

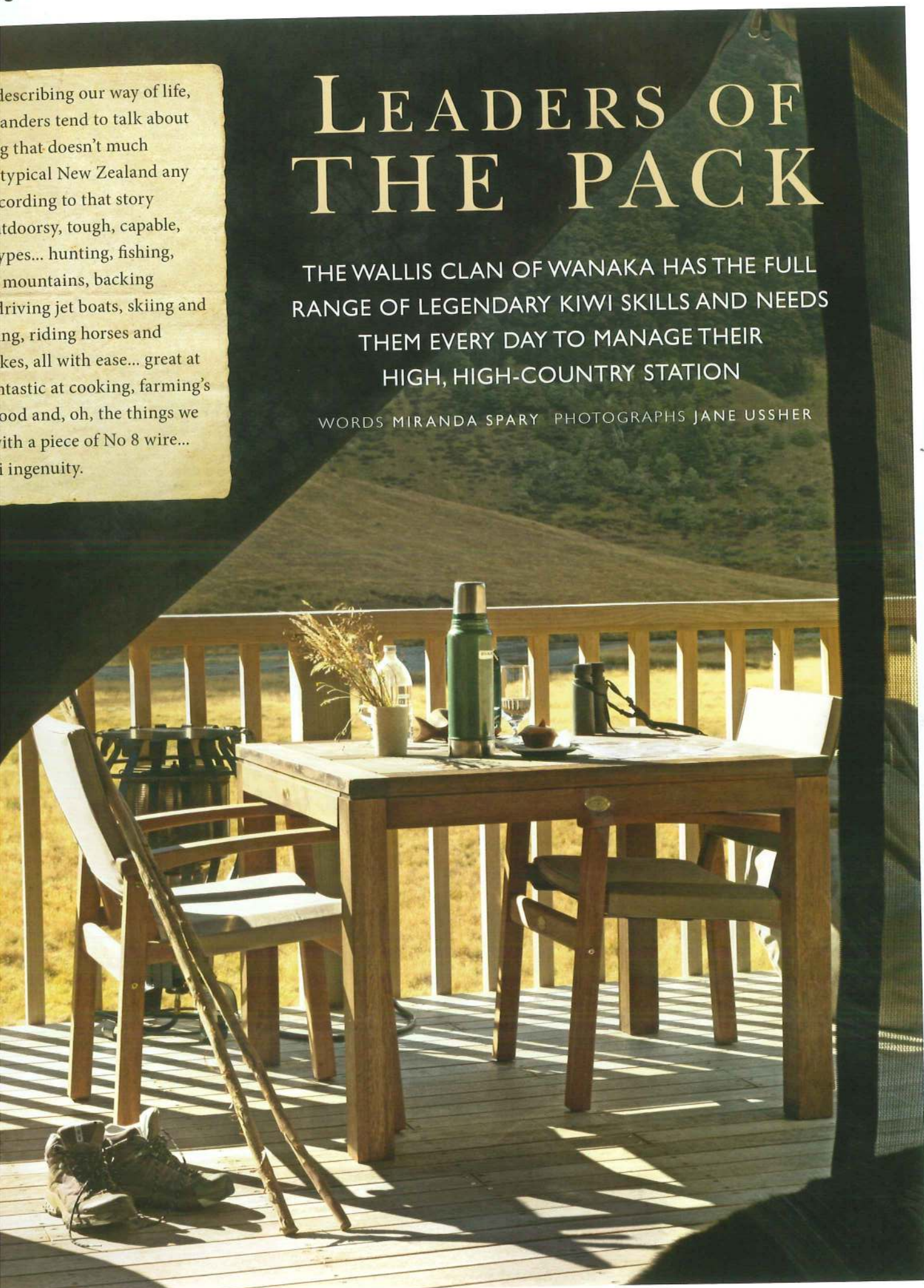
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