



Russell Ujdur says driving the MAN is like driving from the comfort of an armchair

KIWIS ACROSS THE DITCH

WORDS BY VIVIENNE HALDANE, IMAGES BY VIVIENNE HALDANE AND SUPPLIED

While in Brisbane recently, Viv Haldane caught up with Kiwi truck driver, Russell Ujdur

Russell and Sophie Ujdur, former Kaitia residents, live in Brisbane where Russell drives for Terry O'Donahue of Complete Needs Australia. They decided to settle there six years ago because that's where two of their daughters and 12 grandchildren live. Having been behind the wheel in New Zealand, Russell easily found work across the ditch and today enjoys driving a MAN twin-trailer unit, delivering freight for several distribution centres around Brisbane.

DOW caught up with him one sunny afternoon at Yatala near the Gold Coast. Among the various shift workers, I noticed many New Zealanders. Russell says, "The thing I like best here is the close network that exists between the Polynesian workers; it's like a big whanau. It's important to look after each other."



Sophie and Russell at Challenger Motor Freight head office trailer section, Toronto

Courier run

To go back a bit, let's talk about Russell and Sophie's earlier work in Kaitia. Russell trained as a diesel mechanic and later, he and Sophie owned a Fastway Courier franchise doing line haul and courier deliveries between Kaitia and Whangarei.

"In 1996, we won Australasian Franchisee of the Year in New Zealand and Australia. The following year, we won a sales and marketing award that sent us on a trip to Fiji," Russell says.

He credits Sophie as being the driving force behind their partnership.

"She's the backbone. A lot of people say they don't know how they can work with their wives but I don't know how I couldn't. My theory is women tend to get things right and we men tend to take shortcuts. We've been married 40 years, had five arguments, and I've lost them all."

Community work

While in Kaitia, Russell managed the Kaitia branch of Sport Northland Sports Trust while Sophie managed the Heart



Russell is one of the many Kiwis working in Brisbane

Foundation. Their work took them into schools, sports clubs, and health initiatives in the community. Russell says dealing with a wide range of people, from funding agencies to mayors, MPs, netball coaches, and the All Blacks was a rewarding experience.

"It also gave us the opportunity to help our at-risk kids. It's up to us to put the pathways in place to guide them forward," he says.

After 11 years, Russell was ready for a change. He and Sophie decided to move to Canada.

Team drivers

Because Sophie also had her heavy truck licence, she and Russell were able to work as team drivers for the company, Challenger Motor Freight, delivering high-priority freight mail for Canada Post, DHL, and Purolator.

They were required to drive thousands of kilometres per week, often in extreme weather and over challenging terrain. Regardless of the weather, the mail had to go through.

It may sound daunting, but Russell says it was an amazing experience and one they



Russell during a Zopkios Brake Check at the summit of Hope Mountain before dropping into Vancouver

“The coldest temperature we worked in was minus 48 degrees Celsius in Edmonton”

Driving to Saskatoon in the province of Saskatchewan

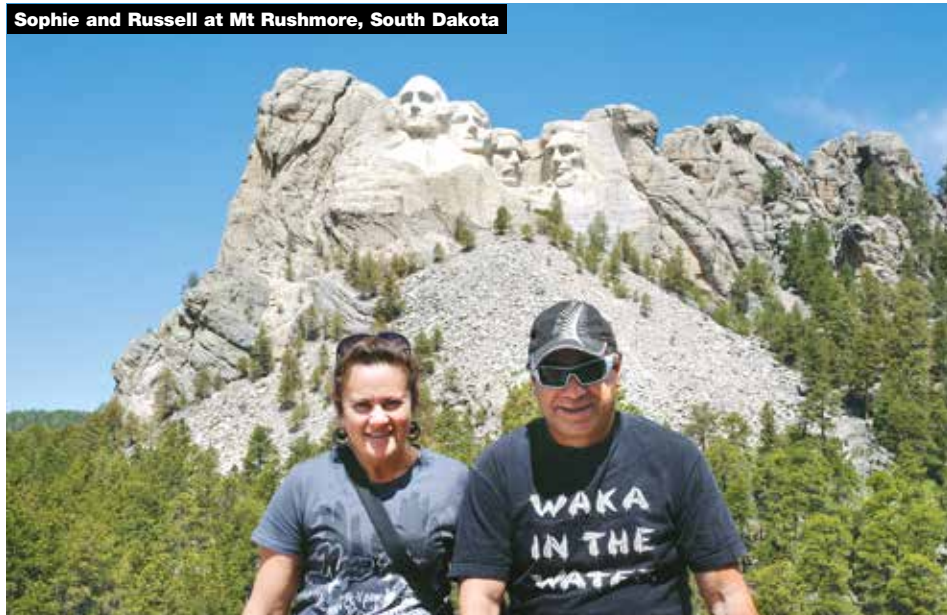
wouldn't have missed for the world. “We had three good years over there and the whole journey was like a second honeymoon for us,” he says.

