

News, views and clues

Care-A-Vanners

It's a long way to come from Ohio to New Zealand to swing a hammer; but not for American RV enthusiasts Wayland and Joan Ritzman.

They are among about 6000 people who, since 1988, have combined organised RV road trips with volunteering, as part of Habitat for Humanity's 'RV Care-A-Vanner' programme. Habitat for Humanity is an international not-for-profit organisation that helps low-income families to build their own simple homes relying on volunteer labour and discounted or donated building materials.

Most Care-A-Vanner trips are in north America, but every year since 2002, Care-A-Vanner groups from the USA have travelled to New Zealand. They hire campervans here, generally spending two weeks on the road sightseeing, and another fortnight helping to build houses in conjunction with Habitat for Humanity. The volunteer teams pay for their own travel, campervan hire and living expenses, and also make a donation to the local branch.

"We came back to New Zealand because of the beauty, its people and environment," say the Ritzmans. "There was less graffiti and trash, and



The volunteers hard at work in Kaitia



The Care-A-Vanners line up at the Manukau Top 10

more consideration. There were many times when people made every effort to help us,

whether it was interpreting a menu, sharing a favourite place or inviting us home for tea."

The itinerary and the order in which volunteers juggle sightseeing and volunteering depends on the building schedule. In recent years the trips to New Zealand have been in May, when it is off-season and campervan rates are lower. They usually start in the South Island to take advantage of the weather before it gets too cold. This year the Ritzman's team travelled around the South Island before heading north to help build a house in Kaitia.

Age and experience are not usually barriers. Wayland and Joan are both 64, and neither of them come from a building background. Habitat has trained supervisors on-site to guide volunteers, and people are given tasks that suit their skill and fitness levels.

New Zealand's volunteer programme coordinator, Dawn Lehman, would like to see New Zealand RV enthusiasts become involved.

"There's no reason why Kiwis can't form teams," she says. "It's a great way to see the country, have fun and help change the lives of fellow Kiwis at the same time." ■

By Linda Grigg.

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