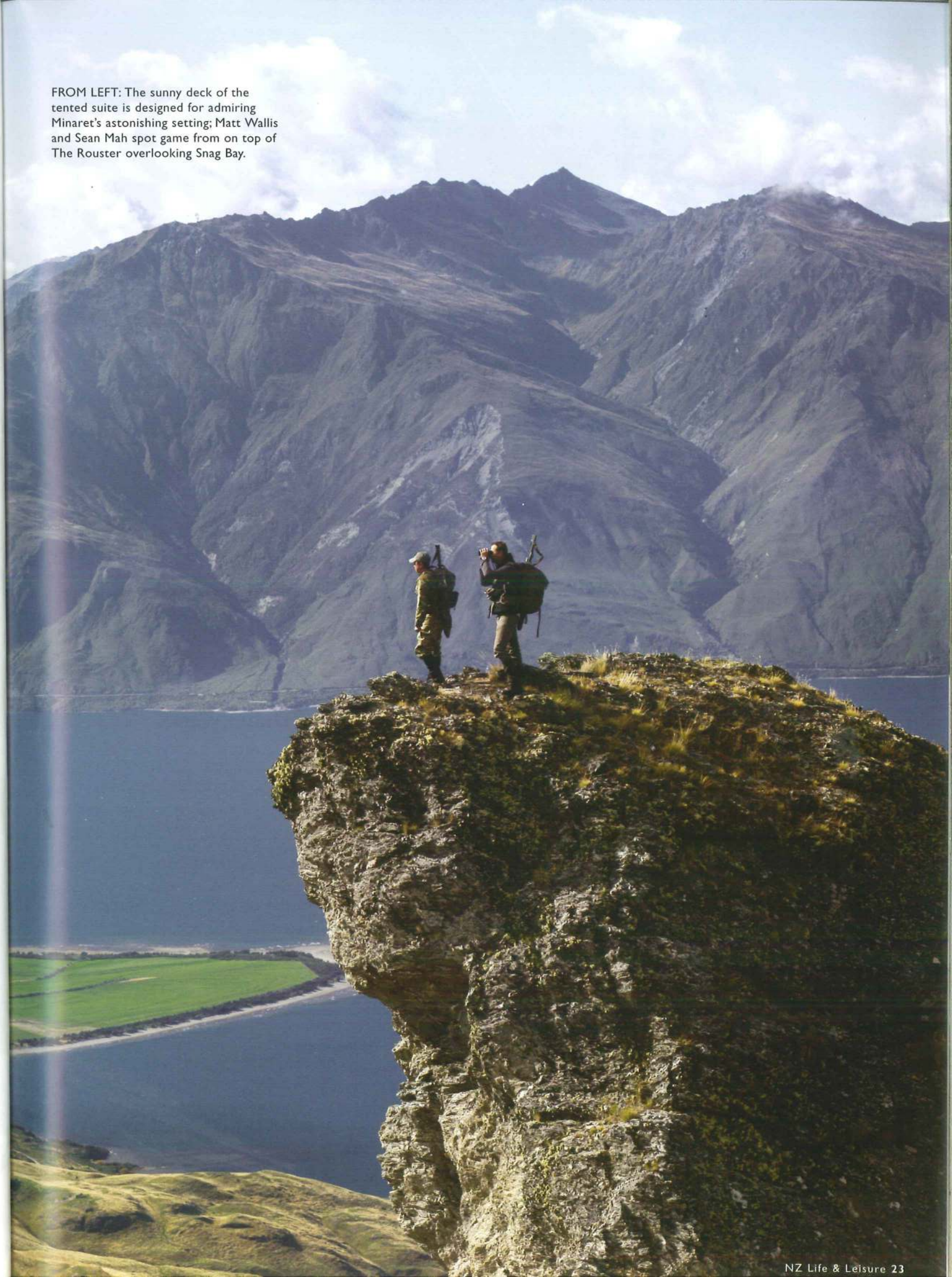
LEADERS OF THE PACK

