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THE FARM MOBBED BY FOREIGN TOURISTS
YES – WHILE THE BORDERS ARE CLOSED.

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BETTING ON THE FARM

How a Kiwi lifestyle farmer created a booming tourism business while our borders are closed.

By Sharon Stephenson

More than 3500 tourists have visited this patch of loamy Palmerston North soil in the last year. They came from all over: France, the United Kingdom, Guatemala and the United States, Iceland and Siberia. On arrival they were greeted by Arthur Chin, a former banker turned lifestyle farmer and their gregarious host.

They met kunekune pigs, 24 ewes and a pair of five-month-old lambs named Olaf and Elsa. They learned why chicken's wings are clipped and how to run an environmentally friendly sewage system. They took in gorgeous sweeping views overlooking the Manawatū's Tararua Ranges and, if the weather was kind, Mount Taranaki.

There's no quarantine required to take this hour-long tour and closed borders aren't an issue — it's conducted via Zoom by 46-year-old Chin, who decided last June to start hosting virtual tours of the land he has lived on for the last 10 years. Equipped with little more than a cell phone camera, a ring light, and a selfie stick, Chin runs a couple of tours most days via Airbnb. It

was speaking to a colleague stuck in Dubai during lockdown that sparked the idea in Chin's mind. "Her husband was in Auckland and she was in a hotel room for weeks," he says. "To fight the boredom and as a way to connect, they both signed up for live tango classes via Zoom."

Chin was intrigued and thought, why not give it a go? He had recently been made redundant thanks to Covid so he had the time, he knew New Zealand was still high on the list of destinations for many travellers, and he had something special, his farm, to share. After signing up with Airbnb Experiences, Chin went through the application process (including auditioning the tour with Airbnb executives) and



got stuck in. Chin's New Zealand Nature Highlights Tour is one of about 100 virtual farm tours offered on Airbnb, and representatives from the company recently got in touch to tell him it's the most popular.

Airbnb has traditionally facilitated global rental accommodation, but in the last few years the company started providing hosts with the ability to offer not just their guest room or bach, but interactive experiences too. Pre-pandemic, things like cooking lessons, walking tours and local craft-making sessions were the kinds of activities you could expect to find offered in cities around the world. Since Covid-19's spread, hosts have adapted, with more and

more people offering an eclectic variety of virtual experiences — why not take a musical tour of Havana, or a lesson learning how to horse whisper?

Chin's first tour netted him a grand total of \$6.80 — “enough for a pie!”

Chin's first tour netted him a grand total of \$6.80 (“enough for a pie!”), but now he's making roughly 65 per cent of his former salary. “This business is the cheapest I've

ever set up but it's probably the most profitable,” he says, adding that it's also the most fun. In short, snappy modules he's developed to make sure guests don't get bored, Chin chats to guests about the different types of Kiwi farms, tells them about about shearing and drenching and explains how cage-free farming is more common here than in other parts of the world (when Chin's chickens stop laying, they are sent to live out their retirement pecking away at the far end of his property). His style is sweet and endearing, as is the fact his animals literally flock to him while he talks. It's a balancing act: seeming natural in front of the camera phone while engaging customers and wrangling the

animals who roam around freely and often play up for the camera, headbutting Chin, his phone, and each other.

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The guests range in age from children to 80 year olds and include families stuck in lockdown, companies wanting to help staff bond while working remotely, animal lovers, those who miss travelling, and even couples on online dates. Some enjoy the experience so much, they sign up for a second tour. Chin currently has a rating of 4.97 stars out of five from more than 600 reviews. He replies to most, signing off each time with “Keep well, and God Bless. — Arthur”.

