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Bus-board Bulletin

So – the next stage of the zigeuner life is a much more local look at the world - by house-bus.

I'm writing this from a sea-side holiday camp at Gore Bay in North Canterbury. It's a classical kiwi family camp, not flash, full of kids and (despite the signs) a few small dogs. It's the first place we've stayed where we've not yet fallen into conversation with German tourists – though they may yet be here too!

Ours is also the classical kiwi summer holiday road-trip: Catching the ferry at an awful hour because of the holiday bookings, family fishing trips, barbecues and working bees – and then doing the "let's hit the road and see where we end up" act. Three or four generations of tent-toting, caravan-towing, and now campervan-driving kiwis have made it a ritual.

But of course, we have our own Swiss slant to this excursion! The bus is hanging with Mani-made landjaeger, some for our sustenance on the journey – others were given to his boys. Our first stop after Picton was at a pick-your-own cherry orchard. So far, so Kiwi – but then we produced an empty barrel from the back of the bus and asked sufficient quantities of third-grade fruit to start the en-route kirsch-making! The barrel is now resting at Konrad's farmlet, fermenting nicely, gurgling fragrant fumes through the airlock. We'll pick it up again for the trip home. Oh yes – and the cherries we picked for eating were wonderful too. The big white-fleshed ones were sweet and crisp, the dark ones intense enough to empurple our mouths.

Both of Mani's boys live in Nelson now – Daniel in town, and Konrad and family out of town past Wakefield. They work together, doing roofing contracts. Daniel says despite being high up on scaffolding and roof trusses it's a lot less stressful than chef-ing! They hunt and fish together too – so it was that we had another typical

holiday day out fishing in Nelson Bay. At the first place we tried success was limited to my two small sandsharks – but after riding through a sudden storm to the other side of the bay we were rewarded with a fine catch of snapper which were on the barbecue that evening.

More kiwi delights of Nelson – picking raspberries, boysenberries and tayberries in the hot sun, on the proven ratio of "one for the bucket, one for the *bauch*". There'd been others picking before us, so in places you got the best fruit by looking where they hadn't – lower, higher, and further into the canes. I was musing as I picked that life's a bit like that – better when you look deeper, and reach further...

And when we returned to the farm, it was to find a working bee in progress. Heidi, one of Mani's daughters from Brisbane, and her partner John were also over for the holidays, and Heidi was determined that Konrad and Janine would have the flower garden they'd been intending to put in. So – the fence was put up, a concrete and quarry stone edging constructed and the ground dug over in the space of an afternoon. Seven of us variously working, advising and supervising had it done in no time. The next day, a boot load of plants and a ute-load of bark, and the garden looked as if it had always been there. It seemed like time to hit the road, before the "mucking in" bug spread to other endeavours!

New Year's Eve was spent at Nelson Lakes, in a DoC camping ground a bit out of St Arnaud. The weather had turned chill and damp, so Mani invited a couple of German girls into the bus (they've been huddled under a sun umbrella!) and we shared a warming bottle of Mani's Williams and saw the New Year in, in a haze of mixed languages and life-stories.

The next morning I finally fully understood how the bell-bird earned its name. I've always loved its tuneful song, interspersed with

those strange croaks and gargles – but to me it's never seemed especially bell-like except for the clarity of tone. But at dawn – with hundreds of bellbirds all singing at once, it was truly like many many small bells. Was it the massed effect? Or do they have a different song for the dawn? Anyway – it was the effect of the herd of heifers in the apple orchard next to us at Altenrhein, multiplied many times.

It's also a wonderful time of year for the roadside flowers. We'd been keeping an eye open for St John's Wort to make the next batch of healing oil. Isn't it amazing how many roadside flowers are gold! Dandelions, buttercups, that gold clover, a damp-loving plant whose name I must look up – interspersed with the wonderful purple-blue of echiums on the Blenheim Nelson side – and over the Lewis Pass the echiums were the main show – with the golds as contrasts. But no Johanneskraut! Then – for Mani's birthday – a serendipity. We were in the Gowan River motor camp, and had walked to the facilities block and back maybe twenty times, past a raised garden with flax bushes. Just before we were about to leave I suddenly noticed the garden was full of St John's Wort. We picked bags full – again musing about life and how you don't see what's in the places you're not looking for it in!

The gold flowers are now steeping in the sun in an oil-filled bottle tied to the bus's wing mirror, the leaves are drying for tea on the front seat – and our camp-site neighbours have learned about things herbal.

Ah summer holidays Kiwi-Swiss style!

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IF...**

...you complain if your bus/
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late.