THE WALLIS CLAN OF WANAKA HAS THE FULL RANGE OF LEGENDARY KIWI SKILLS AND NEEDS THEM EVERY DAY TO MANAGE THEIR HIGH, HIGH-COUNTRY STATION

WORDS MIRANDA SPARY PHOTOGRAPHS JANE USSHER



FROM LEFT: The sunny deck of the tented suite is designed for admiring Minaret's astonishing setting; Matt Wallis and Sean Mah spot game from on top of The Rouser overlooking Snag Bay.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The brotherhood, left to right, Matt, Toby, Jonathan and Nick high on the hills looking north towards Makarora; sheep take a brief look at the lodge as the autumn muster takes them down the Estuary Burn; like all the Wallis brothers, Nick's natural habitat is a helicopter; musterer Doug Andrews watches for troublemakers breaking ranks; no road in means Jonathan and Annabel's children, Phoebe, Alice and Angus, go to school by boat each day.

THERE AREN'T MANY FAMILIES WHICH COULD WORK TOGETHER SUCCESSFULLY BUT THE WALLIS BROTHERS ARE A DIFFERENT BREED

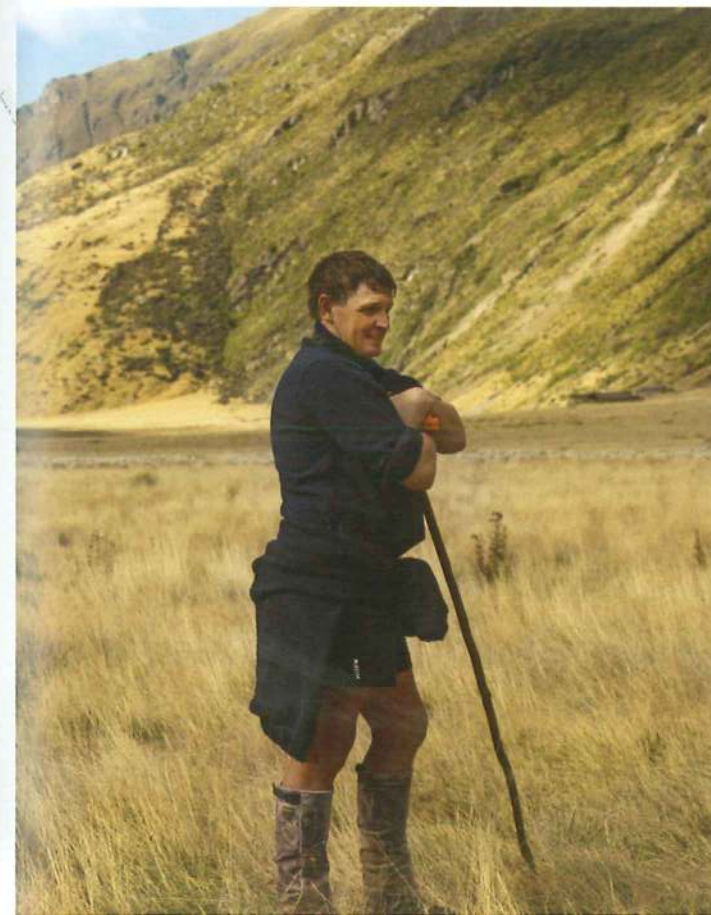


IT'S NOT FOR THE TIMID, Minaret Station, 15 minutes from Wanaka as the helicopter flies. It is so remote – there's no road to it and almost 90 percent of it is above 700 metres which is great for heli-skiing but rough for farming. Every person, animal, tool, kilo of wool, litre of fuel and roll of loo paper flies or sails in or out by helicopter or by barge across Lake Wanaka.

The struggle to domesticate Minaret had already defeated nine owners in the 40 years from 1860 to 1900. Lady Barker, the author of *Station Amusements*, was one of them. She and her husband Frederick bought it sight unseen for several hundred pounds in 1867, not realizing most land in New Zealand was leasehold at the time. The rogue they bought it from set sail for England the minute the deal was done. Frederick spent a few days surveying their new farm. "No matter whether he turned his steps to the North, South, East or West, he met with the same disheartening report. Not only was there no pasturage but, if there had been, the nature of the country would have rendered it valueless on account of the way it was overgrown. Our purchase was a dead loss." They sold and moved on.