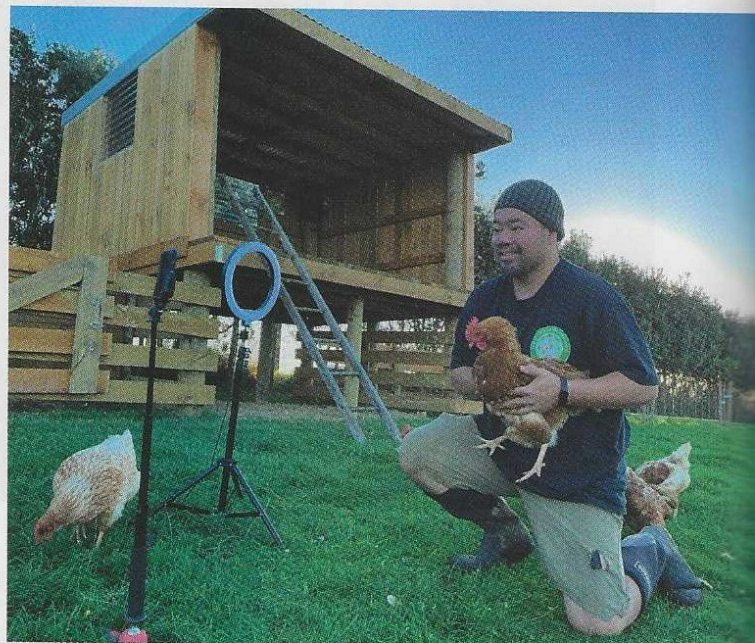
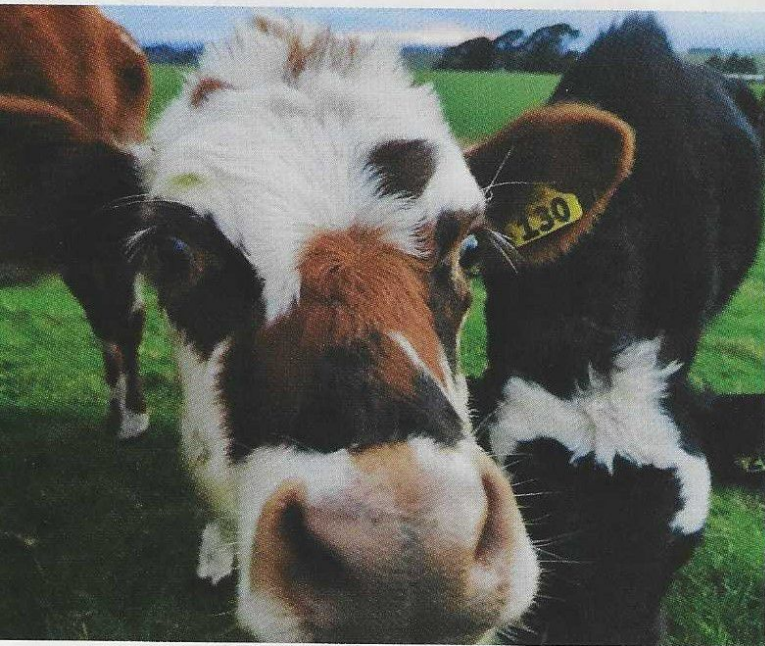
rural property. The tour is also available for corporate groups of up to 100 people and so far Chin has hosted team-building exercises with office workers from business giants Google, Walmart, Facebook and Stanford University (about half his guests are in the United States).

Chin grew up in Singapore before moving to Christchurch in his early 20s with his family. He attended Canterbury University, where he studied for a commerce degree — and met Jenny Lin, a Taiwanese-born marketing student who would become his wife. After graduating, the couple ran various businesses together in Christchurch and Wellington, and Chin worked in the banking sector

national tourism quality assurance organisation. It was also a catalyst for Curation, an online training company Chin launched to teach other businesses how to engage with customers via virtual tours.

These days, he’s often bouncing between helping teach others to run online experiences and hosting tours — he’s run more than 325 since he started a year ago. People are still curious to learn more about different cultures, particularly New Zealand, he reckons — plus it’s cheap, and since everyone has a cell phone it’s an easy way to see the world while borders are closed.

If Chin is worried about what will happen to his farm tours once borders eventually open, he isn’t



PREVIOUS PAGE — Chin uses a ring light to film his virtual tours. ABOVE LEFT — A curious cow. LEFT — Chin wrangles a hen for the camera, right. Photos: Supplied.

He hosts groups of up to 10 people at a time at \$22 a head, and averages between 10 and 20 hour-long tours a week. The experience promises a “firsthand feel of nature in New Zealand”, with Chin walking each group through his farm and explaining along the way how he runs things, and turning his camera to take in sweeping views of the

for a spell. They eventually settled in Palmerston North in 2012 and lived out their long-held dream of buying land. Their son Isaac, now 9, was born soon after. “When you grow up in the urban jungle of Singapore, the thought of a lifestyle block and animals is totally foreign,” Chin says. “I’ve always loved animals so I jumped at the chance to get some sheep and chickens.”

While the global pandemic has generally been catastrophic for the tourism industry, Chin has bucked the trend. New Zealand Nature Highlights is, in fact, the first Kiwi online tourism business to be accredited by Qualmark, the

showing it. He’s confident online experiences are channels for travel which are here to stay. “I think people will use them to confirm their itineraries, a try-before-you-buy kind of thing. They’ll also continue to be popular with people who have no plans to travel, such as the elderly or those who can’t afford it.” Chin says he feels blessed to live where he does, and hopes people will always want to come visit him — “and the sheep trying to head-butt me!”

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Sharon Stephenson is an award-winning travel writer. She lives on the Kāpiti Coast with her husband.