

## Desperate migrants living in vans

By [Lincoln Tan](#)

**4:00 AM** Monday May 10, 2010

Immigrants who cannot afford rental housing on their own are doubling up on accommodation, or even living in vans.

Some are further cutting costs by spending nights in their vehicles parked on the side of rural roads or in public car parks, rather than going to campervan parks or camping grounds.

Cheng Goh, of Settlement Support North Shore, says high rents have resulted in many people struggling to keep a roof over their heads. Some had become really desperate.

Unlike locals, who could move in with family and friends, newly arrived immigrants faced limited options on who they could turn to, she said.

"It's quite sad to see people who come here to set up a new life, only to have their lives turned upside down," said Ms Goh.

"It's just unfortunate that when you come at the wrong time, everything seems to work against you."

She said many failed to do enough planning for their New Zealand move and under-budgeted. The recession – which cost many migrants their jobs – and high rents had aggravated the situation.

A migrant worker from Russia said he spent his last \$1500 in February on a van which had now become his home.

"Before I bought the van, I had nowhere to go and I had been sleeping on the streets since I lost my job last year, but I knew winter was coming and this is the cheapest way to make sure I have shelter," he said.

The former engineer, who has a work permit that runs until September next year, says he knows which office and commercial buildings have shower facilities that he can use early in the mornings before workers arrive.

A 33-year-old German architect, who was made redundant a month after she gained her New Zealand residency last year, said she had been living in a \$1200 van with her partner, also unemployed, since Christmas.

"I have to think positive. I came here with dreams to own my own home, and the van is my first home," she said. "It is temporary and I can take it with me anywhere."

An unemployed woman from the Philippines who has two children is sharing a three-bedroom rental



Gabrielle Ann Anta in her campervan.  
Photo / Steven McNicholl

house with two other families.

She did not want to be identified because the landlord did not know that 11 people were living at his North Shore property.

"It is working out for all of us because it is stretching our savings a little further," said the former secretary, who has permanent residence.

Immigrants, especially from Asia, are used to n crowded homes, says Agnes Granada of Migrant Action Trust.

"It is quite common to be living with extended family in countries like the Philippines, and to them this will be no different."

The settlement support co-ordinator at Auckland Regional Migrant Services, Bevan Chuang, said it was hard for new migrants because those who had been here for less than two years were not eligible for support from Work and Income.

"So these people have got no choice but to find ways to help themselves if they want to stay in New Zealand."

### **ENJOYING A 'REAL KIWI ADVENTURE'**

American immigrant Gabrielle Ann Anta says she is seeing "a lot of positives" to living on the road.

The single mother from California decided to ditch her \$360-a-week central-city rented apartment to become a van dweller after losing her job last month.

She said the move had really given her a true taste of what "Kiwi adventure" means. "It doesn't give me a feeling that I don't own a home, but rather that everywhere is my home."

After four years in New Zealand, last week was the first time she has ventured beyond Auckland to the Coromandel and she says being a van-dweller has given her the freedom to see more of New Zealand.

She bought her van for \$2000 and since she wasn't paying rent, she felt freed up financially. "I am beginning to actually start saving some money now."

Ms Ann Anta, who works as a model and singer, says her biggest worry is safety, especially when she has her 3-year-old son with her – which is why she avoids parking in public areas.

She is now living mostly near a rural Albany property where she does odd jobs in exchange for parking her van.

As she is a Les Mills gym member, that is where she goes often for her workout and showers. "I'm sorted. I didn't know what to expect but after a month I am just loving every bit of it."

By [Lincoln Tan](#)