“At first, we drove a Volvo followed by the latest Freightliner. It was well equipped with a double bed, swivel seats, and enough room for a fridge and cabinets. We went through Canada and the US many times. I can honestly say I know some of these places better than my own country.

“There were times when we were heading through the prairies and we'd be the last truck on the road. Sophie and I would be fighting on through the snow. Often it was safer, being on the road than off, because at least you knew where to drive. Because there was so much snow, they'd level the road out and you'd get half a truck length onwards and fall into the drain. It was chaos. Police were out there trying to clear the roads but we found it better to punch on through. The thing about snow and ice is to keep your wheels turning. As most drivers know, you never hit the brakes because you put it into a skid. It's the same as driving in mud: you spin the mud out of your grips. We knew that from driving on the farm in Kaitiaia.”

In Canada, the Ujdurs travelled regular routes from Vancouver to Toronto, Montreal,

Sophie and Russell at Mt Rushmore, South Dakota



and Nova Scotia, passing through Calgary and Edmonton before dropping down to Los Angeles via Las Vegas and Florida on the west coast.

“No matter what the road conditions were like around Lake Superior, we had to keep moving. I remember driving above Lake Superior past a town called Wawa and

hearing ice break under our tires. You couldn't stop because that's where you would have stayed,” Russell says.

Sophie and Russell gained a reputation for being a hardworking team. “We did the highest mileage in the company; they'd send us halfway across America to rescue a load when there were others closer just because

Russell waits in the Rocky Mountains for the snow clearing team to arrive



WORKING IN SUB-ZERO CONDITIONS

“We had a major breakdown at a town called Ignace located above Lake Superior. We had just travelled from Los Angeles up to Toronto, having fuelled in California to make the trip to Canada. We refuelled in Toronto with Grade One diesel, which contains anti-freezing properties, and then continued onto Vancouver.

“It was New Year's Eve and there was a Blue Moon over Lake Superior. It was pretty cool and romantic as we started to head east. We reached Ignace where the remaining Californian diesel in the tank jelled up. It was minus 29 degrees Celsius. The engine became a frozen block and it took the local mechanic two days to thaw the engine using an internal block heater and gas heater blowing on the motor. We stayed in a local motel and when I checked our stuff in the morning, a bottle of water was frozen solid.

“The coldest temperature we worked in was minus 48 degrees Celsius in Edmonton and it was blowing as well. It felt like I was naked, yet I had on layers of jackets and warm clothes.”

they knew they could count on us 100% of the time.

“When we were interviewed for the job they asked us what our goals were. When told them we wanted to be the number one team, they said ‘Do you know there are 2500 drivers working here?’

“By the time we finished, I'd say we were in the top three. Our best friends turned out to be another top crew so we learned a lot from them. I reckon if you associate yourself with good people, the results you aspire to happen.”

Tackling the Aussie terrain

With tight areas and tricky roundabouts to navigate, Russell says his current truck—a 2016 MAN auto/manual—makes the job easier; it's like driving from the comfort of an armchair.

“This is one of the most comfortable trucks I've ever driven and it has great visibility,” Russell says.

“There's lots of tight areas we have to negotiate, but this makes it easy. The trailers are 36 pallet trailers that are able to cart up to a 39-tonne payload with a maximum of 60 tonnes. Even though it's a massive load on behind, it's pretty much the same as driving a car trailer—you have to make sure your lines are straight.

“The roundabouts here are pretty dicey, though. Once I was going slowly around one and a car came up on the inside lane, so I stopped to give it room. It was a young woman driver with P plates and as she did, she gave me the, ‘You are the number one driver's salute’. I thought, ‘I've probably saved your family and saved damage to your car’. We truck drivers get it all the time, don't we? And it's unfortunate because, for a lot of these cars, the consequences of hitting a truck are deadly.”

Homeward bound

Russell and Sophie may have enjoyed their overseas experiences but they still count New Zealand as home.

“I will probably do this for another two years and then we'll come home to Kauri Flat, which is not far from Ninety Mile Beach. That was my playground when I was young. We look forward to gardening and being on the land. My dad is 85 and still milking his cows; mum is 83 and still tending her huge rose and vegetable gardens. As well, my sister is up there helping them. Sophie's mum is 82 and our other grandchildren are also in New Zealand.”

They are also looking forward to the abundant seafood of the Far North—“kina, mussels, fresh snapper, plus a decent hangi,” Russell says. ■