



*A passion for*  
**ADVENTURE**

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Sometimes you have to get into tricky situations in order to capture the photograph.  
OPPOSITE: Inside The Tree House.



Swimming with sharks and diving sunken shipwreck sites are among many once-in-a-lifetime experiences Cheviot's Ellis Emmett clocked up as co-host of the adventure travel dive series *Descending*, which premiered on SKY TV's Travel Channel in August. Now his thoughts are turning to the next global travel show, as well as a bold new project to inspire and motivate young New Zealanders. We caught up with Ellis recently at his unique rural home – The Tree House – to find out more.

ELLIS EMMETT HONESTLY BELIEVES he is an ordinary man. He tells me this as he pours out some protein shakes for himself, his wife Sanna and myself in the kitchen of the utterly unforgettable home they have built for themselves over a decade.

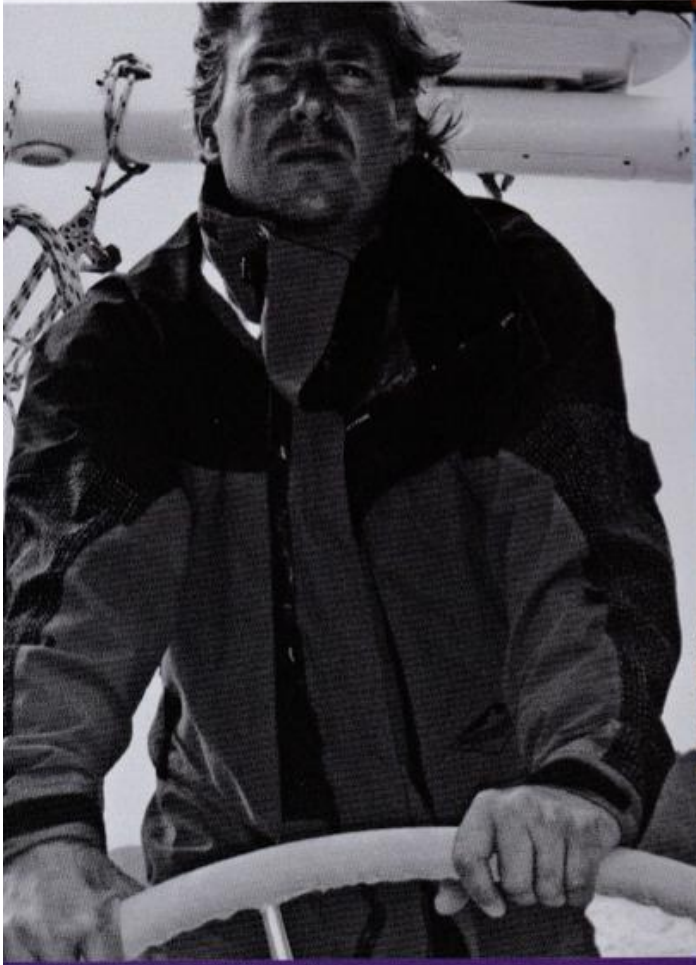
The couple hand milled all of the home's 147 beams with an Alaskan chainsaw mill. Two huge nine-metre eucalyptus tree trunks support the home's backbone. We take a seat in front of one of the largest natural rock fireplaces in New Zealand where the hearth stone alone weighs 1.2 tonnes.

"To me, that's art. It's art created by nature," says Ellis.

Hailing from Finland, Sanna met Ellis while travelling in Chile in 2002 and promised to visit him in New Zealand a few months later. Her six-week-long visit – and other subsequent visits – were spent mixing concrete and milling timber for The Tree House, the dream home Ellis designed on a hilltop site in Cheviot. The three-storey, rustic retreat is a shared labour of love that has involved them both in many thousands of hours of planning and hard work.

A year after they met, Sanna and her daughter Michelle, then aged seven, moved to New Zealand; six months later, Ellis proposed.





The show saw the trio explore tropical reefs in Sudan, wooden shipwrecks in the Great Lakes of North America and fissures between tectonic plates in Icelandic waters.



Left: Scanning stormy weather ahead onboard Miro, 43 foot Beneteau, Auckland to Wellington.

Top right: Traveling light without a tent has its disadvantages in the rain.

Above: The Descending film crew setting up for the sunset.

I have not, however, come to Cheviot just to write an article on The Tree House. What has really lured me here is Ellis's adventurous reputation. His underwater experiences with fellow television host Scott Wilson and director Andre Dupuis, captured in the 13-part Canadian series *Descending*, were shot in the marine environments of 17 different countries over 18 months. The show saw the trio explore tropical reefs in Sudan, wooden shipwrecks in the Great Lakes of North America and fissures between tectonic plates in Icelandic waters. Places visited in New Zealand included Fiordland, the wreck of the *Mikhail Lermontov*, the sunken forest at Lake Waikaremoana and the Poor Knights Marine Reserve.

