

Serving up views of sea and mountain

Country pubs

Mike Watson

From the main ensuite bedroom in Opunake's Club Hotel, guests have a spectacular view of Mt Taranaki from one window, and the Tasman Sea from another.

But when Rahul Tyagi arrived to take on the manager's role two years ago he wasn't sure if he had made the biggest mistake of his life.

Tyagi had never even been to the Taranaki coastal town before – well known for the rugby-mad Barrett family, All Black captain Graham Mourie, Olympic champion Peter Snell, and former Prime Minister Jim Bolger – but it gave him an opportunity to move his family out of Auckland.

"Auckland was becoming too much like where I had come from in (New) Delhi," he said.

"A friend and I were working in the security in Auckland and we wanted to work in hospitality somewhere we could move to and get away from the traffic and the high cost of living," he said.

"There weren't a lot of opportunities in Auckland so we thought we would try buying a country hotel because there seemed to be plenty of potential if the price was right and we worked hard."

The first few months were a struggle at the 104-year-old hotel for Tyagi and his wife, Neha.

"It was extremely challenging, and I thought we had made a big mistake," he said. "We struggled to pay the invoices but slowly we turned the business around."

Loyal local patrons stuck by the couple as they made small improvements, first to the accommodation.

With 16 single and double bedrooms available the couple started to rebuild the business by switching to the *Booking.com* website to attract tourists to stay overnight.

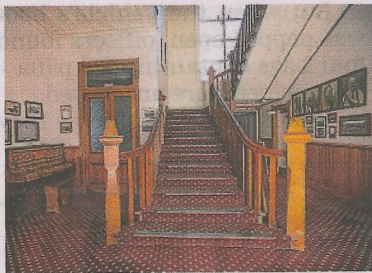
"Basically we had only one person, an oil field worker, and an 8-ball pool team from Rotorua stay in the hotel in the first year we were here," he said.



It was struggle at first for Opunake's Club Hotel manager Rahul Tyagi, but more guests staying overnight in summer had slowly turned the business around.



The main bedroom has a view of Mt Taranaki, and the Tasman Sea.



The wooden staircase at the Club Hotel leads up to bedrooms and their fine views.

PHOTOS: ANDY JACKSON/STUFF

"Slowly more people, including a lot of overseas tourists, booked to stay weekends, and during the week, especially in the summer."

Guests often join the regulars for a drink at the bar, and campers will drop in for a beer during summer on their way back from the beach, he said.

Hotel staff Piki Hohaia and Sonja Hape cooked meals and poured beers all weekend without a break when an Australian rugby league team booked out the hotel.

"People come in to have a drink, or have dinner, and place a bet on the TAB, and that keeps things ticking over."

"They like being in a traditional country pub and hearing about all the history behind it."

"It's one of the few bars where you can sit around the bar and talk."

There's the weekly handle club nights, karaoke, and sausage sizzles to keep the beer

from going flat.

Freedom campers can use the showers, and two big open fireplaces are a feature in the public bar and dining room.

Two fires destroyed two previous hotels on the site – the Telegraph Hotel 1871, and Middleton's Hotel in 1883 – and the Club Hotel escaped serious damage in 1955 from a smaller blaze.

"Last summer we were very busy. Now we need to build up the winter trade."

"We are not making a lot of money and there's a lot of maintenance – if we have a maintenance-free week we feel lucky. But we really enjoying living here."

"The town is starting to pick up with out-of-towners buying property and every day there is someone new coming in."

"My wife says if we lived anywhere else we would have to pay to see a view like this of the mountain and the sea."

"Here we have it for free."

Patrons can sit around the public bar and talk with friends and staff.



The Club Hotel's dining room features an open fireplace and chandelier.