

# treehouse

Surrounded by gum trees and looking as though it's grown out of the Australian bush that surrounds it, this unusual house is home to a Kiwi photographer and her family

WORDS MONIQUE BALVERT-O'CONNOR PHOTOGRAPHS TREVOR MEIN

**KANGAROOS BOUNCING UP AND** sideswiping your car are a drawback to living in the bush on the outskirts of Melbourne, admits Jodie Lachmund. But this New Zealander says she'd be struggling to come up with any other negatives.

Hawke's Bay-born and raised Jodie and her Australian husband Jason live in Kangaroo Ground, a 45-minute drive from the hub of Melbourne.

Friends call the Lachmunds' home a glorified tree house, in recognition of its timber façade shaped around tall posts resembling tree trunks, and its hilltop location among a sea of gum trees. Jodie likes the description, so much so that a rimu sign dangles over her front door announcing 'Te Rakau Whare' – the Tree House. The sign was carved by a Maori elder and was a gift from Jodie's dad Jack Boyle. It joins many other New Zealand touches in this home, such as a fishhook carved of stone, a floor rug resembling a Friesian cowhide, a flax cloak, rimu chairs, and bedcovers by designer Bianca Lorenne.

Australia has been home to Jodie, a real estate photographer, for the past eight years and the couple have owned their current house since mid-2006 – pretty much ever since Jodie was sent out to photograph it for work. →



"I took one look at it and went home to talk to Jason. The next day I rang the real estate company director and asked him to take it off the market because I wanted it. There was just no mucking around. My in-laws have referred to me as 'the whirlwind' ever since," Jodie says.

Missing out on the house she'd fallen in love with was unthinkable. Jason's initial reservations about moving further from the city quickly dispersed, and before long he was referring to his home as "a work of art".

Besides, he's proved adept at charming the birds from the trees. Three kookaburras have become the couple's unofficial pets and fly down to their deck every morning to feed from Jason's hand. More often than not these great winged beauties have to jostle for landing rights with rosellas, magpies, king parrots and cockatoos. The birdlife is like art in motion, and easily viewed from inside because many of the exterior walls, both upstairs and down, feature expanses of floor-to-ceiling glass. These see-through walls offer the chance to sometimes catch kangaroos, echidnas and wombats illicitly munching on Jodie's flowers.

The couple speaks proudly of the house's antique flavour. It may only be 11 years old but they relish the



**TOP:** Underneath the historic staircase in the downstairs is Jason's red Ducati motorbike – also spotted by Jodie on a photo assignment. "Lots of his friends wanted to marry me that day," says Jodie. **LEFT:** The upstairs lounge has been furnished to capitalise on the view. **ABOVE:** The master bedroom, with an old French gate for a bedhead and Jodie's designer wedding gown on the mannequin.

fact that all its construction materials appear to have a former life and a story to tell.

The Australian hardwood that lines the upper floor ceiling and all the interior walls dates back 400 years; the trusses are from an old boathouse; the wooden poles spanning the two storeys and holding up the deck are former power poles; and the staircase and balustrade are from a Victorian house in the city. All the internal doors and the French doors leading from the master bedroom to a tiny deck are from old Melbourne houses, and the huge walls of windows are double-glazed and vacuum-sealed as they were originally destined for a Melbourne skyscraper.

The house never really stood a chance of being a dull creation. It was built by Hamish Knox, the son of Alistair Knox who, with his love of mud brick and recycled building materials, significantly influenced 20th century domestic architecture in Australia. Hamish's design brief was to create a studio-cum-party house.

Bands performed there and the stories are legendary up in Kangaroo Ground. In fact, according to local lore it was a bottle or two of Aussie beer that aided the creation of the home's often puzzled-over lower floor. →



**ABOVE:** The second bedroom feeds off the downstairs lounge and Jodie has created a private little sitting nook. **TOP RIGHT:** Many of Jodie's interior choices have special meaning. In the kitchen, this Vietnamese cloak is a daily reminder of the country where the couple, right, exchanged their vows.

"Apparently the initial owner had a drum of metal letters in storage. Then one day, while having a drink, he randomly tossed them onto the just-poured concrete downstairs," says Jodie. "It's a huge talking point and many people have stared at those letters seeking meaning."

Many of the interior design touches also tell a story. The bedhead in the master bedroom, for example, was once an old French gate. Two solid wood hippopotami were lugged back from a trip to Zimbabwe, and an ancient Vietnamese cloak – complete with moth holes – is a special memoir because Jodie and Jason married in Vietnam. Her gold tulle designer wedding dress is draped on a French mannequin in their bedroom.

Jodie has found many a treasure while out on photographic assignments – such as the art deco standing ashtrays and a drinks trolley of glass and chrome from a deceased estate. A gilt-framed mirror by the dining room table, a Louis chair downstairs, and the designer dining room furniture painted in primary colours also came courtesy of photo jobs.

There's no doubting the Lachmunds' home is an eye catcher for more than one reason. But it didn't always look quite so sharp. When Jodie first clapped eyes on the house it was rented out and in "a very interesting state". One huge spring-clean later and it was time to start making some changes. Over the months they've added a wardrobe and put carpet in their bedroom, which feeds off the main open-plan living area upstairs. They've installed a new kitchen, and their en suite revamp has



included removing the bath; there's not much point having one, Jodie says, seeing as they're on tank water.

The downstairs comprises a second big living area with doors leading to the home's only other bedroom and a bathroom they've replaced. They've also added an audio-proofed ceiling where there was once just exposed wood from the floor above.

The soundproofing has come in handy as late last year Jodie and Jason added twin babies – Carter and Kennedy – to their family. They acknowledge they'll need to make a few more interior changes once their son and daughter start crawling. In the meantime they're enjoying their picture-perfect home that everyone seems to love... except perhaps one of Jodie's girlfriends.

"A kangaroo hit the side of her Mercedes convertible and did \$10,000 damage," Jodie says, grimacing.

So does this Kiwi girl ever get homesick? Well first, she's thrilled that her mum has just moved to Melbourne. Second, the local general store caters to any yearnings for a taste of New Zealand. There they stock L&P, Pineapple Lumps and Buzz Bars.

So, life is indeed sweet in Kangaroo Ground. **N**