



SHIP SHAPE

FOR THE STEVENS FAMILY, LIFE IS ALL ABOUT
BOATS, BOTH AT A CITY MOORING AND
A COTTAGE BY THE LAKE

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FROM LEFT: *Caravelle*, the flagship of the fleet at Lake Rotoiti, motors out into the early morning; breakfast at the lake is served with a view of the pier and the promise of adventure.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Charlotte and Richard Stevens on the bridge of *D'Urville*, their classic motor yacht; Charlotte caters for charter guests who enjoy al fresco dining in *D'Urville*'s sheltered cockpit; a spiral staircase leads from the saloon to the main accommodation and engine room below decks. durvillecharters.co.nz



SHE WAS A FORMER London bobby who had come to New Zealand on holiday and returned for good. He was a lawyer turned accountant turned real estate broker, amid other career paths, before following his heart into the boat charter business. A friend of his said: "I know someone you should meet. She's an English girl. Her name's Charlotte." Not for Richard Stevens the awkward dance of the blind date but, he says, "Something made me think: I've got to meet this girl".

Charlotte picks up the story. "So one day I picked up the phone at work and this voice on the other end said, 'Hello, my name is Richard Stevens. You don't know me from a bar of soap but I'd like to take you out for dinner. And I laughed and said that I thought he was very brave and I didn't think that dinner would be a very good idea but perhaps we'd start with a cup of coffee.' Three coffee meetings later Richard asked Charlotte to dinner on his classic motor yacht *D'Urville*. He lived on the boat at Pier 21 in downtown Auckland. To be on the safe side, Charlotte asked if she could bring some friends. "Of course," he said. She brought six. That was in 2003.

They married in 2013. They still live on *D'Urville* most weekdays, with weekends spent at their cottage at Lake Rotoiti. It's a water-based lifestyle, thanks to Richard listening carefully when in 1998 life held up a big sign in front of him. "I decided I'd climb out of a suit and become a charter boat skipper," he says. "It was brought about by my father, who was only 23 years older than me, getting terminal throat cancer. He was 68. When he was diagnosed I suddenly thought: 'Right. I don't want a suit any more. Let's go and do something different.' It was something that I'd wanted to do for some years but I'd convinced myself, or had been convinced, that I couldn't do that. I was a father of young children and had pressures on me to be sensible rather than do something stupid like run a charter boat."



The view from *Caravel's* saloon of the Stevens' cottage on the shores of Lake Rotoiti.

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With many of the belongings and original furnishings of the previous owner still in place and its timber walls adorned with sporting equipment, the cottage feels like a small hunting lodge.

New Zealand Challenge, the 60-foot former Team New Zealand America's Cup tender turned charter launch was for sale. Richard had always admired this stylish work-boat so a deal was done, retaining contract skippers until he obtained his own ticket, and was soon contract skippering other local vessels including international deliveries. In 2001 he bought *D'Urville*, an elegant 70-foot, 55-ton design by Laurent Giles, built in kauri by McMullen & Wing in Auckland and launched in 1975.

D'Urville sits like a matriarch at the end of her pier. Her cockpit is partially enclosed, sheltered from the prevailing south-westerly. It's high enough to give al fresco diners good views over surrounding boats. The cockpit leads into the saloon with green leather seats, nautical shabby-chic and a shippy smell of salt and maritime workings.

The bridge has its original gauges and switches. Steps for'ard lead down to a small galley and some accommodation but the main accommodation is down a spiral staircase on the starboard side of the saloon. Below decks *D'Urville* feels like a naval ship; a corridor leads to cabins on either side, bathroom and Richard and Charlotte's cabin aft. A solid, watertight door clunks open to reveal the engine room; the cylinder heads of the twin 230hp Gardner engines line up like soldiers beneath the incongruous sight of clothes hanging above, taking advantage of the warmth from the generator.

D'Urville has welcomed many high-profile guests over the years and continues to delight up to 30 guests on the day and evening cruises that make up the current charter business. Charlotte, a self-taught cook and ardent foodie, looks after the catering and deck-hand duties. Luckily she is keen on boats too, having ventured into sailing during 20 years as a detective in London's Flying Squad. "I was married and we had a Hunter 23 so did a lot of sailing down the south coast and across the Channel." ▶





Caravel makes a small sortie onto the lake, still sporting her retro-style gauges. Refreshments are served on the engine box in the cockpit; Richard at the helm of *Caravel*. As a 12-year-old he would catch the bus from Auckland a few days ahead of his parents and go boating on his own.



But living on a boat has its limitations, especially in winter when it's a decent trot from boat to car. Space was limited, there was no washing machine – since rectified – and about seven years after moving on board Charlotte hankered for a real house with a garden. “I decided I’d had enough of living on the boat and we asked our tenants to leave our house in Meadowbank and got all our furniture back.” After a year they moved back onto *D’Urville* for the summer and Charlotte realized how much she’d missed the marina. “There was always something happening on the boat. When we moved back to the house I grew lonely working in the spare room with nothing to distract me. So Richard was delighted when I said, ‘Shall we stay?’”