Slowly, slowly Minaret became more viable. In 1935 sheep numbers peaked at almost 10,000 but lambing percentages were low (54 percent average) and death rates were high (19 percent average) due to the harsh physical nature of the property coupled with losses from snow and kea. Through much of last century wool kept the station marginally viable. By 1995, when Minaret came on the market, stock numbers had declined considerably.

Luckily for Minaret, Wanaka-based aviation entrepreneur Tim Wallis wanted just such a challenge. There's nothing timid about the pioneer of New Zealand's deer-farming and helicopter industries (achievements for which he was knighted in 1994). Nor was there anything limited about the range of skills he brought to the project, not to mention capital. His business interests include aviation, farming and the processing, marketing and exporting of deer and deer products as well as stock feed. He also owns several veteran fighter aircraft and was involved in establishing the Alpine Fighter Collection and the Warbirds over Wanaka Airshow. ▶



WATCHING THE WALLISES New Zealand Assets Management director Richard Riddell is a lucky man. Not only did he acquire a gorgeous wife when he married Rebecca Wallis 11 years ago, he became part of the extended Wallis family. "It's been fascinating to watch the Wallis boys come back from overseas with their new ideas and their innate entrepreneurial

skills. What makes New Zealand such a great incubator for new business is that because we are so remote we have to think of smart ways to do things better. Minaret is an outstanding example of this – combining the wildest, most spectacular bit of high-country farming with all the adventure and scenery and comfort that our most sophisticated tourists want."



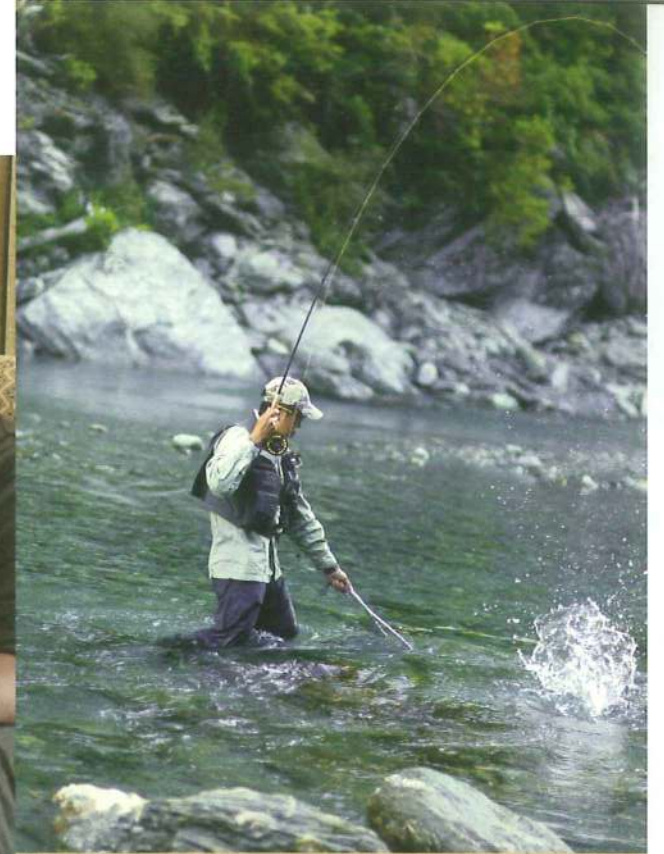
The Bay Burn hut was built in the 1930s when every last bit of material had to be carried in; the beams were cut from nearby trees. The fire heats the tiny space in minutes.

FAVOURITE GUEST ACTIVITY
MINARET
The lodge has been operating for a long time, attracting international guests to the strange and wonderful contrast of wilderness and luxury and already noted by the UK's *Tatler* magazine as one of the world's top 100 hotels. All the usual guest activities (hiking, biking, skiing, hunting, fishing, eating, sleeping in the tented accommodation) are mostly bypassed for simply coping out with whatever is happening on the farm. Few people have the chance to bring a flock of sheep down from the high country for the winter, especially as shepherding requires riding in a helicopter with the doors off and the siren "whoop-whooping" to hurry the sheep along. It's hypnotic watching a clot of sheep drift-shape into long, skinny lines then regroup in their woolly, sheepy way to round shapes and slowly bleed back into a mass again. When the sheep stop and stare at you, being the focus of a thousand pairs of ovine eyes makes you feel like the Messiah. Sheep can be fascinating and people, apparently, are fascinating to these sheep which don't have many visitors.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Camping at its most glamorous: a thick possum blanket in the tented suite makes good use of one of New Zealand's worst pests; Nanny Shirl's little boys Nick and Matt tower over her these days, but she's still in charge; Sean Mah fishes for trout in the Albert Burn; Leungo Lippe, the Botswanaan chef at Minaret, is a genius at turning whatever arrives into a memorable meal; the dining-table at the Mountain Kitchen is made for long dinners of excellent mountain food and less long but equally excellent stories.



