



## Chasing the sun

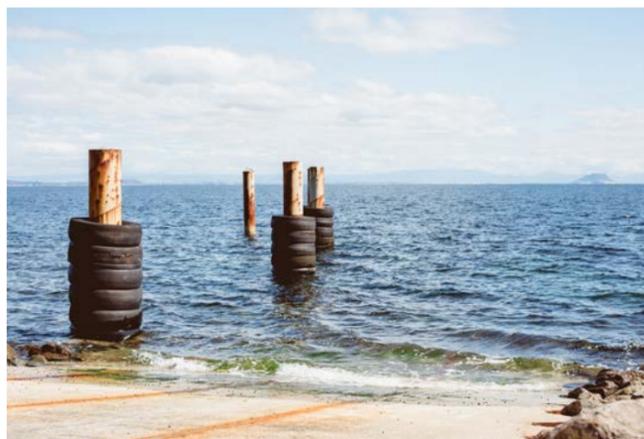
No roads, no noise, no rates. For one lucky orchardist and his wife the workplace is a picturesque island and home is a house by the sea

**T**he Canadian geese have got it right. They arrived at Motiti Island many years ago and then bucked the migratory norm by never leaving. Home is an irrigation pond on the Sunchaser avocado orchard on Motiti, a Bay of Plenty island the same size as Venice but with a permanent human population just shy of 40.



## PEOPLE THE ORCHARDIST

**Close to nature** The home of orchard manager Greg Prince and his wife, Lynn.



PEOPLE THE ORCHARDIST

**Sea change** Motiti is 12km off the Papamoa coast – a mere eight minutes from the mainland by air or two hours by barge (the landing is pictured above). The shoreline is a favourite spot for basking seals and Greg (pictured opposite) says there's good fishing to be had off the coast. The avocado orchard's 12,000 trees thrive in near-perfect conditions thanks to the island's microclimate and, luckily for us, most of the fruit is destined for the home market.

They wake to a cacophony of warbling turkeys and trilling tui and fall asleep under vibrant stars. The ocean is a mere stroll away

Sunchaser's on-site manager, Greg Prince, and wife Lynn understand the birds' compulsion to stay. They are recent arrivals on this 700-hectare island 12km off the Papamoa coast, where Greg manages one of New Zealand's largest avocado orchards. They're smitten with the place, waking to a cacophony of warbling turkeys and trilling tui and falling asleep under vibrant stars. The ocean is a mere stroll away.

Leisure activities include beachcombing and feeding the stingrays that dart into the shallows. There's fish and crayfish to catch, scallops to shuck and, of course, an endless supply of avocados to enjoy. Seals congregate along the shore; above them, a cluster of golden-bloomed pohutukawas clings to a cliff face. It's a magical place to entertain the grandchildren, they say. One youngster mistook the diesel generator for a giant coffee machine, and the thought still causes merriment. Also raising a smile is the fact there are no rates to pay as there are no sealed roads or mains power or water.

Along with Sunchaser, Motiti (which falls under the jurisdiction of Internal Affairs) also comprises a handful of other avocado orchards, privately owned grazing paddocks, tribal land and European-titled Maori land. Sunchaser occupies 145 hectares on the

southern third of the island. If Greg and Lynn want to get back to the mainland, it's an eight-minute flight or a two-hour voyage aboard Sunchaser's 25-metre barge, Deliverance. The orchard also has its own airstrip (with a gang of turkeys as a welcoming committee).

Sunchaser has been owned by the Motiti Group since 2004. Chairman Mark Yortt says that when they purchased it, only 3.5 hectares were planted in avocados; the rest was fenced for grazing. Today, about 80 canopy hectares – that's about 12,000 'Hass' avocado trees – are dedicated to production, with another 20 hectares in the pipeline. The remainder of Sunchaser's block consists of a pa site, waterways, coastal margin, and land designated for a future housing hamlet.

Sunchaser is the only one of Motiti's avocado orchards that grows primarily for the domestic market. It's a sensible focus given the fruit's early maturity, says consultant Jonathan Cutting. While mainland avocados are harvested from August to April, Sunchaser's crop is picked from late May to August (although as the harvest builds, that will extend into September).

"Our consumers are spoilt as we produce big, beautiful, class-one export-quality fruit ahead of time," Jonathan says. "We meet the need when others can't."





**Green with envy** Buoys decorate the tree outside the homestead; Greg (top right) traverses the island by truck; consultant Jonathan Cutting (bottom right) says Sunchaser's early harvest (from late May to August) means New Zealand customers are spoiled for choice with large, export-quality fruit arriving in the shops ahead of the mainland harvest season, which runs from August to April.

Motiti enjoys a microclimate. With the sea's moderating influence, soil temperatures remain high and Motiti is frost-free. In summer, the thermometer rarely reaches 30°C - the optimum avocado-growing temperature is around 29°C.

Orcharding on an island has its own particular difficulties, but the Sunchaser team seems to have overcome the majority of them. Coastal shelter belts of native trees, plus pines established within the orchard boundaries, provide excellent protection from the elements and further enhance the microclimate. Irrigation is enabled via storage ponds fed by natural springs, run-off and rainfall.

The avocados are picked and then sent to the

mainland for packing. It's a six-to-seven-hour round trip, including loading and unloading. The weather plays a significant role in all this, with the tides and sea conditions determining when the barge can travel. When conditions are difficult, windows of good weather are pounced upon whenever they arise, says Mark. "This can be at midnight or two in the morning."

Working around the vagaries of the weather is all part of the challenge of island life but the future of the business is certainly looking sunny. "Over the last 12 years we have enjoyed steady growth, and significant growth is anticipated for at least the next 10 years," says Mark. This is good news for Greg and Lynn - and the grandchildren. •