

Flight of the Kiwi

May 22, 2010 *Sydney Morning Herald* by Tim Dick



A long way from Denver ... Doug Kirkpatrick, with his wife Carolyn and sons Liam, 11, and Colin, 9, enjoying the outdoors near their new home in Queenstown. *Photo: Michael Thomas*

New Zealand is seen as an Eden by its new arrivals, but the locals are still leaving for better opportunities elsewhere, reports Tim Dick.

Doug Kirkpatrick and his wife, Carolyn, were thinking about moving from Denver to Europe - probably to France - when they went to New Zealand on holidays in 2004.

They stayed in its sunniest town, Nelson, travelled down past the glaciers of the West Coast and on to Wanaka, a ski town in the Southern Alps with fewer French and better pinot noir than the northern hemisphere version.

After 10 days, France was off. "I've been to over 50 countries, lived half my life abroad," Doug says. This move was the first not for work or parents, but motivated entirely by what felt right. "We could have chosen anywhere in the world, we chose New Zealand."

They chose the most remote rich country, one with little influence and no geopolitical importance - at least to countries comprising more than an atoll or two.

It has as many people as Sydney, no fighter jets and, according to a Lowy Institute poll in 2005, is of such insignificance that little more than a third of the neighbours could name its prime minister. And research by immigration authorities suggests isolation may be good for attracting the kind of well-qualified, rich migrants New Zealand wants.

In the 1980s, far more people left than arrived. But the tide has turned: in 17 of the past 20 years, more people arrived than left. Unlike most Kiwis who move to Australia, many who move to New Zealand do not go for the money. They go because they think it beautiful and

unspoilt, safe and relaxed, polite and friendly. It's half a globe from the nearest nuclear weapon, and the closest reactor is at Lucas Heights. For many, it is a remote paradise in the South Pacific, a return to Eden.

The top three attractions by far, according to a long-term study of 7100 migrants, are its relaxed lifestyle, its "clean green" environment and a better future for their children.

The Kirkpatricks found all three in well-to-do Queenstown, which features prominently in Tourism New Zealand's ridiculously successful "100% Pure" campaign.

She is a teacher, he works in funds management, and they wanted to live somewhere outside the cities - not that cities across the Tasman are large. Even with a third of the national population, Auckland is barely bigger than Adelaide. They wanted somewhere small, somewhere people don't lock their doors, somewhere like Queenstown, "a very good place to bring up kids", he says.

Two years on, has the dream met reality? "Yes. We've been very happy with the move. People are amazing here and they are very open. They have been very embracing."

There was the odd disappointment, as most migrants discover. The education system needs work, for one. And there's a reason economic opportunities didn't top the list of attractions, for them or for most migrants.

"They aren't here," Doug says. "It's very expensive and frankly I don't know how the average Kiwi family can balance the budget. It doesn't surprise me that so many Kiwis head off to Australia or London."

The flight of the Kiwis is a constant source of national anxiety. The Prime Minister, John Key, of the conservative National Party, takes it more seriously than his 1980s predecessor Robert Muldoon, who pilfered a line to claim departures to Australia "raised the average IQ of both countries". In the year to March, it recorded a net loss of 15,500 people to Australia - a good year. The previous year, it lost 33,600.

Reducing the growing Kiwi diaspora to Australia dominated this week's budget debate, the theory being if New Zealand can match Australia's wealth, fewer will want to go.

Those who leave are replaced through immigration and, according to two major recent studies, those left behind feel warmly about those who come to join them. But both studies suggested many would be happier still if migrants were more like Kirkpatrick - from countries with Anglo-Celtic backgrounds with English as their predominant language.

But they're not. While 29 per cent of residents born overseas came from Britain and Ireland, the same proportion came from Asia. Just 7 per cent came from Australia, less than from China and falling, and 15 per cent flew in from the Pacific islands.

In urban south Auckland, Pacific islanders outnumber both Maori and pakeha (of European descent) by two to one. Increasing numbers of Europeans and American migrants might not move to New Zealand for money, but most Samoans do. Economic opportunities are relative, and Samoa's gross domestic product per person is one-tenth of its former colonial master.

