



A hard-working group of NZMCA members (that's them below) came to the aid of Misha's Vineyard, in Central Otago, this season to help harvest a bumper grape crop – and had a great time doing it.

A PERFECT PICK

NZMCA members Janine and Simon Jensen (#106226) are from Tokerau Beach, in the Far North, and in March this year they embarked on a 1817km journey from the top of the North Island to near the bottom of the South Island in their motorhome.

Their mission? To join the harvest crew at Misha's Vineyard in Central Otago for a month of grape picking.

Misha's Vineyard is located in Bendigo on part of a high-country sheep station just outside Cromwell on the edge of Lake Dunstan. Owners, Andy and Misha Wilkinson, normally source casual staff to work on their vineyard through the pool of international backpackers that visit New Zealand, but after two years of closed borders there were very few left.

"We'd found it hard recruiting staff throughout our growing season and with harvest approaching we knew we needed a different strategy to find more people to help hand-harvest our grapes," said Andy.

So, the Wilkinsons placed an ad in the Feb/ March issue of *The Motor Caravanner* calling for people to 'Join in Central Otago's grape harvest'.

"It was the ad we saw in *The Motor Caravanner* for harvest staff that inspired our trip," said Janine.

The couple had been trying to plan a visit to the South Island for a couple of years but with the various waves of COVID-19 and lockdowns the trip hadn't eventuated. Their decision to join the harvest team became the focal point for their expedition south and they planned the rest of their journey around that.

"We had never done anything like a grape harvest before and it sounded like the vineyard really needed some help," said Janine, "and we





ABOVE: It's just another day at the office for the NZMCA crew at Misha's Vineyard; and **BELOW FROM LEFT:** NZMCA member Janine Jensen, with a fellow worker; members' vans parked up under the awe-inspiring Central Otago skies; and Simon Jensen hard at work in the vines.

knew we were fit enough to do it."

She said the idea to join the harvest team felt more 'intrepid' than 'romantic' as she was well aware it would be physical, outdoor work.

Part of the attraction of working with a vineyard was the ability to park on site. The Jensens also had two small dogs so needed to ensure that the logistics would work for everyone.

"The campsite at Misha's Vineyard was fantastic," said Simon. "We were treated with huge skies and we even slept with the window of our van wide open during those cool Central Otago nights, so we could see the amazing night sky."

Andy and Misha designated a site on the higher terraces of their 57-hectare estate overlooking a rocky canyon for the campers and equipped it with a water supply and a portaloo.

There were four campervans parked on the vineyard during harvest and a total of seven people from the NZMCA who complemented

the Misha's Vineyard permanent team, along with a handful of other casual staff to make a total of 18 in the harvest team.

"Every night we had 'happy hour' with the other campers and we'd count the number of grape bins on the back of the truck leaving the vineyard at the end of each day to work out how many tons we'd picked," said Simon. "That felt pretty satisfying."

So how did the Jensens find the harvest experience?

"It was tough," said Simon. "You were using muscles you don't normally use and twisting in a way you don't normally do."

"And it is hard being on your feet all day," added Janine, who commented that the harvest was well-organised and she found it became easier as they went along.

For both of them, the highlights included the fun and banter within the team during the days of picking, the sundowner drinks with fellow

campers at the end of the day, the incredible vistas from their scenic campsite and of course the wine treats they enjoyed with 'Picker of the Week' rewards.

Would they join a harvest team again?

"Yes – we would definitely do it again. Being in the amazing geography of the Central Otago region and really getting to know it by being part of its fabric was fantastic."

For Andy and Misha, it was also a memorable harvest as not only did they have enough staff to pick all their grapes but the fruit was of an exceptional quality with above-average yields.

"There were naturally some concerns initially about how our team would cope with a month of picking especially with our steep slopes, but there were no issues," said Andy. "We would definitely have some motorhomers back for a future harvest – in fact we look forward to it."

