

WIDE, BLUE Stepping into Molesworth's YONDER

Blair Ensor - The Marlborough Express

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It's not hard to get away from it all on New Zealand's best-known high country station, writes BLAIR ENSOR.

Molesworth Station is brown, very brown, and yet this is the greenest tour operator Geoff Swift has seen it in years.

The station is remote and desolate, but I reckon that's what gives it much of its magic and beauty. It's remarkable that people for more than a century have farmed this land, and continue to do so.

Geoff and his wife, Lee, operate The Molesworth Tour Company out of Blenheim and offer tours ranging from the Slice of Magic One Day Tour which goes as far as the gates of Molesworth, right through to a four-day package which ventures into both Molesworth and the Nelson Lakes district.

The two-day trip I embarked on offers the chance to compare the different scenery of Molesworth and Rainbow stations, broken up by a night's accommodation at Hanmer Springs. The tour takes in many different landscapes ranging from the mountainous gorges of Rainbow Station to the desolate beauty of the tussock-bound Molesworth Station.

Anyone can drive through the historic Molesworth high country, but the essence of the area would be missed. Being able to sit back and absorb the landscape without the pressures of driving is a definite bonus. Learning the historical background at the same time clinches it. Geoff began to take tours through Molesworth in 1993 and has since developed a remarkable wealth of knowledge about the area.

He can tell you the the history behind the stations and provides details of farming techniques and the people who used them. There are also tales of deceit, and even details of a murder-suicide that happened at Red Gate at the southern end of Molesworth in 1868.

The story goes that Ivanhoe Augarde sent a man called German Charlie to deliver a letter to his girlfriend, Miss Kate Gee. However, German Charlie opened the letter and it was read by various men en route. When Ivanhoe found out, he was so angry that he rode off on horseback, carrying a heavy rifle, to find Charlie.

Ivanhoe found Charlie at Tarndale Station and shot him. Then on the way home, the guilt-stricken Ivanhoe dismounted and shot himself.

Geoff also has an extensive knowledge of the fauna and flora. He's done a lot of reading on the area, as well as talking to residents past and present to gain the information. "We just try to create a whole atmosphere about what it would be like back in those days.

"The whole landscape is diverse in terms of river valleys and mountains. The size of it is awe inspiring."

The tour is run in spacious air-conditioned vans, because the couple like to run small tour groups.

"We still keep in touch with some of the people who have been on the tour with us."

Geoff and Lee used to live in the Awarere Valley, and have close relationships with people who live on farms further up the valley. This enables them to offer people the unique chance to meet people living in the high country, Geoff says.

The couple also try to stick to country values, and serve up a smorgasbord of country cuisine and fresh fruit and sandwiches throughout the journey.

If you're a fan of spectacular scenery and want to learn more about some of New Zealand's pristine high country farmland, then look no further.