

Come together

CALL OF THE WILD



ELLIS EMMETT'S EXTRAORDINARY HUNGER FOR KNOWLEDGE HAS MADE HIM A STAR IN THE WORLD OF ADVENTURE TRAVEL. HE, HOWEVER, SEES HIMSELF AS JUST AN ORDINARY GUY FROM NORTH CANTERBURY

WORDS LUCY CORRY PHOTOGRAPHS RACHAEL HALE MCKENNA

Ellis Emmett has chased thrills all over the world, but his heart is in north Canterbury where he lives with his wife Sanna and dog Sasha. "Adventure is about learning and growing, about facing your fears and making your own discoveries," he says. "I've spent a lot of my life facing my fears."



'FEEL THE FEAR and do it anyway' could have been invented for adventure traveler Ellis Emmett. He has climbed vertiginous mountains, swum with sharks and dived in dangerous shipwrecks, all in the name of adventure. His latest exploit – a six-month sailing odyssey in the South Pacific – has been captured in a new documentary series for National Geographic and he has plenty of ideas for more.

"I don't do anything particularly crazy," Ellis says. "Some people might say I do extraordinary things, but there's nothing special about me. Traveling, growing and learning are my reasons to get out of bed in the morning. To be able to document the beautiful world we live in, and pass that on to other people, completes the circle."

His life may seem like something from a boys' own adventure story, but Ellis maintains he's just a guy from north Canterbury who has pushed himself to great heights – and depths – at home and abroad. "I'm just trying to live the very best life I can with what I have, and hopefully inspire other people to do the same," he says.

"I really enjoy the personal challenge of being in extreme places. When that panic wells up, I love the challenge of having to swallow that feeling down and stay calm – actually living in the moment at those times.

"We all have a line in the sand where our comfort zone is for every different facet of life. Often we get to the line and turn back because we think we've reached our limits, but over that line is where the good stuff happens."

Ellis started crossing his own lines in the sand as a teenager. He grew up in Cheviot, a small rural community roughly halfway between Christchurch and Kaikoura. The youngest of three children, his was a safe, no-thrills upbringing where the closest he got to high adventure was watching David Attenborough and Jacques Cousteau on television.

The Tree House

Ellis and Sanna's cherished Tree House has been a labour of love. The 365-square-metre house takes its name from two giant eucalyptus trunks that act as supporting columns. Ellis estimates the trees are about 120 years old – he rescued them after they fell in a nearby park, and worked them into the structure of the four-level house.

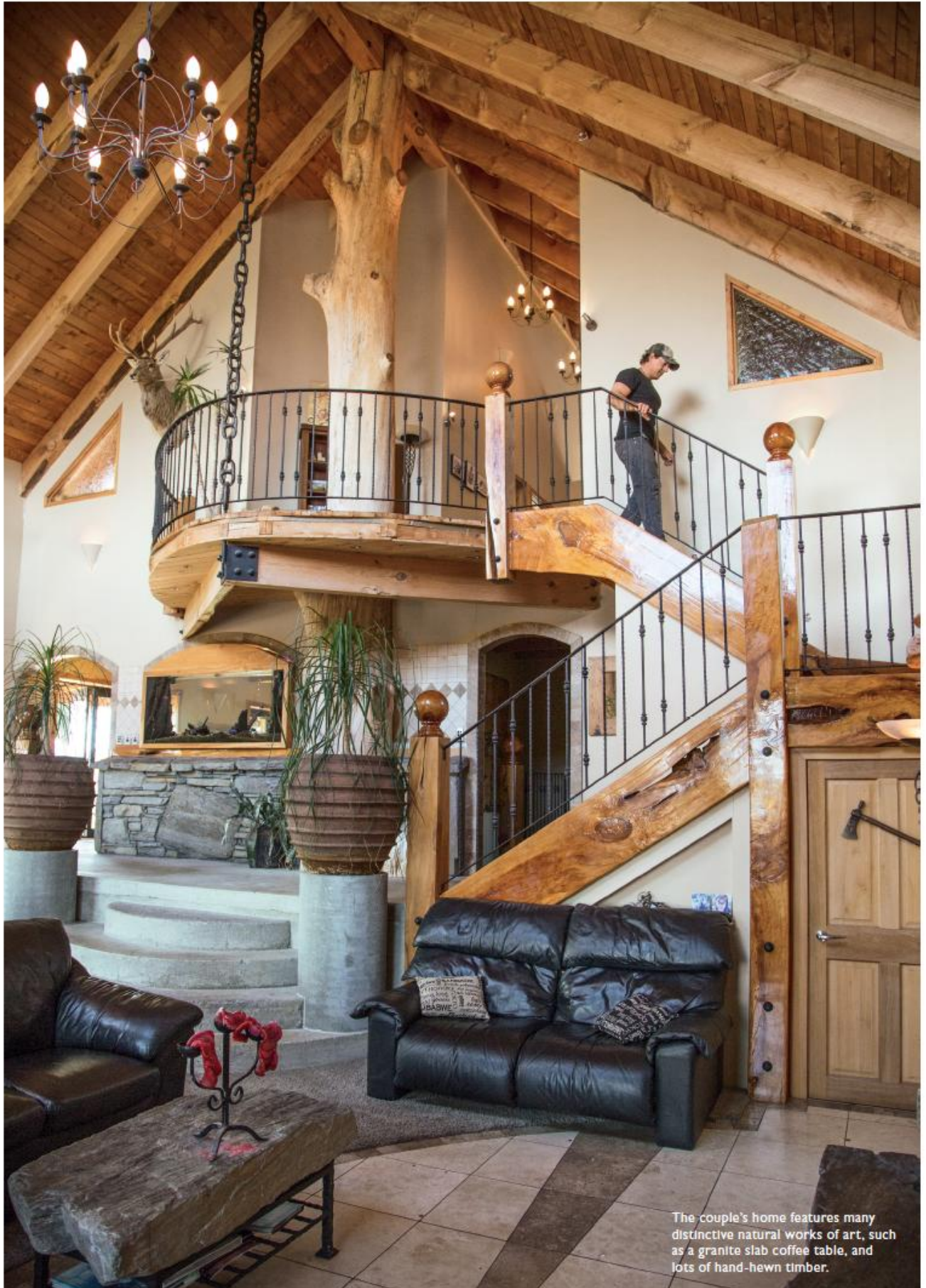
A super-sized schist fireplace, inspired by the temples at Angkor Wat, dominates the open-plan living area. "I love art, but the art I love most is the art made by nature," Ellis says.

