

THE JOURNEY

by Daniela Diaz Soto

Eric Lim

Malaysian and Kiwi spirit combined

Eric Lim's life has been guided by his name, which means 'eternal ruler'. Born in Melaka, Malaysia, he hails from an economically underprivileged family, which pushed him to be both a hardworking and creative young man.

He even became a balloon artist to make money while pursuing creative activities such as singing, acting, dancing, and music, and graduated in 2004 from Limkokwing University of Creative Technology with a diploma in graphic design.

But in 2007 he embarked on a journey that would change his life completely. After hearing from colleagues about the opportunity to work in New Zealand, he decided to be bold and go on an adventure. "I came here because of the Working Holiday Visa and the open relationships between Malaysia and New Zealand."

Like many backpackers, he worked in various jobs during his visa period, from cleaning and gardening to the potato and onion harvest, which, despite his family's farming background, he wasn't accustomed to. His longest stint was three months at a Kiwi packhouse in Te Puke and, overall, it was a tough first six months financially, which made him question his decision, when he could have been working comfortably as a designer at a desk in Malaysia.

"I borrowed money to come to New Zealand. I was struggling," he says.

"At the end of the day, we are migrants; we are here just to do the jobs that Kiwis don't want to do. But it was part of my experience," he affirms.

Despite his doubts, he describes it as a beautiful time when he started connecting with people, learning about different cultures, and appreciating their similarities and differences.

After working and travelling throughout the country, with six months of his visa remaining he was in a concerning financial situation with only a plane ticket to return home and \$30 in his pocket. Just as despair was setting in, though, he received a crucial call that would change his destiny: Southern Discoveries reached out to him to become a guide and host in Milford Sound. Eric laughs as he recalls: "I Googled it and realized it was a paradise, so I said yes."

Eric was chosen partly for his exceptional charisma and because he speaks five languages: English, Malay/Bahasa, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hokkien, which made him a valuable employee for the company in Milford, where he worked for six and a half years.



Thanks to his leadership, organisational skills, and, above all, his rapport with people, he progressed within the company, eventually becoming the operation manager in the area.

During the first two years, he worked diligently to pay off his debts back home and give his parents and sister the tremendous gift of an unforgettable 21-day journey in a campervan through New Zealand. Eric fulfilled his family's dream of visiting NZ without any financial concerns as a token of his gratitude to them and life for opening doors he had never imagined.

After completing his tenure in Milford, Eric decided it was time for a change and eventually moved up to Queenstown, a "gem" within the country. Here, he worked for eight years as a manager, focusing on diversifying the company. "That moulded me into who I am today. I'm a leader; I like to empower people in my community," he says.

After 14 years of growth at Southern Discoveries, he resigned last year to focus on one of his passions: bringing people from diverse cultural backgrounds together to create a close-knit community.

Having experienced discrimination himself, he believes building a community without regard to colour or origin is essential for a society to function peacefully, a goal that he thinks has yet to be fully achieved in Queenstown. "As a migrant, that's what I can do for my people, my whānau."

In recent months, Eric has been working intensively on organising the second edition of the Queenstown Multicultural Festival, scheduled for 7 October, which promises to be a colourful day full of culture, performances, music, and food.

"We are a group of people caring for migrants, for the community, for the locals," he says.

And if that wasn't enough, the multi-talented Eric also freelances as a masseur therapist, a yoga teacher and has reignited his old passion, balloon artistry.

Overall, he says he's grateful for being able to work his way from a life of poverty to tranquillity and freedom. New Zealand is now his home because he feels his lifestyle fits better here.

"I'm happy to say that I'm still Malaysian, but I have half the spirit of a Kiwi."



The QLDC Welcoming Communities initiative brings together local government councils and communities to make the places we love more welcoming for everyone and to provide support for newcomers choosing to make the Queenstown Lakes District their home.

For more info, visit www.qldc.govt.nz/welcoming-communities