New Zealand seized German Samoa for the empire early in World War I and now, almost 50 years since independence, 1100 Samoans are allowed to migrate each year by ballot. About the same number secure other forms of residency. They come, almost entirely, to Auckland suburbs like Mangere.

Here, greengrocers charge more for green bananas than yellow and stock more taro than potato. The smartest shop at the concrete-block mall is a new McDonald's. A Pacific Loans outlet offering cash loans competes for attention with Nappies For Less.

A third of this community is on some kind of government benefit or pension and the median age is a decade younger than the national figure, just 26 years old.

The local member was once the prime minister (David Lange, Labour), and it is now held for the same party by Su'a William Sio, who moved from Samoa in 1969. He says New Zealand's five-quarter recession hurt islanders badly, as downturns always do.

The national unemployment rate is now back down to 6 per cent, but is 13.3 per cent for islanders. For Pacific youth, it is 27 per cent.

"There's a growing mood about it," Sio says. "An uneasiness about the whole thing."

The recovery is hesitant, and many Pacific people who lost jobs remain unemployed.

They share similarly poor comparative economic and social statistics with Maori - they die earlier, are imprisoned more often, are fatter and earn a fifth less than the average.

New arrivals are looked after through churches and family links, manifestations of a proud culture. "We used to joke the Chinese came and they set up restaurants. The Indians turned up and set up shops. And the Samoans turned up and set up churches."

That means islanders tend to settle in quickly, at least socially. But immigration research shows when they first arrive, their economic fortunes are poor - as with many migrants. Unlike those from other countries, their fortunes tend not to improve, no matter how long they stay. But that research compares their wealth with the New Zealand average, not the Samoan one. Sina Gray, 23, moved from Samoa last year to finish her arts degree at Auckland University. She came for the money. "It's advanced, and there are many opportunities here," she says. "Big salaries."

She finds living in the islands expensive, given the low pay, and plans to stay after graduating, even if some New Zealand-born Samoans tend to look down on newer arrivals.

When she graduates, she will be an exception: a Pacific islander with a degree. Most work in less skilled jobs.

Unlike Samoan migrants, many from Asia lack social structures. That was drawn to national attention this month when a Korean mother who moved to Christchurch for her two daughters' education was found dead, alongside her children. Shortly after he arrived from Seoul for the funeral, the father was found dead as well.

Another Korean mother, Joanne Kim, 38, told *The New Zealand Herald* she had expected New Zealanders to be friendly, but found only social isolation. Harassment by a neighbour was sparked by the amount of garlic in her cooking but deteriorated and eventually led to depression and an attempt on her own life.

That experience is rare, and the economic fortunes of those from Asian countries tend to rapidly improve. Zoe Sun, 31, is one of the 9 per cent of residents born in Asia. She went to university in Christchurch, and returned a graduate engineer to Taipei. Five years later, she was back with her husband, Jack.

They moved to Auckland last year, despite the market for engineers being much greater in Taipei. "We want to grow a family together and Taiwan is not quite the place I want to raise kids," she says. "My idea of New Zealand is small-town, cruisy, like Christchurch where everyone knows everyone. Taipei is really busy, really crowded, everyone lives in an apartment, it's really hard to get a house."

And Auckland is a bit of both, she says, a better lifestyle and a stop-off for rock bands. They went to AC/DC, but missed out on tickets to Metallica.

"People here try to have a good life, a balance of everything. But in Taiwan it's all about money. People judge you by how much you earn, the clothes you wear, the car you drive."

She likes it here, as do nine in every 10 migrants who say they are either satisfied or very satisfied with life in New Zealand. In there is a message for politicians who obsess about matching Australia's economic performance.

Asked why she didn't move to Sydney - it has a similar culture, better money and is closer to Taiwan - and she laughs. "It strikes me as just an English-talking Taipei. Still very money-driven." That's not what she wanted, and it's not what she found