In one episode Ellis goes into the water in a shark cage to observe great white sharks in South Africa, tickles a huge honeycomb moray eel under the chin and dons pink 'anti-shark' fins before diving overboard to mingle with circling

oceanic blacktip sharks and a large tiger shark, lured by a chum bait ball.

"I was quite scared to go in the water when I saw the guys on the boat throwing in bait and the ensuing feeding frenzy. I was thinking 'when we dive in, how will they [the blacktips] know the difference?'" recalls Ellis. "But from the moment we could see them underwater you realised they were not dangerous."

Ellis believes everyone has their own 'safety line in the sand', a kind of built-in self-preservation rip cord. He doesn't think of himself as being brave – it's just his own safety line appears well beyond that of most people. Even when he reaches it, he always asks himself the same question: 'what's the worst that can happen?' The difference between Ellis and those who choose not to swim with hungry sharks lies in how they would answer that question.

He insists, again, he is an ordinary man, a farm boy from





Above: Underwater filming Lembeh Strait, Indonesia.  
 Right: Sometimes in life you just have to make the leap.

Cheviot who has lived around animals all his life. He says he can read animal behaviour "reasonably well", including that of marine animals. "It's thrilling to be around such a great number of sharks. To have that experience and feel very secure with them was pretty cool. Okay, you have to accept you might get bitten, but it's only a bite. They won't tear you limb from limb."

A flurry of media interviews when *Descending* went to air saw Ellis dubbed 'an adventure daredevil' but this is not how he sees himself. "I've had amazing experiences but I don't consider myself a daredevil. What I do have is a passion for adventure and for discovering new things and inspiring other people. That's pretty much it."

In a year and half of filming, travelling and exploring a vast diversity of marine environments, he has also become very knowledgeable about these environments, their beauty, their fragility and the threats they face. "They are changing very







Entrance to The Tree House.

rapidly. The same theme kept coming back: people would say to us 'it's not as good as it used to be'. Everywhere we went we came across environmental issues." Yet Ellis remains hopeful the world will wake up in time. *Descending*, for its part, is sharing a passion for the ocean that is proving inspiring. "I've had numerous letters from people all over the world saying the show has motivated them to take up diving – it's having a direct impact."

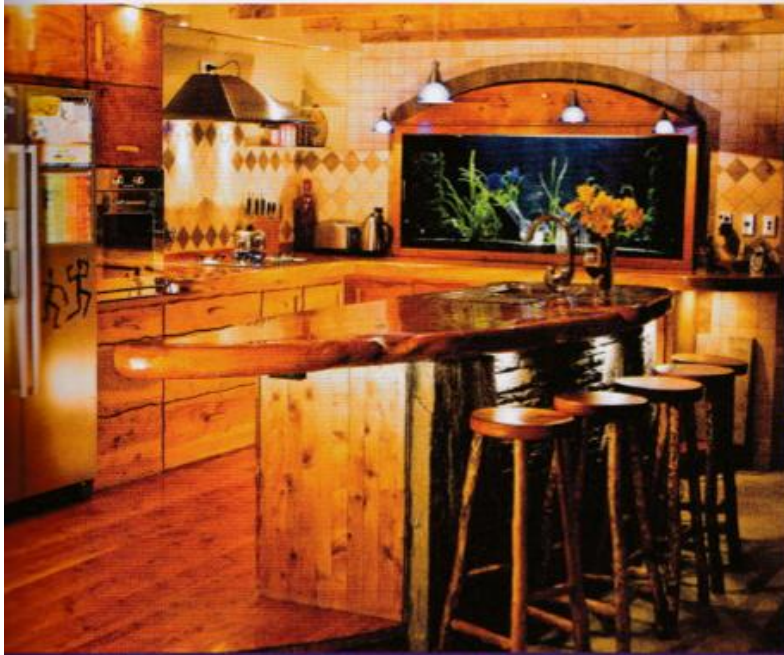
Diving was a recreation Ellis himself took up as soon as he was old enough to sign on for a dive course at 16. A desire to explore beneath the waves began even earlier, in his pre-teen childhood. "People have asked me 'what got you into diving?' Like most of my generation, I grew up watching Jacques Cousteau and David Attenborough. Dad was big on nature programmes. I think that's where it all started."

Ellis says he grew up in a safety conscious household where adventure wasn't necessarily encouraged. "Maybe I'm

still rebelling," he laughs. Still, he found his fair share of it as a young man diving for crayfish or taking off on hunting trips with his best mate Andrew Ashley. The experience of carrying out wild game, over ridges and through valleys for several hours, gave early insight into how seemingly impossible tasks can be achieved, one step at a time. "I took that same mental philosophy with me when I started building this house. I took on a massive challenge and broke it down into a series of steps and just kept focussed on the next step."

