



keeping the faith

Buying a house online while 20,000 kilometres away from home was a risk that paid off for this family

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"Colour makes me feel comfortable and happy – and that's what this house is all about"



Feeling "physically sick" is not the usual response associated with buying a house. But when you're 20,000 kilometres from home and purchasing a property you've only seen online, it's an entirely natural reaction, says Rebecca Hellberg-Walker.

Wellington-born Rebecca and her husband Michael, from Temuka, had been living in the UK for more than a decade when they decided to return to New Zealand. That meant spending hours poring over websites and getting Rebecca's parents to visit open homes on their behalf.

Michael estimates his in-laws saw around 14 houses before they stumbled upon this 1920s, 210-square-metre home in Hataitai. With four bedrooms, off-street parking, a garden and storage, all within walking distance of the beach, it ticked all of their boxes. And, most importantly, it was a character home.

"In England we lived in a thatched cottage in a rural setting," says Michael. "It was freezing but beautiful, like something out of the movie *The Holiday*. You can't go from something like that to a modern house."

Opposite page The character home was bought with the help of Rebecca's parents, who provided on-the-ground support for the online purchase. *This page, left* The family in their newly renovated kitchen. *Inset right* The white and brown weatherboards contrast nicely.



coffee maker (on the
ch, far right) is Michael's
er baby", an indulgence he
ght on a work trip to Italy.



in a nutshell

Who lives here? Michael Walker (business development manager), Rebecca Hellberg-Walker (mother and graphic designer) and Florence, 8 months.

What was your best overseas buy?

Rebecca: The Christmas decorations we picked up in Belgium, France, Italy and New York. Our house comes alive at Christmas and I go OTT decorating every room.

I do, however, miss a winter Christmas in the Northern Hemisphere.

What do you consider your best buy?

Rebecca: It's not a bargain, but I treasure the antiques that my grandparents carefully collected during their lives and generously gave to us.

Michael: Our coffee machine. Buying directly from the Italian source netted us a bargain.



Purchasing a house without visiting it could have its downside, but fortunately, when the couple eventually set eyes on it three years later there was no buyer's remorse. However, having been rented out, it was in a less than pristine state.

"The spare bedroom was yellow with smoke and the rest of the house was pretty run-down," says Michael. "We had to paint it, which wasn't a bad thing because the colour scheme was pretty dark."

They also completely rewired it and gutted the downstairs bathroom, where a lack of ventilation had caused mildew to set in. "The bathroom also had a terrible layout, so when you opened the door, you hit the toilet! We relocated the toilet, installed a new shower, ripped up layers of lino and cork tiles, and basically dragged it into the 21st century."

The biggest change, however, was in the kitchen, which Michael says was badly positioned, dated and not terribly user friendly. The first thing to go was the bank

KITCHEN/LIVING

The couple has utilised every nook and cranny in the house, including the old brick fireplace cavity, in which the oven now sits. Rebecca's graphic design background is evident in the use of lettering throughout the house. A tea chest that they brought from the UK, filled with their possessions, has been repurposed as a coffee table.





upboards that was replaced with open
 ving, allowing the couple to display the
 a they'd picked up overseas, as well
 reasured items such as Michael's
 admother's flour sifter.
 he old exposed-brick fireplace had
 ady been converted into a cavity for the
 n, but thanks to an ineffective extractor
 it was pretty grimy. Along with the
 of the kitchen, the bricks received the
 te paint treatment, which works well
 n the splashback tiles.
 he kitchen was designed around the
 nac espresso machine, which Michael
 ught back from one of his many work
 s to Italy and now has pride of place
 he bench.
 Upstairs, Rebecca has been liberal with
 e grey paint, which provides a lovely
 kdrop for her colourful furniture and
 essories. The graphic designer has a
 at eye for colour and says it makes her
 l comfortable and happy – and that's
 at this house is all about".
 he's also a dab hand with a sewing
 hine, making all the curtains in the
 use and reupholstering two armchairs
 inherited from family, using fabric
 rced from Europe. "I went to an
 olstery course where the tutor was

wise from above The landing is brightened by an
 oom chair Rebecca covered in hot pink fabric; the
 t bedroom also benefits from her love of UK linens;
 upstairs bathroom remains on the to-do list.



BEDROOM

Rebecca is a fan of British textiles and bought up large before leaving London. She made these sunny yellow blinds in the main bedroom. Both the chair and bedside table were inherited from her grandparents.





decor details

- ✦ **Rather than blindly following** what's in fashion, aim to show your personality through your furniture and artwork.
- ✦ **Use colour to create** the mood you want to establish throughout your house. Rebecca wanted a fun, happy house, so she went for bright colours.
- ✦ **Surround yourself with** treasures you've sourced from special holidays and received as gifts to make a home full of memories.



horrified I used pink piping on a chair," she says. "But New Zealand furniture tends to be dark and I wanted to have lots of happy colours in my house."

Rebecca made the living room cushions from leftover striped fabric and spray-painted the lampshade in the hallway a bright yellow. She's been busy in daughter Florence's room, making the bunting that adorns the ceiling, and also created the "rainbow of ribbons" in the guest bedroom. "I was inspired by French markets, which feature a lot of vintage ribbons on display," she explains.

French markets were also the source of other items throughout the house, including the antique clothes and jewellery hooks, as well as much of the artwork.

The couple was about to tackle the upstairs bathroom when Michael's company relocated him to Christchurch. They'll rent out the house but hope to one day come back and finish what they started. "This is such a lovely house and it's hard to leave. But we know it will always be here."

→ Find out how they got the look on PAGE 144.

Opposite page Rebecca has really let her creativity run riot in daughter Florence's bedroom, teaming pale paint with bright bunting, bedding, cushions and artwork, all of which she made herself. This page left Florence and Michael play in her light-filled room. Inset right The guest bedroom features Rebecca's "rainbow of ribbons", inspired by her visits to French markets.