But there are more boats in the Stevens’ life, although even they are not sure how many. The boats reside at Lake Rotoiti at a cottage on a white-gold sandy beach with a wooden pier – the sort that carries love scenes in movies. The cottage is reached after a hairpin turn off the main road and a bumpety-bumpety track through a tunnel of trees.

Richard’s father bought the 1930s cottage with an old launch and slipway from an Auckland district court judge in the late 1950s and often recalled sitting in a queue in the judge’s waiting room like a naughty schoolboy waiting outside the headmaster’s study while would-be buyers were interrogated. Richard’s father was the successful applicant. “I like you,” the judge had said. “It’s yours. Walk in; I’ll walk out with just my waders and the visitors’ book.”

Many of the judge’s possessions, including furniture and cutlery, are still there. Old split-cane fly-fishing rods line the timber walls. There is a collection of old boating and *Country Life* magazines. The cottage has three smallish bedrooms, leaving the lion’s share of space for the sitting room. ▶





This has an open fire and servery through to the kitchen. Guests at the dining table look out to the water. Until six months ago the kitchen had no hot running water, cooking was by way of a small electric cook top, benches were uneven and unmatched. Now there is a gas stove and the coal range, recently refurbished in Whangarei, delivers delicious aromas and warmth throughout the house.

The darling of the boat collection is *Caravel*, commissioned from local designer/boat builder Norm Keen by Richard's father and launched on Christmas Eve 1962. *Caravel's* hull lines are a melody from bow to stern, with a thick coil of rope at her gunwale. As a lake boat she would never meet big seas, so she has large windows and an open door from cockpit to cabin. Her engine box is in the cockpit, to free the cabin for seating. To keep her pretty, her coach roof is low so there is headroom for adults only when sitting. Inside, she feels like a doll's house.

Nine-year-old Richard was disappointed that *Caravel* was not a speed boat. "Dad explained that she answered his dreams as a family lake boat and speed boats would come and go as needs changed. He was absolutely right. *Caravel* has now endured 52 years and is treasured by the family. Many speedboats have come and gone."

Richard and his sister still wanted their go-fast boat and in 1967 they bought *Mickey Mouse*, a baby-blue aluminium speedster, from neighbours in the next bay. She was built in England in 1956 by Albatross Marine and so named because, if Mickey Mouse owned a boat, this would be it. The Ford 10 engine delivers a good bark and a good turn of speed. "We raced around in it for the next 12 years," Richard says, "all through uni days; this was day transport for two or three of us – incredible fun. I used to go out in it in all conditions."

Then, for about 25 years, *Mickey Mouse* became stuck midway through a refit. "I took her to Auckland, pulled her apart, the engine was reconditioned and she was painted and then I got interested in other boats and she stayed semi-dismantled from about 1980 until about five years ago," Richard says. His engineer friend Morrie Laing – if you own this many boats, you need an engineer friend – gave him a hurry-up. Morrie got her going and put in electronic ignition. "She starts like a dream," Richard says. *Mickey Mouse* roars again.

Then there's a bad-boy racer for water skiing and wake-boarding. It has a big Mercruiser V8 engine and sparkly purple decals. "Love it, love it," says Richard, out of earshot of the other boats. "Put the wake-board tower on and off we go. It's not super-quick; it does about 45mph." Other boats? A timber clinker-built Frostbite, a Laser, a dinghy, a single-scul canoe, a kayak or two and some paddle-boards nestled in the cottage's outbuildings.

A third Stevens generation, David, Tom and Jack, have grown up with a love of the cottage, boats and boating, thankful that their grandfather made the cut in the judge's office 55 years ago.



FROM LEFT: Richard and Sammie, the border collie cross, go for an outing in *Mickey Mouse*, a 1956 British speedster; boats are easily launched on the firm, gently sloping beach; a line-up of *Caravel*, *Mickey Mouse* and the bad-boy racer used for water skiing and wake-boarding.

WHAT WE'RE READING

Charlotte: Just finished *The Ship of Brides* by Jojo Moyes. Just started *The Narrowboat Girl* by Annie Murray (a distinct boat theme here – not intentional). Also I love reading cookbooks – so many lovely ones around.

Richard: Anything as long as it's an old boating magazine!

WHAT WE'RE LISTENING TO

We both listen to Pandora a lot. We love the variety of music available and so much that we have never heard before.

Charlotte: Anything from Bruce Springsteen (love his music even more after going to his concert last year), Eagles, Amy Winehouse – whatever the mood I'm in.

Richard: Anything as long as it's Frank Sinatra, jazz or blues!

WHAT WE'RE COOKING

Charlotte: I love Annabel Langbein's recipes – so easy but impressive. My home-made muesli is Richard's favourite at the moment, made with nuts, dried fruit, oats, seeds, maple syrup and LSA, toasted and just delicious – a great start to the day. Last things I made were lamb koftas with a chickpea and tomato sauce with Israeli couscous and sun-dried tomatoes.

Richard: Mmmmm – nothing since I met Charlotte! Not entirely true but almost. I was famous for the Stevens salad which the boys love. Everything that could possibly go into the salad went in – eggs and bacon and cheese – all the good things.

WHAT WE'RE DRINKING

We have recently enjoyed a couple of lovely smooth red wines: Bushmere Estate Gisborne 2013 The Italians and Rojo Garnacha 2013.