These days, he no longer chooses to go hunting. There have been enough close calls in his own life, particularly through climbing experiences, to have deepened his appreciation for life – "not just my own life, but all life." There have probably been a dozen or more occasions when it's come down to a 50/50 flip of a coin that could have gone either way. He recalls one fall he had when ice climbing on the Franz Josef Glacier. "We were free climbing a vertical face when I fell backwards





The couple hand milled all of the home's 147 beams with an Alaskan chainsaw mill. Two huge nine-metre eucalyptus tree trunks support the home's backbone.

Left: The kitchen joinery is made up of macrocarpa, sourced locally. The 3.5 metre bench top is a solid slab of macrocarpa, chainsaw sculptured by Ellis and Sanna.

Right: The 5 metre high stone fire place is the social center point in the lounge. The hearth rock alone weights 1.2 tonnes.



into a crevasse – I ended up wedged in, ten metres down, at a point where the crevasse had narrowed inwards. It was only my backpack that stopped my fall to the very bottom.”

So, life is now a precious thing. He swerves for sparrows on the road, will think twice before squashing even a spider and seldom eats meat. It explains why hunting with a gun gave way to hunting with a camera.

The dreams Ellis had as a child and young man have followed him through life. He first met Descending's Scott and Andre in Cambodia in 2001, while on his first big overseas journey through Southeast Asia. He had left New Zealand just a week after the 9/11 attacks in the United States. It was an uncertain time but he was passionate about wanting to explore the world, inspired too by friends like former Cheviot hunting buddy Andrew who had already left for Cambodia.

“I bought myself a Lonely Planet guide, read two pages and then decided I wasn't a travel book kind of guy. Instead I

rented a motorbike and headed off the beaten path just to see where it would go.” One such trip, down a dusty side road in Vietnam, saw him welcomed by villagers only to be threatened and interrogated at gunpoint by a quartet of suspicious police. He eventually managed to escape, thanks to some local village children helping to push start his motorbike at the eleventh hour.

While in Cambodia, he met Canadian travel show producer Gordon Sivell, along with Scott and Andre. They were filming a series called *Don't Forget Your Passport*. They asked to film a segment with Ellis, and then recruited him as a guide to a remote temple. On the way, Gordon and the show's host, Ross Shimmon, were involved in a serious motorcycle crash. The silver lining of this rather harrowing experience was having Gordon offer him a hosting gig for the following season.

Three months later, Ellis was nervously hosting his very first television show in Chile, South America. In an eloquent





Left: Standard Tree House BBQ night with Ellis.

Right: Ruurd van der Wel along with Ellis on top of the active volcanic island of Tofua, as part of their 6,000 km voyage, in the Kingdom of Tonga.

online description of this time, Ellis notes he landed this role “with no formal training, no prior experience and no bloody clue what I had got myself into!”

Since that time he has also co-presented a TV show called *Kiwi Dive Safari* and assisted in another of Andre and Scott’s travel shows called *Departures*, (with the pilot and two episodes filmed in New Zealand). Ellis is also an accomplished author in his own right, a talented stills photographer and has his own adventure company, Go Wild Productions.

Now he’s working with Andre on a new documentary series, *Over the Horizon*, where they will set out to explore some of the remotest places on earth by sail. He expects the project to take five years, filming and sailing in six monthly segments.

“This series stems from a childhood dream of mine to sail to places not many people have heard of. I think of it as ‘all the hidden places in between; places you can’t fly a commercial jet to. We filmed a pilot late last year, sailing on a six thousand kilometre journey to the islands of Tonga and back again, timed with the migration and calving of humpback whales. We had some amazing experiences and captured incredible footage.”

One place they visited was tiny Kelelesia Island, deserted by repute. “When we got there, however, we found something

we had never expected: an old man living in a corrugated iron shack. It was his land.” The night of their arrival, they asked the man to share their dinner and he, in turn, shared the story of a yacht wrecked out on the island’s reef. The team later found the wreck, dived at the site and recovered the captain’s log. “This is what I mean by exploration,” says Ellis. “We went to that island not knowing what we would find and made our own discoveries.”

After years of adventure and travelling the world, Ellis wants to give something back to today’s young New Zealanders. He and Sanna are working on a big project together, called SOS, its goal being to inspire young people to reach for their own dreams and give them tools to achieve this.

“I’d like to share my own story by talking to schools and young adults not because I think I’m anyone special but because I’ve had an incredible journey. That journey hasn’t always been easy: I’ve faced huge adversity and many challenges.

“You get knocked off your feet and sometimes have to start again, but if you set your mind to something and work at it over a prolonged period of time, it’s amazing what you can achieve.”

It is truly amazing what this self-described ordinary man has achieved in a not so ordinary life of travel and adventure to the world’s wild places. ■