherwise, if you behave in a way that's not normal, that almost makes the person not part of the family." →



Paula Skelton used to feel 'like a single parent'; now, with Ian away only two nights a week, there's lots of family time.

the Bay of Plenty province to Auckland for work rather than uprooting Paula, a secondary school teacher, and their children: Charlotte, 12, Hannah, 10, and Lizzy, seven.

Ian, a senior manager/business adviser, couldn't find the work he wanted in Tauranga; instead, he found it a 2½-hour drive away. Initially the job required five days a week at the company's Auckland base, but over time that altered to encompass two days a week in the Tauranga office. Now he's away only two nights, leaving on Tuesdays at 5am and staying with a colleague in Auckland before heading back home for a late dinner on Thursdays.

Paula says there's "a world of difference" between her husband being away just two nights as opposed to four.

"I used to feel like a single parent. I really felt the balance was the wrong way because he was away more nights than he was home. Now I feel we're like a normal family. Many husbands aren't available to their families midweek anyway due to business trips or late meetings."

Plus, Paula says, nearly all her best friends in Tauranga

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David believes certain things make the arrangement work for his family.

"We decided as a family to do this. It wasn't something that was forced on me, or that I decided to do and the family just had to cope with," he says. "Second, I set my life up here and in Sydney so I can commute quickly. I don't do luggage and hotel rooms – just a briefcase and a small apartment in Sydney."

David and Margaret say they have a "mature and solid" connection that can survive the time apart. "If you are going to have a commuter relationship it has to be built on the base of a very strong relationship," David says.

Margaret says communication has become extra-important. The two speak and text each other a few times a day. And they agree the success of living apart also depends on personalities.

"I'm essentially alone in Sydney but am relatively happy in my own company so that makes it easier," David says. "Marg is a very capable lady so self-sufficiency isn't an issue, and James is close to Margaret; that, and his great friendships, helps with the fact I'm not home a lot."

While they cope well, both say the commuting will need to have a finite life.

English immigrants Paula and Ian Skelton love their Tauranga lifestyle. So much so that Ian commutes from

are in commuter relationships and they are hugely supportive of each other.

Having a commuting husband means some things fall by the wayside, she says, such as the school PTA. She's relinquished that commitment as it involves midweek evening meetings. But with Ian away, Paula feels more inclined to whip up quick and easy meals, and believes she's more organised and focused with the children.

"It probably makes our relationship better. I really look forward to seeing Ian when he returns, but it means that two evenings a week I have time to myself when the girls are in bed and that is lovely.

"Being away brings positives for Ian too. It means a break from juggling work and the kids. He can be a really good colleague and employee as he doesn't have to worry about getting home on time or picking the girls up."

The Skelton girls are totally used to the arrangement. "They don't jump up and make a big deal of Dad coming home on Thursdays. They just take it for granted he'll come home and that's how it should be." Besides, their busy sporting calendar means his midweek absences fly by.

Paula advises couples embarking on a commuter relationship to be flexible. When faced with Ian being away five days a week, the Skeltons kept their options





When Rowena Roberts and her CEO husband Kevin meet up, it's often in a different part of the world.

open. Moving to Auckland was a possibility, they decided, if they found it too hard being separated.

"But Ian felt it was better that he commute and that Tauranga was the place for our family to be. Given that we had given up being with our family in the UK there had to be a bonus. The bonus was our lifestyle in the Bay of Plenty."

Living in the same house as her husband is a foreign concept for Rowena Roberts.

London-born Rowena, who launched New Zealand's flagship stores for MAC cosmetics and fragrance brand Jo Malone, is married to Kevin Roberts, the worldwide

CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi. Kevin's office is in New York, while Rowena lives in their Auckland home base.

In the 35 years they've been together, Kevin has always worked internationally. For Rowena, knowing when they're next going to see each other has always been important. These days they meet in New Zealand, the USA, at their homes in Grasmere, England and St Tropez, France, or anywhere else in the world.

"Sometimes if Kevin is visiting a country I haven't been to and would like to visit, I will meet him there. So it's a very exciting life," says Rowena.

They meet up monthly, sometimes more.

"A relationship with him here every day would be very different. It would be tricky because we have never done it. It would be great, but then we have such an interesting life now with lots of fulfilment. We meet lots of people and every time I see Kevin it's like being on holiday and we have so much to talk about.

"I think it's fair to say our romance is alive because when we see each other it's really special. It's better than being in a boring or staid relationship."

Rowena says daily calls make their phone bill their biggest extravagance.

The Roberts are a true global family; daughter Bex lives in Auckland and sons Dan and Ben, daughter-in-law Clarissa and granddaughter Stella live in England.

"Kevin has provided them with amazing opportunities. It hasn't been a conventional family relationship but then they have had wonderful opportunities that other children haven't had a chance at." ■

Making it work

Relationship psychologist John Aiken offers tips to surviving commuter relationships:

1 Establish rules for contact: Sit down with your partner and talk through what your expectations are around contact when you're apart. Be specific and create common agreements on things like when you call, how often you call, importance of emails and texts, sleep routines and so on.

2 Communicate clearly: When your partner is away, it's vital that you communicate clearly and avoid sending each other mixed messages. Whether it's by text, phone or email, express yourself in a way that requires no translation. If it's a very important issue, it's better to do this over the phone; that way you can expand on your worries and work things through.

3 Deal with issues immediately: There will be many occasions, while you're apart, when issues need to be

addressed. When they do, make a point of dealing with them immediately with your partner rather than putting them off until the next conversation. This will eat away at you and jeopardise your relationship.

4 Remember dates and surprise each other: When you're apart it's easy to get swept away in what you're doing and forget about life back home. Keep a diary and celebrate all the important dates – birthdays, wedding anniversaries, Valentine's Day, Mother's/Father's Day. As well, try to surprise each other with flowers, gifts, cards, notes and spontaneous "thinking of you" texts.

5 Ease into the intimacy: When your partner returns from their travel it's worth taking some time to get reacquainted. This means taking it a little slowly before getting straight into sex. Have a meal, go for a walk, spend time with the kids, go to a cafe, or have a drink to get back in touch with other.