



# Spread your wings

Get away from it all at a petite retreat that's designed to take flight.

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An hour from Christchurch, 10 minutes from Methven and 2km from the Mt Hutt ski area, Kererū Retreat in Canterbury's Pudding Hill is a micro-cabin that reinterprets the rural New Zealand vernacular and blends effortlessly into the landscape. It also has the ability to be relocated — similar to the way birds migrate with the seasons (its name also references the kererū that roost in the kōwhai trees currently surrounding it). We spoke to its owner, architectural designer Ben Comber of Studio Well.

**So Ben, what was the inspiration for your Tiny Retreats project?** It was born

from a desire to find balance from our jobs in the city and have a space where we could relax and reconnect with nature. My partner Jasmine Truman and I both have desk jobs in Christchurch, and unplugging from those modern demands became a focus for us. With my background in architecture, it became a true passion project that I lived and breathed for months on end.

**Were there specific building principles you wanted to follow?** The antithesis of 'bigger is better', the retreat focuses on achieving quality finishes within a small but seemingly spacious footprint of less than 18m<sup>2</sup>. We can make

buildings as energy-efficient as possible, but the most meaningful way to reduce our negative impact on the environment is to reduce our footprint. A strong sense of localism was also employed, from the New Zealand-grown timber to a wool blanket grown, spun and woven just down the road at Mt Somers Station.

The design is quite simple at first glance. The real challenge was to design something that functioned like a permanent retreat but was nimble enough to be transportable. The compact footprint driven by the transport dimension limitations was the starting point, then the principles





**THE BEST NEST** Ben and Jasmine sought to use natural, local materials wherever possible. The exterior draws on the simplicity of barns, with a Zinalume corrugated iron roof and walls teamed with a weathered Douglas fir rain screen on the gable faces. Manually operated shutters over the anodised window joinery provide shading during summer and protection during inclement weather and transportation.



of living were overlaid to see how the space could best be utilised.

The floor area is modulated to a 2.4m x 7.2m rectangular footprint, with the interior layout based around the orientation of the sun. The entry and living spaces are at the centre, providing a strong connection to the surrounding kōwhai trees. Sleeping is focused towards the morning sun, with the kitchen and bathroom at the opposite end tucked under a loft space for additional guests; the raised bed with uninterrupted glazing behind it becomes a captivating focal point once you're inside. The handcrafted barn-style shutters can be closed to enable

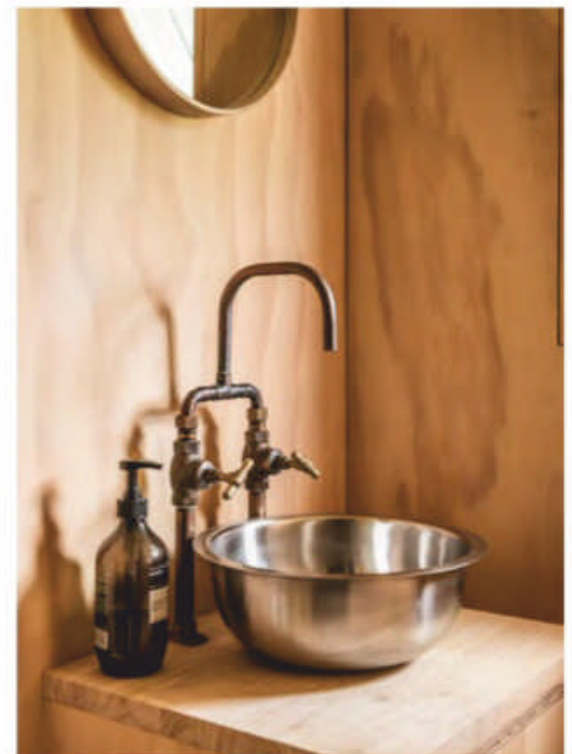
you to hide away in shelter, or fully opened to unveil the framed view. A built-in sofa with ample storage and a drop-leaf dining table positioned next to a miniature woodburner complete the interior planning.

The other more technical challenge was that the retreat needed to be fully off-grid. We achieved this by integrating a solar and battery storage system, composting toilet and rainwater tank. Our hope was that by removing that reliance on services connections, we wouldn't be limited to where the retreat could be located and could at the same time have a truly light environmental impact.

**What inspired the aesthetic?** I've always been drawn to the vernacular structures scattered throughout our rural landscape. They're such unassuming forms, driven purely by the need to function for the basic purpose of providing shelter for livestock or materials, and their ability to adapt to different landscapes was something I wanted to reflect here. The linear gable form offers a sense of timelessness that helps to complement this adaptable aesthetic and allows the building to blend into a range of landscapes.

This retreat is very much inspired by the basic principles of shelter that >





many of our backcountry huts display. We knew that our connection with the surrounding environment would be all the better if we stripped away any unnecessary distractions. The level of comfort in the retreat is certainly improved from your typical hut, but the focus is still on those basic experiences like reading a book, boiling the kettle, stoking the fire and stargazing. Our modern lives are full of distractions, so it's very wholesome to shift that focus to those simple tasks that we've forgotten to appreciate.

**How does it feel to wake up here?** It's such a unique and natural experience, waking up with the sunrise filtering through the gaps in the shutters. It

was very intentional not to install any interior window treatments where possible and instead celebrate that daily ritual of manually opening and closing the shutters from the exterior.

**Is it something that you're wanting to make available for people not only to stay in but to buy?** Absolutely. At this stage, we're looking at a build-to-order model as they're quite bespoke spaces and we're conscious that mass production would take away from the essence of what makes the retreat unique. Kererū Retreat is also available on Airbnb, so people can book a getaway and experience tiny living firsthand. 🏡  
[tinyretreats.nz](http://tinyretreats.nz)

**INSIDE JOB** The interior of the cabin is enriched with locally grown, chemical-free timbers, including pine, Lawson cypress, poplar and macrocarpa. These are gently accented with stainless steel surfaces, handcrafted copper tapware and natural fabrics. Ben says the build "was truly a collaborative effort, with my sister Jess Comber's partner Myles Stanaway of Erksine Bay Builders heading up the construction."