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Ebb of humans a Russell riddle

House prices are going through the roof in Russell but according to 2006 census figures, the town's population is in decline — dropping over nine percent in five years. Advocate reporter **Craig Borley** went to Russell and found that the number crunching does not mean it's crunch time for the town.



IN RUSSELL'S narrow shop-fringed lane running beside the sea, the musket-ball holes in the old church, or the sweeping view from Flagstaff Hill, there is a sense of contentment. It's a place that has seen it all before and feels no burden to impress.

But it does impress. Subtle things, such as the air hose built into the plastered wall at the corner gas station, or an absence of footpaths on the narrow lanes. The town is different, charming, alluring.

And it's no secret hideaway. Permanently hosting holidaymakers from around the world in summer months, the little town with the big history is a tourist mecca. Accommodation prices spike almost 100 percent and the town bursts at the seams with awed backpackers and well-heeled foreigners.

They come and, predictably, are impressed. They wander the streets, drive through the hills and investigate the myriad bays and inlets. And, inevitably, they look at property.

The last 12 months have been good for Russell's property market, says Bridget Hughes of Russell Realty. The median house price on the Russell Peninsula, over the 12 months to March 2006, was \$560,000.

The cheapest house in Russell currently is \$495,000, and just outside town the entry price is \$399,000.

And the sky is the limit. Houses in Russell township sell for \$2 million-plus. One large estate just out of town carries a \$15.5 million price tag. Another recent sale hit \$6 million.

So how can this year's census figures be true? The numbers tell us that in the last five years Russell's population dropped by 9.2 percent. That's 110 people gone from a town that had 1200 five years ago. So what's going on?

Russell is home to many overseas property buyers, many of whom spend less than half the year in the town. The argument goes that the shifting population means local businesses are no longer sustainable. So they shut

up shop and the town slowly dies, while Kiwis who would happily spend all year living there can no longer afford to buy houses.

Certainly the town empties out over winter, and it seems fashionable to point the finger at the foreigners. Their deep pockets and strong currencies mean many locals label them the cause for spiralling house prices.

But the resentment toward foreigners is unfair, Bridget says. She knows the complaints "but it just isn't reality".

"A lot of Kiwis are buying in Russell too, simply because they love the area." The myth of the evil overseas buyer just doesn't apply.

"When they are here, for four or five months, they bring a lot of money into the town."

And they are here because they love the place, and are happy to get involved in the community and spend their money, she says.

Some grumble about the negative effects the housing trends and part-time population have, but generally the locals aren't complaining. In fact, the census figures bring a wry smile to their faces.

Linton Lindauer, born in Russell in 1937 (and a grandson of artist Gottfried Lindauer who came to New Zealand in 1873), isn't worried by the shifting

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 It's a part of you. I've been away, I've been in the merchant navy, but you always come back. A true Russellite always comes back.”

”
 Linton Lindauer

population — although he admits he doesn't mix in the same circles as the "Jafas and foreigners".

"They're probably doing good things for Russell. Locals can't afford to buy groceries in town here, it's too bloody expensive.

But they [Jafas] buy petrol here, they buy other stuff. It's good."

The part-time residents leaving over the winter months does not disappoint Linton, as then the quiet fishing village of his youth is returned to him.

"It's good, I like it. I was born here in '37, and we had a very steady population. In winter, if you saw a tourist, he was mad."

In the 1950s the town was home to just 300 people, he says, growing to about 400 in summer. Fishing was easy and life was laidback. Having that isolated island life return for a few months every year is no bad thing.

Bridget, though, isn't so sure the winter exodus is healthy. She, too, sees only benefits in the out-of-town investors but says Russell must do more to attract people in winter.

"We need to keep Russell as it is but, at the same time, we need to get people living permanently in the town. [To do that] we need to make it more vibrant in winter."

Plans are afoot to make that happen, she says.

"It's not a quick fix, but there's work being done by the Russell Business Association to attract visitors here in winter."

It shouldn't be too hard. A winter's morning in Russell can be beautiful. With the bay free of fizz boats and the streets so clear

you can walk straight down the middle, it has a different charm.

Tiny waves ripple onto the pebbled beach, disturbing only the ducks. The silence is golden. It is a town with its guard down.

The locals know it, they like it. Linton says even if change does come he won't be pushed away.

"I like it here. I've got a nice house, my wife has got a job she loves. We won't leave. The only way they'll get me to leave here is in a box," he said. "It's a part of you. I've been away, I've been in the merchant navy, but you always come back. A true Russellite always comes back."

But be warned. If you think buying a house and spending a few summers there will make you a Russellite, Linton will put you straight.

"You've got to be either born here, or have lived here 20 years to be a Russellite."

A few hundred still fit that bill, from the "hippies and the pensioners" to the few fishermen who still work the bay.

And that sums up Russell. After almost 200 years as a European settlement the little town has kept its upbeat attitude. And no declining census figures will change that. ■

□ ABOVE: Russell is a magnet for tourists but locals are getting thinner on the ground.

□ BELOW: Russellite Linton Lindauer: "The only way they'll get me to leave here is in a box."
 — PICTURE / Stephen Western



In **BRIEF**

a bit on the side

Making news



High flyer: You can't keep a good man down as Whangarei's oldest chap, 102-year-old Doug Morrison keeps proving. This is a man who still has a driver's licence and delivers meals on wheels. So it should hardly surprise anyone that he piloted his way over Whangarei during a helicopter ride to celebrate his 102nd birthday on Thursday. It was Mr Morrison's first ride in a chopper, let alone at the controls. He now wishes he'd had a more serious play with them when he was a bit younger. He's got a great attitude, has Mr Morrison. He especially impressed his hosts — Northland Emergency Services Trust personnel — by scrambling aboard without help.

WINNERS

The winners of the *Northern Advocate's* winter warm-up giveaway of Naked Naturals soup packages were: Eve Bell, Grace Te Kani, J Sandford, E Nicholson, John Hiki, S Olney, O Dickinson, D Rowlands.

TRENDS

INTO IT

■ **Soccer World Cup:** Why is this the biggest sporting event in the world? Drama, tension, tears, tantrums, heartache and celebration, terrific football and some great acting (particularly from the South Americans).

■ **Crumpet toast:** We just have to say it — the best thing since ...

OVER IT

■ **Cold comfort for crims:** Moaning about keeping prisoners warm. If underfloor heating is cheapest and safest, so be it. Heating isn't a luxury, it's a necessity.

BROWSINGS



Our favourite website this week:

■ **www.patentlysilly.com:** Everything you never needed? Just how silly can you get? Find out.
 ■ **Got a favourite website? Share it with the rest of us.** Send your suggestions to editor@northernadvocate.co.nz