The couple constructed the house themselves, including milling many of the large timber slabs by hand, despite having no previous building experience. "It was so funny in those early days, as Sanna didn't know the English names for even the simplest of tools," Ellis says.

"If I were up on the roof and wanted a particular tool passed up, I would have to imitate the noise or action that it made. Usually, when I wanted the chainsaw, she would return with the weed-wacker, or something just as 'useful', and it would have been quicker to climb down and get it myself."

The house, which is surrounded by 1.4 hectares of lawn and gardens, has been the location for many milestone moments, including Sanna and Ellis' wedding in 2005. The couple also open it to guests via Airbnb.





The couple's home features many distinctive natural works of art, such as a granite slab coffee table, and lots of hand-hewn timber.



“I was inspired by watching those shows, and I think that sowed a seed in me. When I was 10, a guy came to my school and he talked about his sailing adventures. Then and there I decided that was going to be my dream too.”

Inspired by Cousteau’s underwater explorations, he got his dive ticket at 16. On land, hunting became a way to explore his surroundings. “I learned a lot of early lessons through hunting – it started out as a physical challenge, then it moved into something else. When I thought about it, I realized what I loved about hunting was the being out in the mountains – I didn’t really like shooting things or going after them with my dogs. But if I hadn’t been into hunting when I was young, I probably would have got into a lot of trouble.

“I was still trying to find myself when I left school. I didn’t know what I wanted to be doing. I was a bit of a loner and I wasn’t very good at conforming, but I was passionate about the outdoors and I liked a challenge.”

Ellis worked for Environment Canterbury when he left school – a “lifestyle job” that allowed him to pursue his love of the outdoors. He ditched hunting in favour of the adrenalin highs of endurance races and was planning to build a house in Cheviot when a friend flying helicopters in Cambodia suggested he pay a visit. That trip, which expanded into several months’ exploring south-east Asia armed with just a motorbike, a map and a compass, opened his eyes to the world.

“When I was younger I thought I didn’t want to travel overseas until I’d seen our entire backyard because New Zealand is such an amazingly diverse little country. I realized as I got into my 20s that that was naïve, because you could spend your life going up rivers and climbing in the mountains here and you’d still never see it all.

“I decided I had to go then or I would miss the chance. It’s so lucky I did because it really changed my life. I’ve probably been to 50 countries now and that trip is still the best I’ve ever done.”

A chance meeting with a Canadian film crew in Cambodia (and a wild tale involving hidden temples, a motorcycle accident, assisting in some very rudimentary surgery and many other heart-stopping moments) turned into a job offer, hosting a travel show with his new pals the following season.

You couldn’t make it up. Suddenly Ellis had the job all harum-scarum explorers dream of: he was being paid to travel, meet people and share their stories. Life was already looking pretty rosy when fate (and his first gig as a travel show host) found him on a boat in southern Chile with an intriguing Finn called Sanna.

“I didn’t think she would be interested in me,” Ellis remembers. “When I finally twigged that she might be, I became incredibly clumsy. I mean, I’d been climbing in the mountains and diving and doing all this stuff, but when Sanna was around, I could barely walk down a paved road without falling over.”