HAPPY MINARET GUESTS

Michael and Ross Perrett from Taranaki had a father/son holiday at Minaret. They're mad-keen hunters and fishermen and in just one day with the Wallises they'd bagged a Himalayan thar on Mt Cook, a red deer hind and a trophy brown trout before heading to the West Coast where they free-dived for crayfish and paua. According to them, it would normally take four or five days to do all that. The Perretts couldn't get over how much the Wallis boys loved seeing other people fall in love with Minaret and enjoy everything they enjoyed too. Toby couldn't wait to share more. "After we'd paid the bill and left, Toby rang and suggested we might like to go out with him to catch a Chinook salmon. He turned up with a chilly bin of beer and took us out in his boat. That was after we'd had that perfect day; we wouldn't have thought you could make it any better. If you wanted to introduce a foreigner to the top Kiwi blokes, they'd be it."

All these skills were called upon to make Minaret work. However, and without doubt, his number-one asset is a hugely supportive wife (Prue, Lady Wallis) and four (then-nearly) adult sons. Unsurprisingly, with Tim as a father, all four are skilled helicopter pilots with more than 15,000 flying hours between them and, as helicopters have revolutionized high-country farming, this represents a significant asset. The combination of choppers and the sheer grit and manpower of the Wallises has certainly improved the economics of Minaret Station but farming it remains a continual challenge.

Sir Tim and Lady Wallis' approach to their sons' involvement in the family businesses was very traditional. The boys were not to have anything to do with it until they had a useable skill or could afford to buy in. Each headed to a different corner of the globe – Nick to the United Arab Emirates, Matt to California, Jonathan to Canada and Toby to Cambodia – where they all worked in different industries ranging from exporting seafood to helicopter maintenance.

It wasn't until Tim was severely injured in an aircraft accident in 1996 that they all gravitated back to Wanaka, Jonathan running Minaret Station, Matt heading the tourism side of things and Toby and Nick in charge of helicopter operations. There was so much cross-over between the businesses that it made sense to form one company and buy each other out. The Alpine Group Ltd was formed with all brothers receiving equal shareholding. All four are directors of the company, along with two independents; Jonathan is the CEO.

Naturally the brotherhood has differences of opinion; however, they all agree that collectively they are stronger provided they stick to what they know and do best. With combined skills in tourism, helicopter aviation and marketing and a particularly picturesque farm, coupled with the most gregarious, hospitable and capable family around, you'd eventually work out that the family would do very well in top-notch hospitality. Ideas were tossed around until the one that stuck and materialized was a Minaret Station luxury tented lodge tucked in under the towering Southern Alps.

There aren't many families which could work together so successfully but the Wallis brothers are a different breed. While their father's doings are the ones that have attracted all the media attention, their mother Prue is no slouch either. Her efforts in helping Tim's near-miraculous recovery from his injuries are considered super-human and credited to her "bloody-mindedness". She's a staunch and active supporter of trusts and charities for the arts, the environment, medical research and local groups.

Energetic and enthusiastic she may be, but even she needed an extra pair of hands when the boys were little. Shirl Flynn came on board as the nanny for seven years until she had children of her own. These days this wiry workaholic and her husband Jerry Rowley are back as part of the family, running the lodge. No one really leaves the Wallises. Squeak, who looks after all the machinery and the Minaret barge which operates across Lake Wanaka, arrived in 1996 and Murray, who manages the processing factory, has been with them for more than 40 years.

