



Jacha
Potgieter

Alpine *aspirations*

Meet artist and conservationist, Jacha Potgieter, whose passions combine to create an unusual tourist offering in Betws-Y-Coed

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Arriving at the railway station in the village of Betws-y-Coed, it was amazing to think that we would be staying in this interesting stone building for the weekend. The station - within Snowdonia National Park - was built by stonemason Owen Gethin Jones in 1868 to the architectural style of contemporary gothic revival. It is now home to an array of quaint shops, cafes and the new, luxury Alpine Apartments.

The stylish self-catering apartments, created by artist, photographer and environmentalist Jacha Potgieter, have been designed to the smallest detail with his global eye.

'It took less than a year to open,' said Jacha who met me in the Platform Galeri, his art gallery which opened earlier this year set beneath the active platform of Betws-y-Coed train station. 'I was very lucky to have a lot of local people helping me out. They don't question me when I have a wild idea!'

Jacha, who was born in South Africa in 1963, went on to study for a diploma in conservation in Cape Town following his National Service duties. A life of adventure followed, including conservation work in the sub-arctic Prince Edward Islands and backpacking around the world in countries such as Israel, Turkey and Hungary. This introduction to a wealth of cultures fuelled the fire in the collector's belly and his rucksack was often full with treasures ranging from Ottoman-style candles to fantastic patterned rugs and textiles.

This path eventually led him to Wales. After meeting his wife Gwyn in Budapest, they married in 1993 and moved to the outskirts of the Snowdonia village. Gwyn's first husband, Bob Hughes, who had passed away some years before, had bought the Betws-y-Coed station building in the early 1970's after a dwindling economy had meant it was used less and less.

'Here where my journey in North Wales began,' said Jacha. 'Gwyn had been running



ABOVE: Alpine Coffee Shop

“The duo transformed the café into a colourful space in harmony with Jacha’s conservation efforts”

the Alpine Coffee Shop here since Bob bought the buildings, and it has been an iconic café ever since.'

The duo transformed the café into a colourful space in harmony with Jacha's conservation efforts. All the food sold alongside their own award-winning coffee and loose teas is free-range and palm-oil free. Palm-oil is a type of edible vegetable oil derived from the oil palm tree in an often unsustainable way, linking it to major issues such as deforestation, habitat degradation and climate change. Toiletries and food in the apartment are also palm-oil free.

'In all three of my businesses, I want to make people aware of animal cruelty. The Galeri, coffee shop and apartments are all an extension of each other so I want the same message to be carried across. This is

what I am passionate about,' explained Jacha.

Creative canvasses of art adorn the walls of the café and apartments. They are often paintings of apes, an animal which is close to Jacha's heart. He longs to see these animals safe in their own habitats and it is his wish that visitors to all three businesses will have raised their awareness of the plight and issues surrounding their conservation.

'All of the work in the gallery is centred on the conservation of apes. The reason we started the gallery and the refit of the coffee shop was to raise awareness. All the proceeds from any of the artworks sold in my gallery are sent directly to two charities: Orangutan Appeal UK and Ape Action Africa.'

Two of the artist's paintings and photographs were also recently auctioned at an evening with Sir David Attenborough,

Betws-y-Coed old station building



ABOVE: Alpine Coffee Shop

Virginia McKenna and Brian May in support of Hope 4 Apes. However it isn't just animals that Jacha and Gwyn are passionate about. The couple sponsor the education of ten children in India each year. Most of their speciality teas derive from the country, so they want to ensure they give something back: 'It's not just about me. I am only a person in a position to help. We are a voice to these animals and children and I want to make people aware of it,' said Jacha.

'I have educated the staff in the coffee shop to know about what they sell so they can go on to educate customers,' he continued. 'We have also started to visit local schools to make pupils aware about palm-oil and orangutans.' ■

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The Alpine Apartments

Above the shops in the railway building are three apartments that have been transformed into luxury self-catering accommodation with innovative design and artistic touches.

'We hope to have seven apartments open in the future. Two will be bed and breakfasts,' said Jacha. 'The two of us have continued Gwyn's first husband's dream of developing the station, and I am proud of that.'

Each apartment speaks of the exotic climes and cultures Jacha has experienced. We stayed in Apartment No.6, a romantic and intimate apartment for two. This warm and friendly space makes the perfect bolt-hole for a romantic

break. Each apartment has been handcrafted by Jacha and a team of skilled locals including Gerallt, an artisan metalworker and G.E.M, a trio of builders and carpenters.

Quirky and eclectic touches make these apartments quite special. From the upcycled artistic installations, such as the beautiful chandelier in the entrance hall to the previously unwanted furniture that has been lovingly transformed with Jacha's own twist.

The items collected on Jacha's travels are also dotted around each space, including Arabic carpets and Moorish doors. No.6's bed even has a metal-worked headboard in the shape of angels' wings,

adding to the romance of the room already provided by the private balcony with its view out over the station platform, hills and beyond.

Each apartment is well-equipped with appliances, including a radio CD player with Apple docking station, complimentary Wi-Fi and central heating.

Jacha and Gwyn also include some groceries in the booking price including Champagne for those staying in No.6, wine, fresh fruit and bread, butter, tea, coffee and milk among others. For an additional £30 they will also provide organic goodies to make the perfect full English breakfast and a few little extras.