A shipboard flirtation turned into a holiday romance that neither of them wanted to end, despite their travels taking them to opposite ends



Sanna was home alone (Ellis was sailing in the Pacific) when the Kaikoura earthquake struck in November 2016. The couple's house was just 20 kilometres from the quake's epicentre, and while they count themselves lucky that it only suffered minor damage, Sanna was sufficiently rattled to spend six weeks afterwards sleeping in the car with Sasha. "I could handle the aftershocks in the daytime, but I didn't like being in the house at night," she says. "And the car was fine; it was just like camping."



of the earth. Several months after they parted in South America, Sanna arrived in Cheviot to see her New Zealand action man on home territory.

"When we were in Chile, I'd told her all about this house I was building and how amazing it was going to be. I've got a great photo of her when she first came here, standing on the foundations with this look on her face that says, 'I thought the house would be finished,'" Ellis laughs.

It's taken them more than a decade to complete the building – called the Tree House – but this dynamic couple built a strong life together in the process. After some to-ing and fro-ing – Ellis on the move while filming the travel series *Don't Forget Your Passport*, Sanna to Finland to collect her daughter, Michelle – the little family settled down and kept on building. Now finished ("well, you're never really finished, are you?"), the distinctive timber and stone home stands on a hill overlooking their nine-hectare block of land, with views of the Inland Kaikoura Ranges.

"Everywhere you look, it's beautiful," Ellis says. "We are so lucky to be able to wake up here."

The house has remained a constant for the pair amid many other adventures. Ellis and two close crew mates went on to spend more than a year underwater, filming the diving series *Descending*. Back at home, Sanna and Michelle got to grips with life in New Zealand and Sanna developed her personal training business (the house's basement doubles as an impressive gym).

"I don't worry about Ellis when he's away," she says. "He knows what he's doing and he knows his limits. There's no point me sitting here thinking, 'I wonder if he is okay.'" ▶





"I live for adventure," says Ellis. "The road less traveled is where I want to be." After conquering heights and depths, his most recent challenge saw him learning to sail before he could take on a sailing odyssey around the far-flung islands of the South Pacific. "Sailing your own yacht is a lot harder than being on the crew for someone else, when they're telling you to pull that green rope or wind that shiny winch."



'I'm just trying to live the very best life that I can with what I have, and hopefully inspire other people to do the same'



The fear factor

"The problem with fear, especially fear of the unknown, is that many times we don't start the journey because we're afraid. If you let those 'what ifs' stop you, then you've missed out on an opportunity that you could have made a reality. I'm not a brave person; in fact, I'm not very fond of the word 'brave' at all. But I strongly believe that for every challenge you face, you become stronger to face the next. It's like anything; if you do something enough you get good at it." gowildproductions.co.nz

That attitude has stood her in good stead so far, especially in 2010 when Ellis told her he wanted to pursue his childhood dream of sailing around the world. Like all his adventures, this one required meticulous planning and no small amount of sacrifice. Ellis spent 18 months learning how to sail before he and long-time collaborator Andre Dupuis self-funded a 6000-kilometre sailing trip, which ended in Tonga, to film a pilot for the series.

"Even though it looks glamorous on the outside, there's a lot of hard work in what we do, a lot of planning and logistics," Ellis says. "*Over The Horizon* took four years to put together – that's four years with no income. It takes a lot of commitment, emotionally, physically and financially."

Once the pilot was filmed and National Geographic picked up the series concept, the real work began. Ellis and his crew spent six months at sea in the South Pacific last year, traveling to many remote and seldom-visited dots on the map. "Sailing is the epitome of freedom," he says. "You're powered by the wind, and you can access places you can't get to any other way. That's what I love about it."

"If I'm looking at an island on a map and there isn't any information about it, it just makes me want to go there all the more."

It's this desire for discovery and curiosity about other people and places that powers him through any moments of doubt or uncertainty. Ellis is gregarious, engaging and a born raconteur, but he doesn't do anything for the sake of bragging rights.

"I do love to share my stories and to hear other people's, but I don't do this just to say I've been there. I'm not really into social media but I have to post to promote the show. I'm really shy about being on television and being in the public eye. I try to put it to the back of my mind that people will watch what we're filming. But as much as I have that fear, I have much more passion to go and experience these things. My 'why' is bigger than my 'why not?'"

For now, he's waiting to see if National Geographic will sign them for a second season of *Over The Horizon*. In the meantime, he's working on turning the 150,000-word manuscript of his initial life-changing adventures in south-east Asia into a book and developing a sideline in motivational speaking.

"I have a real passion for inspiring people, especially youth, to live their own dreams and I've been so fortunate to have all these experiences and have learned so many of life's lessons, but the whole point of having them is to pass them on," he says.

"I've learned the importance of having something to work towards and the importance of giving back. I want to help other people realize those things too."

Crucially, he's also learned that every traveler needs a place to rest. "After any period of expansion you need a period of reflection, you need time to appreciate and remember the lessons you learned," he says.

"I love to travel and I love to meet people, but I always love coming home." 